

California Lawyers for the Arts
in collaboration with the New York State Council on the Arts
and the Woodstock School of Art

National Arts in Corrections Initiative

New York Arts in Corrections Demonstration Projects
at Ulster and Adirondack Correctional Facilities (2019 to 2021)

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Project Background

Under the auspices of the New York State Council on the Arts, California Lawyers for the Arts engaged the Woodstock School of Art to provide drawing and watercolor classes for a self-selected group of men at the Ulster Correctional Facility and at the Adirondack Correctional Facility. Two demonstration projects were funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. These were the first courses that were completed as part of a three-year national project expanding arts in corrections in five states, including New York, Louisiana, Michigan, Ohio and Texas. We look forward to adding more demonstration sites as we continue to implement the project.

The research protocol and surveys were reviewed and approved in advance by the DOCCS Department of Program Planning, Research and Evaluation. The impact on the students was measured through written surveys that they completed during their first and last classes. The first series of classes was presented in person at Ulster between December 2019 and February 2020. As a result of COVID-19, the project was put on hold in March, 2020. The second set of classes was presented remotely to students at the Ulster and Adirondack correctional facilities between April 2021 and July 2021.

Both of the 12-session courses were taught by Keith Gunderson, an experienced art teacher who was selected by the Woodstock School of Art. The results, described below, provide striking evidence about the value of the arts in changing the participants' attitudes, emotional management and intellectual flexibility. Also noteworthy is the difference in self-reported satisfaction rates between the in-person and the remote classes, which were conducted over Webex to students at the Ulster and Adirondack facilities simultaneously.

Summary of Pre and Post Program Evaluation Results from Ulster In-Person Classes

This section of the report highlights some of the key findings from the first demonstration project at Ulster. Participants anonymously completed pre and post-program evaluations at the beginning and end of the 12-week drawing and watercolor course that started December 6, 2019. We received 14 completed pre-program surveys and 12 completed post-program surveys for an 85% retention rate; two students did not finish the course. A comparison of the pre and post-program responses shows that participants reported more positive attitudes and behaviors after taking the art program.

The responses suggest that the art class had a positive effect on the participants' productivity and time management skills. On the pre-program survey, 69% of respondents (9 out of 13) strongly agreed with the statement, "I plan and use my time efficiently (Question #12)" and 92% (11 out of 12) strongly agreed on the post-survey. In response to the statement, "I like to be an active, get into it person (#31)," 43% of respondents (6 out of 14) strongly agreed on the pre-survey and 75% (9 out of 12) strongly agreed on the post-survey. Additionally, 46% of respondents (6 out of 13) strongly agreed on the pre-survey that "Art will help me improve my concentration (#39)" while 75% (9 out of 12) strongly agreed on the post-survey.

Participants reported having better emotional control and mental flexibility after completing the arts course. On the pre-program survey, 46% of participants (6 out of 13) strongly agreed, "I change my thinking or opinions easily if there is a better idea (#14)" which increased to 75% (9 out of 12) who strongly agreed on the post-survey. When given the statement, "I stay calm and overcome anxiety in new or changing situations (#22)," 23% of respondents (3 out of 13) strongly agreed on the pre-survey and 58% (7 out of 12) strongly agreed on the post-survey.

The results also demonstrate that the arts program had a positive effect on participants' relationships and social interactions. On the pre-program survey, 25% of respondents (3 out of 12) strongly agreed that "Art helps me and my family share our thoughts and feelings with each other (#40)" which increased to 42% (5 out of 12) who strongly agreed on the post-survey. There was a 25% increase in those who strongly agreed with the statement, "Art is a way for me to connect with other inmates (#41)," with 25% (3 out of 12) who strongly agreed on the pre-survey and 50% (6 out of 12) who strongly agreed on the post-survey.

The post-program survey included the question, “Did you enjoy the course you just completed? (#8)”, to which 100% of respondents (11 out of 11) replied “Yes.” There was a 33% increase in those who strongly agreed with the statement, “This program will give me hope for a better future (# 43).” with 42% who strongly agreed (5 out of 12) on the pre-survey and 75% (9 out of 12) who strongly agreed on the post-survey. When asked whether “this course will have a positive effect on me (#42),” 42% of respondents (5 out of 12) strongly agreed on the pre-survey, and on the post-survey, 100% of respondents (12 out of 12) strongly agreed, “This course had a positive effect on me. (#43).”

These findings demonstrate that the students' engagement with art had an overall positive impact on their attitudes and behaviors, and several students expressed a desire to take more art classes in the future.

Additional comments from participants in the first class at Ulster included:

- “I truly do appreciate your sincere efforts towards a productive experience. It's certainly a measure for improvement and I definitely hope and pray you're able to extend more of your concern/ability in the future -- perhaps on the same Friday afternoons, which is best for creative energies (at the end of the prison week). God bless!”
- “This has been an amazing experience! The instructor is very well informed and is an excellent teacher, we all have learned so much from this course. Learning and experiencing watercolor painting was not only fun but also rewarding. I am very much looking forward to more sessions and working on my own. Thank you!”
- “This is a very good program. Very good teachings. I truly enjoyed this class. I hope to take part 2.”

