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Brave Spaces, Radical Openness, and Youth Loneliness

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University of Montana

GBLD 499: Global Leadership Initiative Capstone

Devin Carpenter

April 20, 2023

Abstract

It is no secret young adults, no matter where in the world they come from, face social pressures with the potential to be isolating. For today's youth, not only are they feeling the commonplace anxieties about fitting in, finding success, and uncertainty of the future, but these anxieties are exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Young adults from all over the globe report feeling more anxious, more depressed, and more lonely. However, it is also no secret that deliberate community building, creation of art and writing as a means of self-exploration, and participation in spaces designed for acceptance fend off these feelings of loneliness. So, to these ends, the question guiding our research is as follows: How might we acknowledge social pressures on young adults and create a brave space to build community through self expression? Our team discovered that a creative writing and artistic workshop has the potential to create both a radically open space in which young adults can come together, as well as the opportunity for self-reflection via writing and/or creating art. We will discuss the content of the four workshops we have facilitated with local youth and the results of their work will be published in a zine. In the course of our work, we found Brave Spaces, the theory of 'thirding,' and active community support to be powerful forces to fight against youth loneliness, manifested in a series of workshops designed to operationalize those concepts.

Introduction

Youth loneliness has been on the rise worldwide, creating wide-ranging issues for the youngest generation. Especially when loneliness creates both mental and physical health consequences, it becomes important that young people everywhere access systems of social support which enhance their well-being and mitigate loneliness. Among the causes of this trend include general social pressures, the expansion of internet access and usage, and isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. And this extends worldwide as well, supporting a generalizable model of youth loneliness and demanding globality when crafting a response. Such responses include self-exploration via art and writing, self-expression through authentic social support, and facilitated spaces in which to engage with others. It's important to note that culture plays a role here, determining what expectations exist around self-expression, social support, and associated concepts that combat loneliness.

The Brave Space emerges as the ideal format under which to encourage connection among young people. It's a space which affirms one's identity and expression, but also challenges problematic beliefs and encourages growth through deep sharing. Alongside artistic expression, social theories like 'thirding' and 'radical openness' inform the construction of a Brave Space. This project promotes a four-workshop-series which sets the above considerations in motion. Designed to administer activities that actively engage participants in the social support and self-expression that fight against loneliness, the workshops proved to be highly successful agents of the changes we seek to establish. Ultimately, with a few recommended alterations, the Brave Space functions effectively as a solution to global youth loneliness.

Literature Review

Loneliness — defined by Harvard psychiatry professor Eugene Beresin as “the feeling of aloneness *even in the presence of others*” (2019, para. 7) — is a global phenomenon. It can be felt no matter what age a person is or what type of background one comes from. However, in recent years, rates of loneliness have been increasing for one group in particular: young people (Weissbourd, 2022). The challenging nature of loneliness in one’s young life can have an indelible impact as one grows into adulthood as well.

According to a study from the National Library of Medicine, “loneliness in adolescence is associated with diagnosed depression, poorer adult self-rated health, and metabolic risk factors related to cardiovascular disease” (Goosby, 2013, p. 1). These powerful and challenging impacts of loneliness throughout one’s life have even been linked to premature deaths for every race, one study found, and another researcher determined those issues with mental health that act as an immediate symptom of loneliness combines with behavioral and biological problems that may last a lifetime if unaddressed (Novotney, 2019). This even includes issues with one’s white blood cells, which can be thrust into long-term fight-or-flight mode thanks to feelings of loneliness, which in turn lowers one’s immune response (Novotney, 2019). Thus, loneliness encompasses both mental and physical health risks well past one’s initial feelings.

Adolescent Mental Health

These feelings of loneliness have been on the rise among teens for a number of reasons. According to a study conducted by the PEW Research Center, while teens do feel social media strengthens their friendships and can provide emotional support, around 45% also feel overwhelmed by drama; 43% feel a pressure to post things they look good in or that are in keeping with a status quo; and 37% feel pressure for their posts to receive comments and likes (Anderson, 2020). PEW makes clear that for some teens, “sharing their life online can come with

added social burdens,” (Anderson, 2020, para. 6) and according to Beresin, the developmental stage of adolescent teens can make this type of drama an added challenge and an exacerbating factor that might lead to loneliness (2019). These pressures are added upon by issues young people face in the real world.

One study looking at the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact also found expectations of success had a vast impact upon the mental health of people aged 18-25 (Weissbourd, 2022). More than this, studies from both Harvard’s Making Caring Common Project and the Cambridge University Press also look at the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on loneliness and its contributing factors, finding that it had a particularly felt impact upon young adults and adolescents (Weissbourd, 2022). Psychologists found that those near the epicenter of the pandemic experienced increases in generalized and social anxieties (Hawes, 2021). In addition, 61% of those who were surveyed by the Making Caring Common Project reported feeling intensive levels of loneliness during the pandemic — either feeling lonely frequently or almost all of the time during a four week period (Weissbourd, 2022). Studies from London also emphasized that loneliness stems from feelings of being disconnected from one’s community, and discovered that those who identify as LGBTQ+ are particularly at-risk for facing these challenging feelings (Fardghassemi, 2022).

Adolescent loneliness is also a trend internationally, meaning that youth globally are experiencing similar pressures. Since 2012, adolescents have become substantially more lonely and isolated, which correlates strongly with the advent of widespread smartphone and internet access (Twenge et al., 2021). The correlation remains strong when comparing nations in which internet access is limited to nations with wide internet access, noting that the primary variable to which to point may be high levels of smartphone use (Twenge et al., 2021). This would mean

that when conceptualizing the trend of adolescent loneliness, special consideration should be given to the areas in which internet access is high, as well as areas in which telecommunication infrastructure is currently expanding. Further, research interrogates the possibility of intervening variables in youth's isolation, finding that "school loneliness rose and fell in tandem with greater smartphone access and internet use, but not with unemployment, GDP, income inequality, or family size" (Twenge et al., 2021, p. 267). For many young people, it's the internet's isolatory capacity that drives the trend in loneliness.

