

Friendship as a Transformative Process: Cultivating Interest-Driven Connections, Community, and Perspective in the Arts

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Abstract: This study takes a retrospective lens on learning to trace how arts participation, learning, and friendship are interconnected over time. Drawing from a dataset of 261 surveys and 102 in-depth interviews with alumni from 32 community arts organizations reflecting on experiences from five or more years ago, this study offers insights into long term impacts and outcomes associated with friendships developed through arts program participation. Survey findings show that the likelihood of reporting that the programs shaped their lives and prepared them for life events were higher for those who reported persistent friendships from their programs. Analysis of purposefully selected interviews suggest that friendships supported the development of networks, cultivated a sense of community, and shifted participants' perspectives and self-identification both during participation in the program and over time. Implications for research and practice center *friendship* as a central construct worthy of further exploration in the learning sciences.

“I just didn’t feel super connected to my peers at school, and I was so happy to have a group of people that I connected with at dance. Like, I made really strong relationships with the girls I danced with.”

- Participant reflection on community arts program engagement from 10 years ago

Introduction

Though friendships can develop in any setting, they often flourish when young people are in situations where they socialize and make things together around shared interests (e.g., Brennan et al., 2010). In arts contexts, creative work can be analyzed in the context of an environment that supports collaborative, distributed creativity among a group of peers or friends (Farrell, 2001; Sawyer & DeZutter, 2009). In this study we bring together conceptions of peer relationships and friends from connected learning scholarship (Ito et al., 2020), arts-centric, collaborative creativity (Sawyer, 2017), and interest-driven learning in the arts (Pepler, 2013) to highlight *friendship* as a construct worthy of further exploration in the learning sciences.

The broader study in which this investigation of friendship is situated hypothesized that community arts-centered programs carry long-term impacts that young people bring with them into adulthood. Such community arts programs can support youth in trying out their interests as they share creative experiences, collaborate, produce artifacts, and engage in creative production with others. This study examines how friendships are discussed in the context of community arts programs and is concerned with how participants talked about the relationship between their own participation, learning, and friendships developed through arts practice within and beyond these programs. Drawing from 261 surveys and interviews with 102 alumni of community arts programs reflecting on experiences from five or more years ago, this study offers insights into long term impacts and outcomes associated with friendships developed through the programs. The research questions that drove our inquiry were: *How did participants describe friendship as it relates to their arts participation and learning? Did friendships shape their participation and learning and if so, how? Did arts participation and learning shape friendship, and if so, how?*

Background: Friendship in the learning sciences and adjacent literature

The ways learning and meaning making occur through social interaction have long been central to work in the learning sciences (e.g., Greeno, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978). Within this sociocultural paradigm, researchers have studied dynamics of relationships, including friendship. Some examples of this line of work include studies of interactions between friends engaging in mathematics (e.g., Jasien & Gresalfi, 2021), the ways friends socially position one another as experts in academic discussions (Takeuchi, 2016), how conversations and interactions among friends can support the development of voice in the context of art making about social issues (Dahn, 2022),

and the ways young people navigate their emerging identities in learning (e.g., computer science) with existing and new friends (DiSalvo et al., 2014; Nasir, 2002; 2008; 2012). Jasien and Gresalfi (2021) found in their analysis of two friends engaging in out-of-school mathematics activities that as individuals, they participated differently and subsequently viewed themselves and their mathematical identities in different ways in relation to that participation. In a study of English Language Learners (ELLs) engaged in group work in an elementary mathematics classroom, Takeuchi (2016) found that there were distinct differences in opportunities that ELLs had to learn when working with teacher-assigned peers as opposed to working with friends. When working with friends for example, learners were more likely to be positioned as experts, ask questions, and offer their ideas to the group. DiSalvo et al. (2014) found in a design research study of high school African American males' motivation to learn within a computer science and gaming context that participants engaged in identity maintenance of their computer science identities with different groups of friends (e.g., friends who also demonstrated an interest in computer science versus those who did not). Within each of these selected examples from the learning sciences literature, friendship is something that exists or can be observed through interaction in the present moment of the research project itself, such as within the bounds of an intervention or design study. While this study is also interested in investigating the dynamics of friendship, our lens is a *retrospective* one that traces how participation, learning, and friendship are interconnected over longer stretches of time.