Summary of Pre and Post Surveys from Online Classes at Ulster and Adirondack Facilities

Due to the circumstances of COVID-19, which resulted in closing correctional facilities across the country to outside providers, the second set of demonstration classes were presented in the spring of 2021 as a distance learning course. The 12-week course started on April 20, 2021 with classes that were presented by the same art teacher, Keith Gunderson, to two sets of students at Ulster and Adirondack at the same time. Packets of materials for the art lessons were dropped off or mailed in advance to the two participating correctional facilities at Ulster and Adirondack.

A total of 22 students participated in the combined classes, including 12 from Ulster (8 of whom had taken the previous in-person class) and 10 from Adirondack, who were all new to the program.

There was more attrition in the on-line class than during the in-person classes. A total of 22 persons completed the pre-surveys at Ulster (12) and Adirondack (10), but only 13 completed the post-survey at Ulster (6) and Adirondack (7), for a completion rate of 59% (compared to 85% for the previous in-person class at Ulster).

On the pre-program survey of the 22 students at both facilities, 68% of the respondents (15 out of 22) (compared to 69% in the 2019 survey) strongly agreed with the statement, “I plan and use my time efficiently (Question #12)” but only 61% (8 out of 13) strongly agreed on the post survey, (compared to 92% at the end of the previous in-person class at Ulster.)

In response to the statement, “I like to be an active, get into it person (#31), 36% of respondents (8 out of 22) strongly agreed on the pre-survey (compared to 43% in the 2019 survey) while only 25% (3 out of 12) strongly agreed on the post-survey (compared to 75% at the end of the previous in-person class at Ulster, which had reflected noticeable improvement).

In response to question #39, 9 out of 22 respondents, or 41%, strongly agreed on the pre-survey that “Art will help me improve my concentration,” (compared to 46% in the 2019 survey), which decreased to 33% who strongly strongly agreed on the post survey (compared to 75% at the end of the previous Ulster survey).

In contrast to the earlier findings in the Ulster pre-pandemic program, participants in the on-line demonstration project reported having diminished emotional control and mental flexibility after completing the arts course. On the pre-survey, 33% of participants (7 out of 21) strongly agreed, “I change my thinking or opinions easily if there is a better idea (#14)” compared to 46% of participants in the earlier in-person course. At the end of the on-line course, only 15% of the students (2 out of 13) strongly agreed with this statement on the post-survey (compared to 75% of respondents at the end of the earlier in-person course.

In response to the statement, “I stay calm and overcome anxiety in new or changing situations (#22),” 27% (or 6 out of 22) of the respondents strongly agreed in the pre-survey (compared to 23% in the earlier in-person course), and 25% (or 3 out of 12) of the respondents strongly agreed in the post-survey, (compared to 58% in the earlier survey.)

In terms of effects on participants' relationships and social interactions, the in-person program provided more positive results.

On the pre-program survey of on-line students, 29% of respondents (6 out of 21) strongly agreed that “Art helps me and my family share our thoughts and feelings with each other (#40)” (compared to 25% of respondents in the 2019 pre-survey), which decreased to 16% (2 out of 12 respondents) in the post survey (compared to 42% who strongly agreed during the earlier post-survey of in-person students.)

In response to the statement, “Art is a way for me to connect with other inmates (#41),” 27% of the on-line respondents (6 out of 22) strongly agreed on the pre-survey while none of the respondents to the post-survey strongly agreed (0 out of 12 respondents). This was a marked contrast to the earlier survey for students in the in-person class at Ulster, when (3 out of 12) strongly agreed with the statement on the pre-survey and 50% (6 out of 12) strongly agreed on the post-survey.

The post-program survey from the in-person class included the question, “Did you enjoy the course you just completed? (#8)”, to which 100% of respondents (11 out of 11) replied “Yes.” The 2021 post-program surveys asked the same question, to which 12 of 13 respondents answered, “Very much” and 1 respondent said “Somewhat.” The respondent who said “Somewhat” was a returning student at Ulster who wrote: “In person is crucial. Access to materials needs to be better.”

When asked whether “this program will give me hope for a better future (# 43),” 38% of the on-line students (8 out of 21) strongly agreed (compared to 42% of in-persons respondents in the earlier pre-survey). This increased to 50% of respondents who strongly agreed in the post-survey of on-line students (6 out of 12), compared to 75% of respondents to the earlier post-survey of in-persons students.

When asked whether “this course will have a positive effect on me (#42),” 45% (10 out of 22) of the respondents strongly agreed (compared to 42% of respondents in the earlier survey), which increased to 50% (6 out of 12) in the post-survey (compared to 100% of respondents in the earlier survey of in-person students.)

Two comments by students who had participated in the earlier in-person class at Ulster confirmed the disparity in results between the two sets of surveys for the in-person and on-line classes:

- “I truly enjoy the class and wholly appreciate being a part of the program. My wish is that the teacher be able to come back into the facility. In person is much much better. Do grant my wish. Thanks. ”

- “Great teacher. In person is crucial. Access to materials needs to be better. Good luck.”