Many studies may contextualize global adolescent loneliness and isolation in terms of internet use, but it is important to understand how culture can also predispose individuals (regardless of age) to certain behaviors. More specifically, culture influences the degree to which individuals develop internalizing disorders, or disorders in which the individual retreats inwardly and self-isolates. Some research affirms that societies with high 'emancipative values' (or countries in which free expression and individual rights are encouraged) also develop heightened levels of mild mood and mild internalizing disorders (Kapitány-Fövény et al., 2018). The emancipative nation accepts internalization of one's problems as opposed to the free expression of anger and other 'hard' emotions, and therefore contributes to sustaining low-level anxiety and internalizing behaviors. In an interesting explanation, immigration is positively correlated to emancipative cultures, so it is likely that especially diverse countries relate to a pervasive mild mood internalization (Kapitány-Fövény et al., 2018). In other words, nations where people self-isolate and develop a disorder of such internalization are usually accompanied by high liberalism and diversity. Internationally, then, the concept of loneliness, especially adolescent loneliness, should be thought of in terms of internet access, liberalism, and immigration.

Mitigators of Loneliness

While the challenge of loneliness is on the rise for young people and has been exacerbated by recent factors like the COVID-19 pandemic, these challenges are not without solutions. Beresin points to a few ideas, including joining a group with others experiencing loneliness and talking about it, immersing oneself in creative arts, and joining a community as being among potential answers for adolescent people to combat challenging feelings of loneliness (2019).

Based on Beresin's suggestions, our research has found that self-expression is really vital to addressing social pressures on young adults, mainly because it is a reflection of one's internal self. This internal self is referred to in social sciences as the "deep self," the truest form of identity that lies behind the external actions, internal dialogues, and myriad choices any individual makes (Sripada, 2016). Self-expression, in this perspective, is about all of the ways that a person can actualize the deep self. In a derivative analysis, one could submit that this Deep Self Model validates the purpose of identity-recognition and identity-expression techniques. By exploring the things most fundamental to oneself, one can better align with their Deep Self, thereby understanding how this self interacts with the environment's social pressures. However, humans are conscious and autonomous beings, so the expressions exhibited externally may not fit into this deep self accurately.

Here enters the importance of "authentic self-expression," a concept that affirms people are fundamentally and irrevocably social, meaning our personhood is always influenced by others (Tshivhase, 2015). It's about how the self-authored individual reckons with the environment in which they live. However, authenticity is ultimately non-evaluative— it can only be truly defined, measured, and experienced by the person expressing themselves (Tshivhase, 2015). Authenticity therefore cannot be evaluated socially. This should not be understood as a

negation of social interaction on the whole, because “persons come to understand themselves through engaging with others in dialogue” (Tshivhase, 2015, p. 382). In this sense, self-expression is not devalued because authenticity cannot be proven. Instead, inhibitive social barriers should be removed to promote the *highest degree of authenticity*. On the whole, self-expression is a reflection of the deep self, the authenticity of which is determined solely by the person self-expressing, and efforts should be made to remove the social barriers preventing inauthentic self-expression. As young adults self-express, isolation and loneliness can be understood as behavioral products or a set of social factors encouraging such effects. It is in the interest of their health and wellbeing that young adults be able to self-express authentically in a productive environment.

Cultural Considerations

However, any attempt to encourage self-expression must be culturally conscious. This is because different cultural milieux around the world encourage different methods of self-expression. A review of relevant scientific studies finds that the value of a given type of self-expression differs based on one’s culture of origin. Western cultures, with the US as a particularly pertinent case, place an emphasis on speech, while Eastern cultures do not, placing a stronger emphasis on thought (Kim, 2010). When those raised in a Western culture were asked to vocalize their thoughts while solving a problem, they had higher rates of success; conversely, those raised in an Eastern culture had far less success when their thoughts were vocalized, and even displayed involuntary stress responses (Kim, 2010). This means that one’s culture will craft a certain ‘ideal’ form of self-expression, and when the individual expresses themselves in a way that diverges from this ideal, they may have a stress response instead of a cathartic response.

This cultural divide extends to the tendency to seek social support: individuals from an Eastern culture exhibit stress responses when seeking social support while individuals from a Western culture feel comforted during social support (Kim, 2010). Consequently, all successful social support should be characterized culturally, drawing upon “the ways in which participants invoke and affirm their definition of the situation, their understanding of the conversation, and their framing of advice within relevant cultural premises” (Goldsmith, 2006, p. 456). A possible approach to acknowledge these differences suggests priming individuals according to their cultural preference for internal or external support. This sort of cultural cognizance is fundamental to the way in which guided self-expression should occur, because it has historically not been central to the approach. In an important extrapolation, “by assuming one mode of expression or interaction as the only or superior mode, society could bring inadvertent but systematic advantages to the cultural majority” (Kim, 2010, para. 8).

Culture is not the only internationally uniting consideration at play. Age and gender also have a role in how people self-express. An intensive and expansive audit of the ‘blogosphere’ in 2007 finds that content and language correlate strongly with age and gender. Certain ‘outer’ concepts — like Religion, Politics, Business, and Internet — appear more in male authors’ work, while ‘inner’ concepts — Conversation, At Home, Fun, Romance, and Swearing — appear more in female authors’ work (Argamon, 2007). Similarly, older bloggers conveyed the male-correlated content more frequently, while younger bloggers used the female correlated content more frequently (Argamon, 2007). It is important that value not be attached to any content, language, or style of expression, because each form is valuable for the given individual doing the expressing, regardless of their identity. The relevance of this study is limited today, because the blogosphere is much less present and culture has certainly evolved since publishing.

However, the significance is still large because it proves that the way in which one communicates and the content one contributes is largely tied to one's age and gender. Thus, the concerns one is likely to express in any certain fashion can be understood in part as linked to their age and gender. For young adults and the specific social pressures they face, culture, age, gender, and so many more identifying factors will specialize what they express and how they express it. As outlets like guided writing and others ask these individuals to self-express, and to do so authentically, this identity-based analysis should remain foundational to the program.

When addressing social pressures on youth, noting principally loneliness, and when attempting to foster an identity-conscious environment in which the deep self is authentically expressed, a leading method emerges: the Brave Space.