Connected learning highlights the role of peer and friend relationships in supporting interest-driven learning by connecting young people to one another and to opportunities (Ito et al., 2020). Within this framework, research has shown how friendships have impacted and mediated both participation and learning in interest-driven pursuits. Cartun et al. (2014) for example studied how peers and friends shaped and helped sustain participation across various interest-driven learning sites by cultivating personal connections for youth. They found that peers and friends acted as brokers to learning experiences and that participants' favorite parts of programs were forming new connections with friends. Relatedly, drawing upon longitudinal data from youth first person perspectives, DiGiacomo et al. (2018)'s study found that social relations were one of the two primary mediators of why youth initially engaged and/or shifted their participation in interest-driven pursuits or sites. Aligned with the idea that socialization and creating together can help cultivate relationships, in work centered on creative inventions and arts-based activity, Sawyer (2017) pushed against the archetype of the lone creative genius, arguing that creative outputs are almost always the work of collaborative groups or friends working together to make something new. He explained that breakthrough innovations are almost always co-created and co-authored—even if an individual receives most of the credit.

Conceptual frameworks: Arts communities of practice and connected arts learning

Arts communities of practice

This paper takes as a starting point the notion that learning takes place as people co-construct meaning together through interaction in activity (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). Such social interactions around shared interests can support the constitution of a community of practice as learners bond together around shared interests and work to more fully develop those interests. As members are involved in a community of practice, the ways they participate shift over time, and these shifts in participation are evidence of learning as well as evidence of changing identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). That is, as people shift the ways they participate through the roles they take on, the identities that people form within communities of practice are socially constructed (and reconstructed), meaning these identities are defined (and redefined) by both the individual and the ways in which individuals are positioned in a broader social sphere (Fields & Enyedy, 2013; Nasir, 2002; Wenger, 1998).

A community arts program can be thought of as a particular example of a “community of practice” with its own practices and principles that support young people as they navigate learning with others in a shared space. In the context of a community arts program, a newcomer to the space first participates in a way that makes sense to them given their background, and as their participation continues, they develop new ways to contribute more fully to the community and domain. For example, they may move from initial participation in narrating a radio show toward producing, writing, and directing their own show with other members in the community of practice. There are of course complexities in the characterizations of these communities of practice in arts contexts, as arts learning settings are not monolithic. For example, while some arts environments may have inherently competitive participation structures such as auditioning for first chair in an orchestra or a lead role in a theater production, there are also arts participation structures that support collaboration, collective voice, and creative production through an ensemble building process. Though there are of course particular context-dependent characteristics of these communities of practice, there is something that connects them to one another in that they are arts-centric

(e.g., Kenny's (2016) study of musical communities of practice in Ireland), and interest-driven (e.g., Pinkard et al.'s (2020) work with the Digital Youth Network).

Connected arts learning

Connected learning theory highlights the ways in which youth access participation within communities of practice, largely through their interests, developed through strong relationships that often connect young people to opportunities to extend those interests. Youth engage in activities that support their interests and help them develop affinity-based memberships in groups, thus supporting a sense of social connectedness and shared purpose around their interests (Azevedo, 2011; Ito et al., 2020). The more recent development of a connected arts learning framework (Pepler et al., 2022; Pepler et al. 2023) brought together connected learning theory and arts education literature to highlight the discipline-specific ways in which the arts support both individual learning and community thriving through a focus on cultivating youth interests, building from supportive relationships, and connecting youth to opportunities. Connected arts learning supports a focus on holistic outcomes of arts participation toward meaningful equity-oriented and culturally connected arts learning. Connected learning recognizes that learning occurs in cultural contexts and is mediated by social relationships. The concept of an affinity network, often prevalent in connected learning environments, refers to a group of friends and peers who constitute a community of practice that shares common interests and identities (Ito et al., 2020). Engagement with affinity networks can be transformative for youth in supporting their interest development and practice-linked identities (Nasir & Hand, 2008).

