

0. Gang Members' Aha! Moment - Story Preface

1. Aha Moments, HÅ and Unitarian Universalism

2. Gang Members' Aha! Moment

3. Stillness and Flow: The Impact of Kahoolawe-by Amy Perruso

4. Place-based Learning And Community Engagement by Dr. Tammy Jones



In my junior year at Swarthmore College near Philadelphia, I began teaching at an experimental high school, a project of the West Philadelphia High School and the University of Pennsylvania. The mayor at the time was in conflict with the school district, so he had leaders from opposing gangs transferred into our small school.

I was teaching environmental art and animated filmmaking and came to the brownstone school building armed with my personal Bolex movie camera and high-quality Liquitex acrylic paints. They seemed to really like me on the first day, but I noticed the brilliant colors of the paints were now all over the walls of the neighborhood-- more of an impasto creation than the usual spray paint. My allotment for supplies for the year was used up in two classes. I lamented and questioned students-- why would they use up so much so quickly? "It is good for advertising" I was told.

The availability of quality paint and the interest in the movie camera boosted attendance. The young women were manageable but many had infants with them which compromised their attendance, focus, and work. But most of the young men were unruly and even frightening. I was afraid that I would not make progress teaching, that my camera might be busted, and that I might not even be safe.

One of my friends was in an architecture class and he had learned how to make a polyethylene "room" with plastic film, tape, and a small fan. We blew one up in our off-campus yard and I was thrilled. The top floor of the High School was a big open space-- I brought the plastic and laid it out on the floor at the next class.

Large sheets of polyethylene were held together by duct tape in a three-dimensional rectangle, about 8 feet wide, by 15 feet long by 7 feet tall. We had a pretty good turn out that day, about 15 students were with me and they were laughing at me. Spreading out this plastic looked crazy. Why do it? Then I pulled an old style small fan out of my supply bag and plugged it in. Now they were all laughing-- that I thought that little fan could do anything with the mountainous pile of plastic seemed ridiculous to them.

But little by little, and quite rapidly, the translucent pile began to rise. I could almost hear a gasp as they saw it take shape. When the room reached full height, I took the film camera, the tripod, and some art supplies and lifted the flap to enter the room. They looked scared for me. But I went to the center of the room and set up the supplies and equipment.



I came out for more supplies and to invite them in. I explained that our animation class was going to take place inside the translucent classroom. Young men teased each other about being afraid. They were afraid-- unsure if they could breathe in there. But they saw that I was fine, and the fan was continuing to create a breeze and fill

the room with air.

So one by one, the students entered. And when they were inside, the focus was on the work. Gone was the jockeying for power and the constant joking interrupting the lesson. Now they were creating pixilated sequences with the camera and the art supplies.

The 'aha! moment' for the learners was that changing the environment changed the rules of behavior of the group, and each individual was more able to focus on the learning. It was different, it was surprising, it was new-- and this freed them to be different and to focus on the learning.

For me, the 'aha! moment' showed me that if I could think of the learners' experience, and provide a radical and surprising change, if the change felt physical and engaging, then focus and learning could happen. Our relationship was never the same. We were a team. Eureka.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Gang-Members-Aha-Moment-A-H-Moments-Breakthroughs-in-Learning-and-Living>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Gang-Members-Aha-Moment-A-H-Moments-Breakthroughs-in-Learning-and-Living>

Media Stream



Plastic Room

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Plastic-Room>



West Philadelphia scene

Daily Mail, Dick Swanson

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/West-Philadelphia-scene>