The Brave Space

The Brave Space comes from what many people know as a safe space. While the term 'safe space' has no official origin, it is used across the world in schools, offices, and college campuses. The idea for these spaces is that they create an environment free of judgment and center on the safety of a marginalized community. In practice, these spaces are often considered a refuge for those students or community members. A 'Brave Space' is a term made popular by Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens, and is defined by the use of its five essential elements:

“controversy with civility, owning intentions and impacts, challenge by choice, respect, and no attacks” (2013, pp. 3-4). These core pieces create the 'Brave Space,' and by changing our language from safe to brave we aim to help people feel more comfortable with the idea of expressing themselves freely.

To create a Brave Space on campus or within a classroom, one might explain the idea to their students, and then begin conversations with the five central elements above to create an

open and understanding dialogue. Evidence from a NASPA study supports the idea that having places on campus for minority students to understand their resources and feel heard creates a more positive environment where these students can succeed (Arao & Clemens, 2013).

Brave Spaces differ from safe spaces in that they are not confined to a certain classroom or office, but encourage a climate in which students feel comfortable enough to ask uncomfortable questions. Incorporating a Brave Space as a potential way to open communication and self-expression not only allows for students to address loneliness on their own, but also, to find support among a community that allows them to deal with the challenging emotions that can come along with navigating their feelings.

Art and Creative Writing

The methodology behind our approach to social pressures on young adults should match the problems to the solutions. Having performed a thorough review of the pressures themselves, it is apt to consider practices which would most effectively address them. One example of healthy, authentic self-expression is the use of directed journaling, or guided writing. In an analysis of its physiological and psychological effects, research concludes the efficacy of writing depends entirely on the manner in which it is approached and the outcomes desired by the writer (Mugerwa, 2012). While no certain guidelines can be asserted, a few factors increased the success of guided writing, including writing in a private setting, drawing on recent undisclosed events, and continuing to journal for extended periods of at least 15 minutes (Mugerwa, 2012). Authentic expression of the deep self can be realized through directed journaling because it's a situation in which the social pressures impacting youth can be momentarily assuaged. While effective individually, directed journaling can also be facilitated in a collaborative setting like the

workshop. This is a space in which individual practices can be opened for community participation.

The workshop class is a staple among creative writing and art departments at universities across the country, cropping up after the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s (Cain, 2010). These workshops are often peer driven and offer students a space to critique and grow their craft. With the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent rise of loneliness in young adults, the workshop setting not only offers adolescents a space to connect with their peers, but also gives them an opportunity to explore themselves through art and writing. To these ends, we aim to address the issue of adolescent loneliness through a series of workshops in which we can assist with facilitation of their authentic self-expression.

Methods

Workshops often have standard procedures, as are laid out in Dartmouth's "Conducting Writing Workshops." This article provides seven guidelines which advise facilitators to create easy access to students' work in class, properly model how you want students to respond to their peer's work, give enough encouragement and ensure the workshop space is student driven, as well as encourage differing opinions on pieces (*Conducting writing workshops*, 2020). When constructing our workshop, we also took into consideration Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process, which places emphasis on the role of the creator, giving them space to ask questions, respond to critiques verbally—allowing the creator to be an active participant in the workshop space—something many traditional workshops discourage (2022). We believe this process will help us provide a more collaborative and relationship-driven environment.

We also will take into consideration the inaccessibility writing and art often have for students who are of color, are disabled, or are of a lower income. We acknowledge that many

under-served communities either have not been given the opportunity to use the arts as a means of self-discovery and/or have been made to feel unwelcome by artistic communities (which are often associated with white, wealthy, and able-bodied people) (Donnelly, 2010).

To create the most welcoming and inclusive environment we can, we will model certain aspects of our workshop after Mary Ann Cain's essay '*A Space of Radical Openness*':

Re-Visioning the Creative Writing Workshop, featured in the book "Does the Creative Writing Workshop Still Work?" edited by writer and scholar Dianne Donnelly. In this essay, Cain speaks of the political power of the creative writing workshop and its emergence on campuses during the Civil Rights Movement as a response to students wanting more student-centered courses (Cain, 2010). She notes the writing workshop to be a potentially radical space that deconstructs the intellectual and aesthetic assumptions of the academy. Donnelly uses a term coined by Soja in the 60's called "thirding," which in layman's terms describes a space in between binaries in which "radical openness" can take place (2010). Writing workshops work as a "third space in between teacher-student, expert-novice and reconstructs previously conceived power structures—creating a more inclusive and effective space" (Cain, 2010, p. 221).

In addition, to create a welcoming environment, we as facilitators will not be critiquing student's work for content, and will only be editing for grammar. As the writer Felicia Rose Chavez states in her LitHub article "How to Build an Anti-racist Workshop," we acknowledge that student's writing is not ours to conquer, or control, or mold to fit our own aesthetic tastes (2021). The purpose of this workshop is to allow young adults to come together, form connections, and discover themselves through art. We as facilitators will act, as Chavez puts it, as "artistic allies, trusted confidants, ready resources, and steady guides" (2021, para. 33).

As a result of our workshops, we aim for students to complete one piece of work that reflects their experience and ideally, one they feel comfortable sharing with others to compile into a zine reflecting all participants' time with us. Like the workshop, the zine is also a staple of creative writing departments. As is explained in the article *A Brief History of Zines* by River H. Kero, a zine is a short, often self-published collection of anything ranging from poems, to political manifestos, to recipes (Kero, 2021). The zine is a cheap yet creative way to send art into the world— and is a mode of publication we feel teens will connect well to, as it can be made entirely their own. We will be using the website Canva to create the zine, will publish it online, and have secured funding to print hard-copies for participants as well.

Our first step in order to implement and carry out this project will be to gauge student interest. We will partner with a local high school to carry out our project. Then, we will create a poll and send it to English and art teachers at the school. This poll would include questions regarding the best time for students to attend and engage with us, what students might like to see out of these workshops, and to determine rough estimates of how many students we may need to accommodate in our spaces. This poll would be sent out during the last week of January in order for us to have two weeks to solicit responses and determine our next steps to move forward with student recruitment and determine the list of students who will be participating. Our hope would be that every student who participates would attend each session, as they will build on each other to help students develop their pieces for a zine.