Given that young people participate in communities of practice with one another, that relationships mediate learning and development in these spaces, and that interests have discipline-specific ways of manifesting for youth (in the case of this study, through the arts), in this study we examine if and how friendship in the context of arts practice might support a transformative shift in participation and learning as well the reciprocal nature of this relationship as to how participation and learning might shape friendship.

Methods for better understanding friendship in arts communities of practice

Participants and setting

This paper draws on a dataset from an ongoing project that includes 261 surveys and 102 in-depth interviews with alumni from 32 community arts organizations located in the U.S., U.K., and Australia. The aim of the project is to explore the long-term effects of participating in community arts programs by gauging how arts participation influenced participants' lives over the long term. Each of the community arts programs selected for participation had a commitment to working with youth from underrepresented and minoritized communities. Survey and interview participants were at least five years removed from their participation in the program as young people. Community arts programs spanned a range of arts disciplines, including music, dance, performing arts, media arts, radio, creative writing and poetry, among others.

This paper presents relevant findings from survey data and 3 purposefully selected retrospective interviews to describe and illustrate the relationship between friendship, participation, and learning in the context of community arts programs and related arts practice. The three cases were chosen based on the number of times "friend" (i.e., also inclusive of friends, friendly, friendship) were mentioned in a participant's interview transcript. For these three cases, over the course of interviews that each lasted 60-120 minutes, the word "friend" (or some variation of the stem, friend-) was mentioned between 50 and 66 times. Importantly, because friendship was not a primary focus of the larger project, we used the compelling findings from the survey data to dig deeper with selected interviews. In that respect, we reasoned that we could develop initial hypotheses about how participants talked about friendship in relation to participation and learning by looking at the cases in which it came up most often. A limitation of this approach is that of course we cannot yet generalize about characterizing friendship across the range of the dataset, but this analysis presents a starting point for additional inquiry into the themes we identify.

The three focus participants in this paper consistently participated in their respective arts programs for five or more years during adolescence. One of these participants, Chris, identified as Black and Filipino, was 41 years old, and participated in the community arts program over 16 years ago. The community arts program in which he participated focused on media/broadcasting and was in the Bay Area. A second participant, Tanya, was 22 years old, and has last participated in the dance community arts program in New York over five years ago. She identified as Filipino. A third participant, Yvonne, was 25 years old, identified as Vietnamese and Chinese, and had last participated in the Los Angeles-based theater and multidisciplinary arts program 10 years ago as a middle school student.

Data sources and analytical techniques

The 68-item survey was designed drawing from five established surveys (i.e., Americans for the Arts' 2017 Survey of Public Arts Programs, the Australian Council of the Arts' 2019 National Arts Participation Survey; the 2012 Boston Youth Arts Evaluation Project; the 2010 Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies Background Questionnaire; the 2015 International Social Survey Variables for National Identity Report Series). The survey was developed pulling from subsections of these surveys, though the resulting instrument was not validated independently. Relevant results from the survey are descriptively reported in this paper. Odds of participant responses and the associated confidence intervals were calculated using the *epitools* library (Aragon, 2020) with R Statistical Software (v4.1.2; R Core Team 2021).