New students at Ulster shared the following written comments:

- “Mr. Gunderson's dedication and his commitment to teach shows - even through virtual teaching - very passionate about sharing what he has learned and passing it on.”
- “The art class was very beneficial in allowing me to see talents I never used. With practice and patience I will be able to accomplish artistic skills. Thank you.”
- “I came at the end, so I didn't get the full class instruction, but what I did learn was interesting, however, in person would be better. Watercolors interesting, but it made me feel at times, sloppy like the running water colors :-)”

Other comments by participants in the on-line class at Adirondack included the following:

- “I really liked the class because the teacher is so immersed in the vocabulary that describes and identifies the many techniques involved in the way art is done. It's easy to tell that he is a professor in his field and has unmatched descriptive knowledge.”
- “I enjoyed having my artwork critiqued by the teacher, who is by the way, extremely gifted. I have learned some new techniques thus proving that new tricks can be learned by this old guy (71 year old). Thank you for giving me the opportunity to participate.”
- “Having a person, to teach is always better due to the situation we're in. I believe this class was very informative for me. The teacher was very good at what he did, with his skills, and wisdom; he also answered all the questions with patience and understanding. Thank you.”
- “At the beginning I was very tired, but as I start to surprise myself with power of creativity and my artwork, I became more engaged and looked forward to practice more and contemplating to be a professional artist. I will be grateful for this lifetime opportunity.”
- “I enjoyed the class. I liked the way the camera zoomed in on certain details and allowed the class to see up close. The teacher was quite knowledgeable, and I also enjoyed the critiques. I enjoyed too the African-American focus in art; however, additional examples (i.e., Asian, Euro, Latin, etc.) would have been nice too.”

- “It was interesting to have the opportunity to reconstruct an envied dream, a desire to warrant the beauty of an expression being put in a picture, this always amuse[d] me as a child. and even when sometime consumed by other activities, the spirit of art has never left my conscience. This class was a rebirth of an introduction.”

Staff Surveys

For the first time, we asked DOCCS personnel who staffed the on-line classes at both the Ulster and Adirondack facilities to provide written feedback in response to our approved survey instrument that was tailored for their use. These were their comments:

2021 Adirondack Facility Staff Survey Comments (1 respondent)

[17. Do you have any suggestions?]

A written syllabus documenting the focus of each class and the materials to be used would have been very helpful. There was some instruction to that effect in the beginning.

[18. What changes, if any, have you noticed?]

I was acquainted with only one of the participants prior to the program, and he dropped out after the third class. It seemed as though having assignments gave the participants new goals to achieve. Certainly having regular visits from this writer on the housing unit to collect work or give support was welcomed. Anything to distract from the mundane is welcomed here.

[19. What do you like most about the arts program?]

To see the pride each individual took in their work and being able to show and discuss it. Getting in the class a half hour early allowed them to show and tell with each other. I am a counselor. Any opportunity to deliver positive vibes is energy for all in the vicinity. My distribution network has been expanded so I am happy to be of service.

[20. What would you change to improve the program?]

Having set criteria for the materials being issued as to what was to be kept and what would have to be returned at the conclusion of the program. I was put in the position to instruct participants to return materials the morning of the last class. One participant wanted an avenue to make his work available for sale to the public.”

[21. What words or phrases would you use to describe the arts program and its impact on inmates?]

Inspirational, enlightening, motivating. A ray of sunshine on a cloudy day. The music of creativity coming through the din of institutionalization.

2021 Ulster Facility Staff Survey Comments (1 respondent)

[17. Do you have any suggestions?]

Materials being added need ample time to be approved.

[18. What changes, if any, have you noticed?]

Inmates recognized their talent and abilities quickly and participants were able to teach each other.

[19. What do you like most about the arts program?]

Seeing the participants become more confident in their work each week. Some of them were so proud to show me!

[20. What would you change to improve the program?]

In person would be much more impressionable for the inmates (I understand this was what we could do with Covid). Inmates were allotted times to use materials outside of class, but were much more engaged when it was on an in-person level.

Summary of Findings

These demonstration projects offer a clear contrast in terms of the impact of art classes with a teacher who is present, compared to the results of distance learning. While the same teacher was engaged for both sessions and presented the same course materials, it is clear from the analysis of the students' pre and post surveys that the outcomes of the in-person class were more beneficial in terms of behavioral characteristics. Self-reported indicators in productivity, time management, concentration, emotional control, and mental flexibility were significantly increased during the in-person classes at Ulster, compared to the results of the distance learning class presented simultaneously to groups at Ulster and Adirondack correctional facilities. However, as seen in their subjective comments, the participants in the distance learning classes expressed overall appreciation for the opportunity to take a course taught by a professional art teacher. While the staff at both facilities made suggestions for improving the delivery of the course content and instructions, they also conveyed the students' sense of pride when they shared their work.

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