The recruitment process, again, would consist of us maintaining contact with teachers. We will enter their classrooms and have an opportunity to present our workshop to high school students and explain our ideas and expectations. Also, a marketing flyer will be widely distributed, including to all the teachers (see Appendix 1). We will create a Google Docs RSVP

form for students to fill out, capping our numbers at 28 students to allow for the highest level of engagement. This would place seven students each in a group with us, letting us help facilitate the deep connections with themselves and connections with each other that we hope to see come as a result of this workshop series. This recruitment process would be a two to three week period taking place during February and into March, so students have plenty of time to make plans for attending the workshops.

Ideally, we will host the workshops at the Missoula Public Library. This will offer a chance for students to attend in a neutral space, and its central location offers accessibility for students who may not have reliable access to transportation. We will ask students to bring their own journals, but will receive funding to be able to provide artistic materials and the like. In terms of the workshop timeline, we will organize the series around five sessions throughout the month of April, with the final workshop acting as a distribution celebration for students. During the workshops, we would hope to coordinate and ensure a counselor is there in the event that the workshops bring up challenging experiences for students to work through.

Workshop 1

The first workshop will begin to operationalize brave spaces. Because this is the first time participants will be together, it is important to talk through what this sort of space involves, as well as the limitations it brings. A discussion on what we expect from participants should include the elements of a brave space, how they work in practice, and why it's important to follow this model.

Then, we can introduce the systemic and pervasive issues that will come up. When writing about deep and personal topics, participants may confront the most difficult parts of existing as a young person today. It's important they understand how things like racism,

homophobia, sexism, and so much more will come into play during the confrontation of their social pressures. As talks with professionals in this area have affirmed, ‘naming’ the big concepts and difficulties is essential to providing a space in which participants can bravely investigate them.

We will approach the conversation with a lingual relativism, recognizing the way we speak will establish whether participants can feel comfortable in the space. We should strive to be vulnerable, real, and not pretentious. This first workshop is about setting the tone for the subsequent sessions, informing participants why this work is important, and naming the hard concepts that will likely arise throughout the process. We will send the group home with preliminary art and writing prompts to encourage a start on some sort of self-expression.

Workshop 2

Workshop two will provide a reflection period. Focusing inwardly in the early stages of the brave space is necessary to connect the artwork to the self, before it becomes the object of external review. Here we can submit the psychological “deep self” to conceptualize the way our art and writing projects reflect our internal selves. Many high schoolers casually engage in self investigation through personality quizzes. These are informal methods of aligning oneself to the social constructs of the outside world. We can modify that idea for creative self expression through the My Creative Type quiz (mycreativetype.com).

When they self-reflect, the participants will come to understand their artistic endeavors can be self-actualizing. This session should also be facilitated in an approachable and vulnerable way. As we are still early in the workshop series, we should expect to be capacity-building and trust-building *within* each participant rather than *between* the participants. Ideally, such an

approach will set the group up for collaborative interaction in the next sessions. We will continue the take-home prompt and ask that they prepare a piece for the following workshop.

Workshop 3

After the self-reflection workshop, we will structure workshop 3 around team building and collaboration, as the main goal of our workshop series is for participants to find community. We will reflect further upon participants' results from the My Creative Type Quiz, and group them with their “ideal collaborators.” From there we will have participants engage in a number of team building activities and games. After these activities, the instructors will present a mini-lesson on self revision, pulling from resources in our methods section. We want the bulk of the content editing for participants' work to be self-guided. We will then ask the participants to think about what piece they will want to bring into the next workshop for peer-editing.

Workshop 4

The fourth workshop centers around peer editing of each other's work, and finalizing the design of the zine with the group. Peer editing will focus on gentle communication and making the writing pieces more readable and grammatically correct. Zine design will be decided through group decisions about the cover, each entry, and potentially photos or description of the author's work. Each person should have the opportunity to collaborate on their ideas of what should be included on the zine and have the ability to share their opinions comfortably with the group. Through collaboration and communication we will be able to create our zine in a way that everyone feels confident about. After finalizing our discussion about the zine, the instructors will do a final gramatical edit of the zine, and send it off to be printed and put together.

Workshop 5

Our workshops conclude with an ‘unofficial’ fifth workshop that is about showing our creation in a gallery or party setting. This workshop will be about asking our groups to invite their families or friends to come and celebrate the art they created. That time can be used to do an open reading of the writing pieces, or potentially an open question panel for the artists and the instructors. This workshop will be more about leaving the participants with an understanding that they have helped create something unique and wonderful, than about the project itself. We’ll leave the participants with a warm memory of their creation, and end our project in a way that shows our pride. We hope that this final workshop acts as a way for our group members to feel finished but satisfied. The workshop will conclude with each contributor receiving two copies of the zine they helped to create.

Findings and Analysis

Results

After returning from winter break, we worked with the library to set up a registration link for the workshop series and reached out to art teachers, English teachers and counselors at every high school in town, sharing about our project and efforts. Many responded that they would put up posters in their classrooms or share with their students, but did give warning that historically they have had challenges with students engaging in after school activities. We followed up with them multiple times throughout the month of February before registration for the workshop series went live.

Throughout that time, we also worked to fully develop lesson plans for the workshop (see Appendix 2), and held focus groups where we ran through each lesson with peers to solicit feedback before placing high school students in the workshop setting. These focus groups aided greatly in honing our lesson plans and ensuring they would be feasible to complete in about an

hour and a half. We also wanted to ensure they were adequately fostering the development of a brave space.

However, once registration went live, we struggled getting students to sign up. Two weeks before the workshop, zero students had registered. It was not until a week beforehand that students began registering after the library shared the link, and even then, we went into our first workshop expecting to see only four students — a smaller number than the 20 we had originally hoped for. Our group discussed contingency plans for what we might do if none of our students showed and were prepared to pivot to ensure we could still produce something meaningful. Despite our preparation to host these workshops, concerns about participation arose.

We were pleasantly surprised when we showed up to the first evening of our workshop series in April to find five students present. Perhaps coincidentally, 3 out of 5 students in our first workshop were homeschooled. During our first workshop, students shared with us that their decision to be homeschooled stemmed from difficulties surrounding bullying, and how they did not feel welcome in their public school settings. In turn, bullying and lack of social acceptance both play a key role in adolescent loneliness. This confirmed, even if unintentionally, our workshop drew participants from the demographic we aimed to engage: students struggling with socialization. During the first workshop, we briefly outlined the parameters of the Brave Space—asking participants to develop three ground rules for the rest of the workshop series. The goal of allowing participants to create their own ground rules was to give them a sense of control over the workshop, which allowed us to work within Soja’s theory of thirding, and allowed us to blur the natural sense of hierarchy that can develop between workshop participants and us as facilitators. The 3 workshop ground rules that our participants created were: “1. Be real 2. Don’t talk over others” and “3. Be open— but stick to your boundaries.”