To add qualitative depth to the survey results highlighting the prevalence and impact of friendship across the data corpus, we read through all three interviews in their entirety with special attention to lines of transcript that included mention of friends. We also reviewed the surrounding text within each mention of "friend" to understand the context in which friends and friendship were discussed more fully. Motivated by our conceptual framework that brings together arts communities of practice with connected arts learning, the questions that drove the reading of transcripts included: How does the participant talk about friendship in relation to their participation and learning? What relationships are implied through their reported speech? Furthermore, because we believe there might be something special about the *arts* component of the activity, we tracked what, if anything, was arts-specific about the way the friendship was described.

We operationalized our conceptual framework of a community of practice and its conception of shifting participation over time by tracing reported speech from interviews of participants' descriptions of experience before, during, and after participation in community arts programs (i.e., when interview data was available—note that friendship was not a *central* focus of the interview). We further operationalized our framework by looking at how participants discussed friendship, participation, and learning in relation to one another in the context of the arts practice—if and how friendship shaped participation and learning as well as if and how arts participation and learning shaped friendship. Guided by this conceptual framework, we used an open coding approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1998) with participants' reported speech to generate initial themes and name the types of relationships described. The first two authors first discussed the themes in detail and consulted with other authors to refine descriptions of themes that surfaced in analysis.

Findings: Friendship as a transformative process

We present findings in two related parts. First, we describe the survey analysis that motivated additional exploration of friendship in interviews—the analysis that suggested there might be more to discover. Next, we present how participants described the relationship between arts participation, learning, and friendship in the context of community arts programs.

Survey findings to motivate interview analysis

Social relationships were central to participants' positive experiences with their programs, with guidance from staff and peers, long-term friendships, and other social experiences ranking at the top of respondents' most-liked aspects of their experiences. 81% of survey respondents reported persistent friendships from their program, meaning that they were still friends with people made from the program when they responded to the survey. The odds of reporting beneficial outcomes given participants' lasting friendships were calculated using the *epitools* library (Aragon, 2020) with R Statistical Software (v4.1.2; R Core Team 2021). When asked whether past participation in their arts program shapes their life today, the odds of agreeing were approximately 8.33 times greater (95% CI 1.22 - 74.09), for those reporting persistent friendships from the program compared to those reporting no persistent friendships from their program. Similarly, participants reporting they had lasting friendships from their past arts program were 2.70 times more likely to report that participation in arts programs as a youth prepares them for life's events (95% CI 0.95 - 7.05) compared to those reporting no persistent friendships from their program.

Interview findings focused on arts participation, learning, and friendship

In the three selected interviews, all participants described impacts of friendships developed during the programs on their lives through their unique stories. A brief description tracing the friendship stories for each participant is described below, and though a particular aspect of each participant's description of friendship is highlighted, shades of all three themes are evident across interviews. Table 1 presents three themes for how participants talked about the relationship between participation, learning, and friendship in interviews; the work is highlighted per short case and then amplified with examples from the interview transcripts.

Chris: Friendship as building connections

Chris explained that his entire identity in middle school was tied up in friendships developed around a shared interest in the arts—between his band friends at school and his friends in the community arts program outside of school. Chris was first introduced to the media/broadcasting community arts program he attended through a girlfriend at the time, who explained that in addition to learning about music as part of the program, there were “a lot of cool people” to meet. Chris described the shared experiences with his friends in the community arts program as laying “the foundation” for the music label he and his friends started—he attributes the experiences he and his friends had to being “a direct reflection” of being part of the community arts program, that they all developed a sense of “social connectedness” and built their personal and professional networks through participation in the program. He also relayed that he liked the community arts program because within the friendships and networks he developed “there were kids from everywhere” with “all different backgrounds.” Chris said this experience gave him hope that “this is possible in the world” (“this,” meaning people with very different life experiences can develop close friendships and be there for one another). In his interview, Chris reflected on having “proximity to difference” and despite these differences, developing lifelong bonds and connections that would support him in personal and professional ways throughout his life. His arts participation and learning were fueled by the shared interest he and his friends had around creating music together and the shared passion of turning it into a business together. This shared experience of making music and creating a label together supported the development of their friendship and connectedness to one another over the years since Chris first participated in the program.

Tanya: Friendship as cultivating community

Tanya reflected on her time in a dance community arts program, explaining that the friendships she developed in the program were “the only constant in terms of friends at the time” since she moved in elementary school. The people she met in the program—both friends and adults—became “very important figures” in her life, and through the lifelong friendships they developed, she felt “a sense of community” because they bonded together through a “sisterhood,” family-like dynamic. Tanya explained that the program and friendships developed there changed the trajectory of her life course; in her words, the program “completely changed my life in terms of what I ended up studying at school, and the internships I got, and the way I saw myself in the world, and now what I want to do with my career.” She described the program as “the biggest grand-slam home run of my life,” further explaining that the way the program approached developing young people’s artistry was not about cultivating competition, as was often the case with the professional dance world, but instead was about supporting a sense of “camaraderie and community.” The friends who became family and community she developed through the program helped her through professional and personal issues throughout her life; Tanya described them being “bound for life” through their shared experiences that began with participating in the community arts program. Arts participation and learning cultivated a sense of community and chosen family.

Yvonne: Friendship as opening new perspectives

Yvonne described being introduced to the community arts theater program by both her sister and a friend who “raved” about the program. She remembers her experience in the program as having “a lot of fun” and “a lot of friends,” and fondly recalls shared experiences of writing screenplays together. Furthermore, she felt that she had new perspectives opened up to her through meeting new people and developing friendships with those people in the program. She explained, “It just helps being exposed to different aspects of life and different personalities and people helping me not be so closed-minded, not be so in my own kind of judgment of people.” Through creating together and developing ideas around their shared interests, Yvonne grew close with people she may have not known well otherwise. Yvonne explained that she and her friends in the program “always considered each other family and to this day, I still refer to some of them as like my brother.” Through her arts participation and learning in the program Yvonne described a shift in perspective in the way she saw the world as well as the way she self-identified as a person—as less closed-minded, less judgmental—due to the bonds she formed with others in the community arts program. The shift in self learning she experienced was attributed to the nature of the friendships developed through shared interests and experiences in their arts participation.

Table 1

Themes Surfaced across Selected Interviews to Describe Relationships between Learning, Participation, and Friendship

Friendship themes: Specifying the relationship between learning, participation, and friendship in arts communities of practice	Example(s) from interview transcripts, highlighting relationship between participant's own participation, learning, and friendships <i>(arts-specific nature in bold)</i>
<i>Shift in connections: Developing network and social connectedness</i>	<i>Honestly, me, it really is, it is just the experiences that I had with the friends that I met there, you know. And the fact that the foundation was laid for, like the [music] company that we started together.</i>
Expansion of personal and professional networks around shared interest and passion in the arts	<i>Me and my friends who would go up there, we were, like, well, let's go do this over here 'cause they have, kind of, the things we were interested in. We were interested in making music...and being able to expand our friend group and network by, you know, just going here.</i>
<i>Shift in community: Developing a sense of community and lifelong, family-like bonds</i>	<i>So that was a very strong relationship for me, and they were all a year older than me. So I think I still kind of had that, like, older sister-younger sister adoration towards them, and to this day, still do. Like, I still kind of turn to them for advice, and just, support...wouldn't have been friends if it wasn't for [the dance program].</i>
Cultivation of lifelong community through shared experiences in arts program	<i>We shared a lot of the same experiences, like, whether it was, like, going on a trip or doing, you know, going to the studio. Yeah, I don't, uh, uh, having a lot of the same, like, experiences that were, like, formative, like, I'd, a lot of us know that that wouldn't have happened if we weren't part of the program. Um, I think the overarching one is the social connections that we formed just with each other.</i>
<i>Shift in perspective: Developing new frameworks and self-identification</i>	<i>Having a place, [the arts program] that we met people from all backgrounds and really had to work with them, develop friendships. And, I guess, it gave me...me and all of my friends which are, uh, such a mixed bag of folks—that, that this is possible in the world. Whereas, like, even if you look at the media today, you know, everything's so divisive everywhere. And I'm, like, if you just start people out...if they have access to, or proximity to difference... The difference will not be different anymore. It'll become familiar.</i>
Understanding of difference through common interests and experiences in the arts; understanding of self	<i>[If not for the arts program] I wouldn't have much experiences or personal connections to major issues such as like LGBTQ community and their fight for equal rights. And because I have people in the community it's still important to me. And so that's where I feel like I try and grow as a person</i>