We then delved into the self-discovery and exploration aspect of our workshop. After providing participants with drawing supplies, pens, and sketch pads, we shared the poem “Where I’m From” by George Ella Lyon and asked students to write or draw something prompted by Lyon’s work with the goal that they would think deeper about who they are, where they come from, and what elements of their personal history have impacted them. To then allow participants to learn more about each other, we had everyone (including facilitators) share their “Where I’m From” free-create piece. For the rest of the workshop, we spent the time chatting and getting to know each other while drawing, writing, and listening to music. While the students seemed shy at first, everyone seemed much more relaxed towards the end of the workshop— which we took as a sign that sharing our “Where I’m From” pieces helped students open up.

During the second workshop, three students returned to continue the work from the previous session. We began with ice breakers and recaps, establishing a comfortable and inviting atmosphere for the participants. They opened up quickly, willingly engaging in casual conversation. While not necessarily part of the lesson plans, these sorts of informal interaction remain central to the mission of our project. It creates an environment in which collaboration and creativity will flow. For the first activity, we administered a survey which categorizes individuals into ‘Creative Types’ that help to explain the ways in which we prefer to create. There are eight Types, ranging from the Adventurer to the Thinker. Our group was split evenly between the ‘Dreamers’ and the ‘Visionaries.’ This seems apt for the given audience considering that participants self-selected to enter these workshops, and that those Creative Types would invest energy in the artistic and writing pursuits we are facilitating.

After taking the quiz, all participants reflected on the aspects of their Type that most align with their understanding of themselves. In this way, the students are interrogating the parts of

themselves they believe to know, and comparing that understanding with their peers. For example, one Visionary prefers to express themselves through visual art while another Visionary prefers to self-express via academic writing. We noticed together our strengths are diverse despite sharing certain creative preferences. Further, we developed the idea of our 'Ideal Collaborators' by identifying which Types have traits we would like to nurture ourselves. Then, we chose to accept our Type not as a limit to our creative abilities but rather as a structure for the extreme diversity among all of the ways we create.

Sharing these new insights was powerful for all the attendees, because understanding oneself among many is a point of connection to one's peers. And when we have a group with a highly homogenous background, that sort of distinction seems to empower the students to develop their own personal styles of self-expression. However, it did not appear the students gained a diverse enough conception of the other possible Creative Types. A room with more variety would certainly have yielded deeper insights on how creativity can look.

We continued with a reflection period to notice where our creative strengths manifest in work we've already done. Especially for the students with a large volume of creative output, this exercise emphasized that the students already produce valuable work, while adding that they have a personal style which is equally valuable. We appraised the accuracy of the Creative Types and noted where we felt misunderstood by the quiz. It was remarkable that these young artists communicated clear perceptions of their own work. As an exercise in self-expression and self-understanding, the Creative Types layered individual, social, and societal levels of analysis to craft a more approachable vision of the diversity in creativity.

To conclude, workshop two allowed space for free-draw and free-write before the adjournment of the session. This is another example of the informal interaction which primes the

students to share openly and authentically during workshops. We sent the students home with the reminder that we'll be visiting their art and writing as a group in the following week. Overall, this session confirmed there is a place for all forms of creativity, that there is no single superior approach to creation, and that perceiving ourselves in the larger creative system helps us to create more intentionally.

Workshop three was designed to allow participants to share their creative work with the group, as well as prepare their pieces for their final zine project. We anticipated that some participants would be nervous to share their work with the group, so with the aim of easing the tension of the room we played a creative writing game called "Telephone Poetry" before diving into the editing and suggestion portion of the day. We instructed participants to write a line of poetry and then pass it to their right. The next person would then write their own line and then fold down the top of the paper so only the new line was visible. This process was repeated in one full rotation and then each poem was read aloud. We had a total of five "telephone" poems of which were surprising, moving, and fun. While a relaxed and somewhat easy creative writing activity, the "Telephone Poetry" game was also meant to further trust and camaraderie between the participants and facilitators. The game showed participants they could trust their peers with their words, and that when they work together they can create meaningful and interesting art; which in turn makes participants more comfortable not only sharing their pieces but commenting on their peers' as well. Participants liked the game so much, we played another round at the end of the session.

We then moved on to the main activity of the session which was to prep participants' pieces for their final zine project. To start this portion of the session, we emphasized the difference between editing and revising a piece of art. We explained that to revise is to

reconstruct the main idea or sentiment behind the piece, while to edit means to fix simpler things like grammar and word choice. While a traditional writing workshop would focus mainly on revision, for the purposes of Brave Space we thought it best to focus on only editing. This decision was made with the intention of creating a low-risk environment with the hopes that only focusing on editing would further participants' comfort in sharing. To also foster a positive environment, we had participants give their peers one specific piece of praise on their piece. Participants took turns reading their peers' work individually and then wrote their suggestions and praise on a piece of paper for the creator to read. Everyone seemed excited to share their work as well as eager to praise each other— which we consider to be a success.

In workshop four, we worked with participants to create a personal zine that contained all of their work from the course of the workshop series. We instructed participants to bring in any art or writing they completed in their freetime to include in their zine as well. Using scrapbooking materials, participants were given the opportunity to create personalized zine that showcased their time in our Brave Space series. This final workshop gave participants the space to reflect on their growth in the workshop series as well as share their art with their peers one final time. One participant shared with the group a poem about wanting to step out of their comfort zone more and fostering more social relationships. We took this as a sign that our workshop series has been beneficial for those involved and that we completed our goals of creating a radically open space that fostered a valuable sense of community for teens combating loneliness.

Research Gaps

Through the process of speaking with the students attending the workshop series, we discovered there had been gaps in our initial research. Specifically, we failed to consider

homeschooled students might be a key demographic participating in library events and our workshop series by extension.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, many families in the U.S. decided to keep their children in homeschool settings rather than send them back into public education, despite the relaxation of pandemic guidelines. According to the Census Bureau, the percentage of children being homeschooled rose from 5.3% to 11.1% by the Fall of 2020 (Fields, 2021). Similar trends abounded globally during the COVID-19 pandemic. In April 2020, the World Economic Forum reported that closing schools worldwide impacted nearly 1 billion children, and that digital means made it easy to turn to homeschooling as a methodology for ensuring childrens' continuing education during the pandemic, and specifically mentioned fitness classes in the United Kingdom, classes in France and technology in Japan (Broom, 2020). In 2022, a Swiss newspaper found that homeschooling continued to abound in that country too (Leybold-Johnson, 2022).

This global move toward homeschooling has created a situation that perhaps will lead to more students needing to seek out opportunities such as our workshop. However, it is important to note there are many competing opinions on the impact of homeschooling in regards to a child's social and emotional wellbeing. Multiple American studies conducted in the early 2000's tested the social skills of both homeschooled children and conventionally schooled children using Gresham and Elliot's Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) with the aim to uncover any major difference in social performance between the two groups (Medlin, 2013). The SSRS system involves both a self report "Student Form" in which the student rates their cooperation, empathy and self-control (Medlin, 2013). The Parent Form asks parents to assess their child's cooperation and empathy, as well as list their "problem" behaviors. Both forms are used to create

a SSRS score for the student. Surprisingly, both homeschooled children and conventionally schooled children had similar scores in all categories of the SSRS during a study in 2004 (Medlin, 2013). With the limited amount of research on homeschool children's social capabilities and levels of loneliness, for now there is little to no notable difference between homeschooled children and conventionally schooled children's ability to perform and integrate socially. However, little research has yet to be conducted into social and emotional wellbeing of students who began homeschooling after the COVID-19 pandemic— of which could yield much different results from pre-pandemic studies.

While there may be no discernible difference between the social performance of homeschooled and conventionally schooled children, both groups of adolescents face the same social pressures. In addition, they also potentially suffer from the same adverse effects of social media use and the COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore both groups could benefit from the Brave Space workshop series as a means of discovering community and self. As Dr. Mendlin, a professor of psychology at Stetson University states in the article *Homeschooling and The Question of Socialization*, “We might learn much [...] by shifting the focus of homeschooling research from the outcomes of socialization to the process itself,” for which the Brave Space workshop series could play a role. Based on the results of our project, we feel Brave Spaces and radical openness can help work towards positive socialization outcomes.

Recommendations

Because these workshops proved beneficial for all involved in them, it's important to appraise the workshop series' logistical efficacy. Most specifically, the marketing strategy for the target demographic should have been much more thoroughly researched and tailored to our community. Our marketing strategy was simple but wide-reaching. We had emailed all of the

English teachers, art teachers, and counselors in each of the public high schools in town, asking them to share a flier and information with their students about our events. We did not do any paper postering, nor did we do any face-to-face outreach. The library did use their marketing channels to help promote the events. As we had assumed our emails would suffice to reach most of our target demographic, we had neglected to acknowledge that not all students respond to that method of communication.

Instead, we recommend using multiple channels of marketing to reach students. This would include entering the high schools to speak with classrooms about the event and establish a connection face-to-face. And, placing flyers in community-oriented locations can draw from an even larger pool than public schools.

Changing the target demographic may also prove useful when replicating the workshop series. Most of our participants were homeschooled, which could mean that the homeschool population is either more receptive to community events or more in search of the kind of relationship-building we sought to foster. Reaching out to homeschool associations would begin that conversation, and likely would have increased the quantity of participants. Another possibility would be to integrate the series into an already-established structure. For instance, presenting it as modules at a camp, as intervention blocks during English classes, or even as part of an English as a Second Language seminar. This would minimize the need to ask participants to self-select, and would lessen the marketing burden for the organizers.

Finally, we recommend expanding the target demographic to include those early in their university career or possibly (with parental approval) those younger than high school age. The activities and benefits of artistic self-expression are not limited to those aged 15-18, and could be adapted to serve a wider population. In fact, after conducting a focus-group with students of

mid-college age, many expressed they would continue the workshop series and found them helpful. The goal when selecting a target demographic is more about finding who needs what is being offered than about reaching the largest number of individuals possible. This project is useful nearly universally. Due to its culture-, age-, gender-, and personality- based considerations, we feel that it can fit most all communities.

Reflections

Prompt #1: In what ways do you feel your project represents a multidisciplinary effort? What were the challenges and benefits of working across disciplines?

Bringing together students with concentrations in political science, French, education, public health and journalism resulted in a project that has considered multiple perspectives across its research and implementation. The idea for our project came from a recognition of a global public health issue (mental health declines among teens); the solution from the combination of our creative-mindedness and research prowess (the creative writing workshop).

A clear benefit of working across disciplines came in the form of our strengths playing roles at various stages in the process. For example, the research process and organization of our paper was greatly aided by those group members with backgrounds in political science and journalism, while creating our lesson plans largely saw aid from group members with knowledge in education. These differing skills also played roles with organizing the project, with more creative minds helping on the front end of fostering creativity in the workshops, while more analytical minds found home in organizing spreadsheets and ensuring that emails went out to teachers.

Our group was also particularly cohesive. Despite being from different academic backgrounds, we were unusual for the way we entered the project with a strong idea of the type

of goal we would be aiming to accomplish and similar ideas of how to approach this.

Communication was strong, group members completed assigned tasks on time and everyone played critical roles at various stages of the project. Working across disciplines did not result in discernible challenges in our case, though it is easy to foresee this being challenging in a situation where a cross-disciplined group did not have such a clear idea of the project and goals they wanted to accomplish.

Prompt #2: Explain the challenges your group faced in designing and carrying out the substance of the project. For example: How did you attempt to address these challenges? How did the project change after the proposal stage? How might you do things differently?

One of the main implementation challenges we faced had to do with the advertising side of our project. We cast our net wide when it came to reaching out to educators, and despite the warm reception to our project, unfortunately we did not get the amount of participants we had anticipated. Registration opened early March, and remained relatively low until the week before the first workshop. While we were presently surprised with the core group of participants that attended our series, we did create a contingency plan before the first workshop in case we felt like there was not going to be enough engagement. We designed a workshop that was a hybrid of lesson plans 1 and 2 that was meant to be delivered to first year students we recruited on campus. We created this contingency plan based on the fact that technically traditional first year students fall within the adolescent age range— though they are at a different stage of life than our initial target demographic. Thankfully however, we did not need to implement our contingency plan, and carried out our workshop series as initially planned. To mitigate the problem of low attendance, we would suggest going into classrooms to advertise in person.