During their experiences in community arts programs, participants discussed changes in their participation and learning in relation to developing friendships in terms of opportunities to develop networks, lifelong family-like relationships with friends from their programs, and the cultivation of new perspectives and understanding of self. Across the interviews, participants discussed *shared interests* in the arts as a touchpoint for friendships to develop. In the case of Chris for example, a shared interest in music formed the foundation for creating something that had not existed before—the music label he and his friends began together. Through engagement with these shared interests around art making, *shared experiences* also supported the development of friendship in community arts programs. Centered on interest and the shared experience of working together to create new things, friendships mediated the kind of participation and learning that occurred, and transformation in terms of an expansion of networks, community, and perspective. We can indeed also consider this a reciprocal, symbiotic process in which the participation and learning impacted the ways friendships developed—that is the shared experiences and shared interests provided foundations for friendships to form and flourish.

The themes described in this paper can be further distinguished by a strength in intimacy or type of connection made. The relationship between arts participation, learning, and friendship can first be thought of as a strengthening of friendship networks that can connect people to personal and professional opportunities. This first theme may be thought of as less intimate than the other two, though nonetheless valuable for supporting more equitable connection to opportunities. The second theme of connecting to one's community concerns the relationship between arts participation, learning, and friendship that cultivates community connectedness for individuals, attends to both the personal and social aspects of developing within a community of practice and a sense of "finding your people" around interest-driven activities. The idea that these friends are not only connectors to opportunities but are also family, or what we might call "kindred spirits" cultivates a feeling of social support beyond the bounds of the arts participation and learning. These people do things for one another above and beyond what is expected. And the final theme of a shift in perspective suggests that arts participation, learning, and friendship can support a shift in the way people self-identify and consider their relationship to themselves within communities of practice. This suggests that friendship of this kind is a sort of identity work, a process of self-recognition through the act of participating, learning, and *being friends*.

Conclusion

What can this analysis tell us about the relationship between friendship, arts participation, and learning in community arts contexts? We found that friendships supported the development of networks, community, and broadened participants' perspectives within the context of arts-centered interest-driven activity. The friendships participants described through retrospective interviews were far from transactional—that is, they were not just a means to other types of learning or opportunities—in some cases, *they were in fact very much the point of participating*. The enduring value of the friendships participants developed through their arts practice and programs was evident through the transformative effects the friendships had on their lives. The community they created, the cultural connections and networks they made with one another, were all part of the arts participation and learning. It turns out that developing friendships could be one of the key reasons why someone should participate in the arts, or participate in some sort of interest-driven activity with others.

This work has immediate implications for research and practice that center friendship as a construct worthy of further exploration. Implications for practice include starting conversations around designing for friendship in community arts spaces. Cartun et al. (2014) also raised this possibility in their work by suggesting that in the development of interest-driven sites for learning, educators should consider how to intentionally design for interpersonal connections. From a design research perspective, this analysis also provides the impetus to dig more deeply into the tools, materials, and participant structures that can support the mediating processes of friendship development in community arts contexts toward a range of positive life outcomes for youth. Researchers interested in further exploring friendship in educational contexts can look to both short- and long-term design processes in considering how to design for friendship within the bounds of a program experience and beyond, inclusive of outcomes that can be traced later in life (e.g., an eventual career, and feeling of connectedness to friendship networks from arts programs).

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