Another implementation challenge we faced was student engagement within the workshop series themselves. While towards the end of the series participants opened up much more, the first day was difficult in regards to getting participants to answer questions and engage. After our test day with a focus group, we decided to pare down workshop day 1 significantly as we ran out of time to implement the lesson plan in its entirety. However, we failed to acknowledge that our focus group was made up of students who are used to talking publicly in classes and expected our actual workshop group to respond to our questions in the same way. While everyone's answers were valuable and intelligent, we could have done more to ease the initial nerves in the room rather than start on our lesson plan right away to make everyone feel more comfortable with each other. If this workshop series were to be carried out again, we would suggest adding more icebreaker activities towards the beginning of the series to get participants used to speaking in front of each other.

Prompt #3: Read the global context section above. How did considering the global context of the problem your group identified influence your thinking, the project, and the complexity of your work? What challenges did you encounter and how did you resolve them? What would you do differently if you were to repeat this process?

Ensuring our project had global relevance meant deepening the research and scope of our work. First, we understood mental health as a global phenomenon that looks different in each geographic region. Our research confirmed that mental health declined globally during the COVID pandemic, and that those effects were felt especially strongly among youth. To unite these international trends, internet and cell phone availability appears to explain the degree to which young people experience isolation and mental health decline. Giving a global context to mental health research allows our project to gather relevance beyond our immediate environment

and accurately characterizes the problem as a global issue. Second, self expression is absolutely influenced by one's culture, and our project acknowledged that fact. For instance, eastern and western cultures approach collaborative work differently. But most specifically to our community, which has a large Native population, we needed to respect the ways in which culture on the micro level determines comfort in self-expression socially. Talking with leaders in the Native community was helpful to understand those differences.

Third, the Brave Space is a fundamentally challenging area in which to operate. It asks a lot of individuals regardless of their global context. But by inserting those global concepts into our Brave Space, we clarify the ways that internationality can be conceptualized. In other words, a global problem can and often should be dealt with locally. The Brave Space is not an international organization, it operates best on a smaller scale, and it opens the conversation on isolation and struggle within the community. Distilling an enormous trend into an art workshop does not negate globality; it encourages a more generous interpretation of globality. Fourth and finally, the lesson plans we drafted combine all of the above efforts in one document. It demonstrates the need to insert cultural awareness into all areas of education, and we made every effort to interrogate each activity and each workshop to decide whether it meets a high level of cultural awareness. There are certainly blind spots and biases that still exist in the lesson plans, which should be revised as they are found. For at least this first trial of the workshop series, we felt that our global context added a significant amount of care to the project.

The main challenge we encountered when actualizing the Brave Space was that our set of participants simply was not diverse. They were all homeschooled, white, female-identifying, and possessed many other unifying traits. Diversity is central to the effectiveness of this workshop series because it deepens the amount of self-reflection community-discovery that can be done

collaboratively. We attempted to find diversity outside of identity, like in preferred types of self-expression or in lived experience. But the lacking racial, gender, economic, and educational diversity ultimately weakened the effectiveness of our efforts. To resolve this, we recommend launching a more concerted effort to reach underrepresented communities. This would mean interacting with cultural leaders, speaking with identity-based community groups, and marketing this series as a foundationally diverse experience.

In replicating this project, we suggest altering the marketing strategy to better serve the target demographic. Students who could have benefited from this project were not reached, those who were contacted did not perceive the workshops with the gravity that we desired, and our roster reflected those missteps. Multi-channel marketing would have helped. In addition to emailing art and English teachers, we suggest flyering, speaking in classrooms, talking to community leaders, or integrating the project into a pre-established event.

Globality and intersectionality proved essential to the complexity of the Brave Space. By integrating those concepts into our research, self-expression, local focus, and lesson plans, we crafted a more conscious and successful workshop. There are admittedly areas in which those concepts should have been more thoroughly considered, like marketing and diversity. Overall, it's important to recognize that some of the most important problems should be thought about globally.

Conclusion

A global issue like loneliness is layered with adolescent mental health, physical health effects, and international trends. To best address such a multidimensional concept, it's important that proposed solutions foster authentic self-expression which facilitates social support. The Brave Space actualizes these ideas, manifested in a workshop series propelled by the

amalgamation of psychological, cultural, artistic, and educational principles. If we are addressing a huge global issue, focused local projects like these will be invaluable to the youth who need them. And after hosting the workshops, it became clear that they were indeed valuable to those who attended. The students expressed repeatedly during the series that this sort of social interaction is rare for them, and that creating art is highly important to their self-expression. By operationalizing research on loneliness, self-expression, and Brave Spaces, we built an effective model of social support. We plan to share our lesson plans, research, and results online to provide access to educators not only in our local Montana community, but all over the world. We hope that it can serve as a model for caring for our global community.

Project Implementation Plan

- December 16-January 17
 - Creating a survey to distribute to students to gauge students' interest in participation and times that may work for them
 - Get in contact with teachers at Willard and Hellgate High School who will be able to help us share our idea with students
 - Begin lesson plans for workshop sessions
- January
 - Continue lesson planning, continue communication with high school teachers
- February
 - Send out student survey to high schools
 - Go to classes to discuss our project in person with students and increase interest
- March
 - Preparing for workshop series based upon results of survey
- April
 - Workshops will be taking place once a week throughout the month of April
 - Times for the workshops will be determined based upon student interest survey sent out during February
- May 1st
 - Zine Launch Celebration at either the ZACC or Public Library

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Appendix One: Missoula Marketing Flyer



Appendix Two: Lesson Plans

WORKSHOP 1: Foundation

Duration: 1 hour

INTRO ACTIVITY: CREATING THE BRAVE SPACE — 15 MINUTES

Brave space introduction

- Provide students with a definition of what a “brave space” is supposed to be and what we aim to do over the course of the workshop series.
- Place students in small groups and give them a series of discussion questions to determine ground rules for the brave space. Each of us will be present in a group as a facilitator. Have students write the three guidelines they come up with on a whiteboard.
 - Think of a time when you shared deeply. What did that take, what made you feel comfortable enough to do so, and what are three guidelines that would help to make this space have that level of comfort?
- Lead students in compiling ground rules for the brave space and place these rules at the front of the room for each workshop moving forward.

ACTIVITY: POEM READING/ART VIEWING, FREEWRITE/DRAW PROMPT — 15 MINUTES

Objective: Jumpstart creative brains and self-reflection, introduce students to art that delves into identity, which prepares them for the rest of the class

POEM READING AND PROMPT INTRO:

- The “Where I am From” prompt

Read this poem by George Ella Lyon titled “Where I’m From”

<http://www.georgeellalyon.com/where.html>

-Discuss poems form– most lines start with I am from and are followed by objects, places, people and memories that are important to the speaker, things that make up their identity

-Give example or two of our own “Where I am From” poems, and offer the perspective that this type of activity can look drastically different from person to person

-Give students **10 minutes** to either follow this prompt, freewrite, or draw while thinking along the lines of George Ella Lyon. Ask the students: **where are you from? What shapes who you are today? What people, what places, and what memories do you hold close?**

CREATION SHARE — 5-10 MINUTES

Objective: Create confidence in sharing publicly, have students get to know each other, reward students for sharing with praise

- Depending on group size, have participants share with a neighbor or whole class what they created during that 10 minutes
- Have partners/whole group give sharer 1 specific and thoughtful pieces of praise (i.e. I like this line because it made me feel this way, or I like the colors you used and how they are connected to the drawings theme) depending on class experience, facilitators may have to jump in with specific praise too
- Offer for students to share with large groups — does anyone have a drawing or line of their poem that they'd like to share? Did anyone see anything they liked?

CONCLUSION — 5 MINUTES

Objective: Provide students with a writing/art prompt to bring to the next workshop- these prompts are optional, just to get gears turning and to help them generate content for the revising workshop

- **Prompt: Express what community means to you.**

WORKSHOP 2: Perception

Duration: 1 hour

MAIN ACTIVITY: PERSONALITY QUIZ — 30 MINUTES

Objective: Have students explore their “creative identities” in a fun and approachable way. Have students think more deeply about the type of art they like to create/connect to and why

- **15 minutes to take quiz** <https://mycreativetype.com/>
- Have students take note of their creative type and also of their ideal collaborator
- **15 minutes: Like to like mini-activity**
 - Set up signs around the classroom where a designated type will go, instruct students to stand by that sign
 - Hand them a sheet that lists their type’s characteristics so they are staying off their screens for the rest of the lesson
 - Give each group a piece of butcher paper and some markers, ask them to create a poster that introduces their type as well as themselves to the other groups. Give them the following to put down as headers:
 1. Type name
 2. Creative strengths
 3. Each members favorite way to create

POSTER SHARE — 10 MINUTES

Objective: Create bonds within groups, have students get to know each other’s favorite ways to create as well as a bit more of their personalities

1. 1 page personal poster, list your creative type, your ideal collaborator, your strengths, and your favorite ways to create
2. Present to small groups or whole workshop

CLOSING ACTIVITY: REVISIT AND REFLECT — 15-20 MINUTES

Objective: Have students revisit their work from earlier in the workshop and notice their strengths and build confidence in their abilities

-Instruct students to look back upon what they created during the opening activity

-Have them think about the ways their piece emulates the “creative strengths” of their creative type.

-Ask them to answer these questions in a written paragraph:

1. Where in my free-create piece do I notice my creative strengths?
2. Where in my creative pursuits outside of this activity do I notice my creative strengths?
3. Which element of my creative type do I feel to be the most accurate?
4. Which element of another creative type do I wish to cultivate?

Quick 5 minute share of 1 question if there is time

CLASS CLOSE AND REMINDERS — 5 MINUTES

-Remind students to remember their creative types ideal collaborator, maybe even have them bring it written down on a piece of paper

-Remind students to start thinking about what piece they want bring to have peer edited — whether that be the prompt we’ve worked on with them or another piece they’ve worked on that feels reflective

WORKSHOP 3: Adaptation

Duration: 1 hour

PREP ACTIVITY: TELEPHONE POETRY — 15 MINUTES

Objective: Loosen the tension of a workshop that students could be potentially nervous about.

- On a piece of paper, have a facilitator or a participant write one line of poetry, it can be about anything.
- Pass the line to the next writer, and they will add their own line.
- The second writer will then fold the paper to cover the first line, but will leave theirs visible, and pass it on.
- The third writer will write the next line, and then fold it so only theirs is visible, then pass it on.
- This continues until the last writer, then a facilitator or a volunteer will read the poem in its entirety.

MINI LESSON: EDITING VS. REVISION — 15 MINUTES

-Editing Vs. Revision: Revision involves making major changes to a document's content, structure, and/or organization. Editing involves making sentence-level changes to grammar, flow, and word choice.

-Remind students of the ground rules for our brave space

MAIN ACTIVITY: PEER EDITING — 30 MINUTES

Objective: have participants proof-read their peer's work (introduced at the end of week one) to ensure they are ready for publication

- Group students with those who have the same Creative Type as they do. Pair each group with the group of their "ideal collaborators."
 - Team-building activities with the group pairings.
 - **What activities do we want students to engage with here? Are there any ideas of what might help them to come out of their shells and feel comfortable to engage?**
- Each peer will have a printed copy of their piece, or a copy of the art piece that others can mark on. Distribute to small group
- Students will spend **5-10 minutes** looking for grammar and spelling errors
- In the margins or on the back of the piece, peers will leave 1 specific piece of praise

WORKSHOP 4: Creation

Duration: 1 hour

ACTIVITY: ZINE CREATION — 45 MINUTES

-Students will work with facilitators to design the final zine. The process should be very student-led and take the form they desire.

Things to consider:

- lay out
- font
- cover art
- messaging
- theme

ACTIVITY: READING ALOUD — 10 MINUTES

- To have students feel prepared to potentially read their pieces and the launch party, have them practice reading them aloud in the workshop

CLASS CLOSE AND REMINDERS — 5 MINUTES

- Remind students of upcoming zine celebration and to invite their friends and family!