https://doi.org/10.52917/ivlatbsr.2024.016

Centering Students through Collage and Assemblage

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Abstract

This chapter considers specific learning outcomes from centering students' agency and growth via the process and perspectives of collage and assemblage. I argue that these actions empower students to arrange, array, and dialogue with disparate sets of information, creating a unique synthesis of a priori *and* a posteriori *knowledge. Collage questions authority, emphasizes process, asks open-ended questions, creates dialogue, and sets up an exploratory, questing dynamic. I ground these thoughts in visual literacy, culture, and theory with Deleuze and Guattari, McLuhan, Barthes, and hooks. I then illustrate these connections via several case studies, including information literacy sessions in new media, sculpture, and architecture.*

Keywords: collage, assemblage, bricolage, visual literacy, art making, zines

Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss collaging and related activities as a method for thought and action in the classroom. First, I will contextualize some terms. Then I will introduce overlapping concepts drawn from visual culture, philosophy, and pedagogy. Finally, I will give some examples from my own teaching practice.

I want to convey why I am interested in collage and define some nuances of my approach to collage, assemblage, bricolage, and montage. I will primarily focus on modernist art-making activities, but there is a rich history of gluing materials together across the world (Elliott, 2019). By *collaging*, I mean taking disparate elements and assembling them to create something new out of things you have gathered. Closely related terms include *assemblage*, which in art tends to mean found objects and adds a three-dimensional quality, transforming from works on paper to sculpture. Assemblage shares a root word with assembly, which adds the valence of gathering people together. Another term is *bricolage*, bridging between assemblage and the every day, which is making art with what is around you (Johnstone, 2008). Lastly, the idea of the *montage* relates to collage, made famous through Russian constructivist visual communication strategies embraced by Vertov and Rodchenko (Becker, 2008; Petrić, 1987). Montage composites disparate things to express something new, still with traces and indications of their original parts (Anderson, 2016). Collage's aesthetic draws from politically and socially influenced art movements such as constructivism and Dada of the early 20th century (Digby & Digby, 1985). These techniques were picked back up in the 1960s and again in the 1980s in London and the 1990s in New York (Rose, 1991; Eichhorn, 2016). The art form uses free or low-cost materials, conveys immediacy, and has a very low barrier to entry. Unlike bronze casting or oil painting, it does not require access to expensive materials and equipment nor extensive training in manipulating the material.

Collage, while tied to what is readily available to reassemble, is also freeing. You can create art with anything—in other words, anyone can be a cultural producer. As Digby and Digby (1985) state, "...collagists took what they needed and assimilated disparate theories into personal expression" (p. 28). Taking this liberty even further, the semiotics-focused Groupe Mu highlights collage as a form of language that "...tends

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to maximal openness, overflowing with any attempt at classification, reduction, or closure" (Elliott & Etgar, 2019, p. 35).

Collaging techniques are used in other creative fields under different names. Cut ups bring them to creative writing (Adema, 2018); for example, O'Grady's Cutting Up the *New York Times* project (2020). Sampling and remixing bring the concept to music (Gallagher, 2018). Hip hop, a 1970s innovation stemming from the Bronx in severely under-resourced Black and Brown communities, geometrically expanded how music is made (Chang, 2005; Rose, 1994). Naeem et al. (2022) argue that "...it has evolved into a set of creative practices that produce alternate systems of power…emerging technologies have given ordinary individuals an unprecedented ability to document, circulate, and give voice to what they experience and what they make" (p. 21). All you need is yourself, a stack of records, and a sound system. As Busta Rhymes (2021) says,

> Watch; as I combine all the juice from the mind
> Heel up, wheel up, bring it back, come, rewind
> Powerful impact (boom!) from the cannon!
> Not braggin', tryna read my mind, just imagine
> Vo-cab-u-lary's necessary, when diggin' into my library… (Real Hip Hop Lyrics, 2:59–3:13)

Rapping over a lush amalgamation of sources introduces the role of a critical consumer and cultural producer as a way to be in the world. Like collage, cut ups, and sampling, hip hop asserts the self into the culture as an active participant rather than a passive recipient.

Visual Literacy, Culture, and Media

How do collage and visual literacy relate? Murphy defines visual literacy as "an interconnected set of practices, habits, and values for participating in visual culture that can be developed through critical, ethical, reflective, and creative engagement with visual media" (Murphy, 2024, p. vii). Viewed in this light, collage and visual literacy are deeply participatory, engage through analysis, celebrate the action of (re)combining, and are deeply connected to the perspective you bring and the tools and resources ready to hand—expressing a kind of *terroir*. Expressing ideas and centering yourself as a creative being surrounded by pre-existing culture is just as much of a life skill as navigating information online.

Nevertheless, collage is also deeply tied to reproducibility. In his *Ways of Seeing*, Berger (1972) explores the stochastic and reciprocating effects technology and reproduction have on visual culture and how popular culture influences our regard for original works of art. He also ties in economics, society, and art's role in commodity and exchange. He characterizes the conundrum thus: "Because works of art are reproducible they can, theoretically be used by anybody… Yet mostly—in art books, magazines, films or within gilt frames in living-rooms—reproductions are still used to bolster the illusion that nothing has changed, that art, with its unique undiminished authority, justifies most other forms of authority, that art makes inequality seem noble and hierarchies seem thrilling" (Berger, 1972, p. 29). Collage is frequently used to critique or counter prevailing constellations of systemized authority; it is intrinsically tied to reproduced media, and fodder for this art-making practice often includes magazines, newspapers, and words and images that bears traces from commerce and exchange.

Berger's social history of art is imbricated with the Frankfurt School of thought, specifically Benjamin's investigations on the interrelation of politics and art. These power relations shape our perception through the medium of making—whether oil painting, image reproduction, or television itself. According to Benjamin (2008), the manner by which and quantity of images reproduced

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> …substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition…" (p. 22).

Benjamin's critique of how visual culture functions, who it is created for, and what the visual systems and arguments enact echo collage's critique. By deliberately dissecting image reproductions to reassemble into something new, the collagist can reinscribe cultural dynamics through amalgamating tradition and innovation.

Benjamin's and later Berger's attention to how media is constructed and consumed echoes aspects of media studies. As McLuhan et al. (1967) state, "All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered" (p. 26). Berger constantly uses this concept in his entreaties to the audience to be careful consumers of the visual and how what you see affects your perception, including more recent trends such as image reproductions, and historical influences such as the role of the female nude in Western visual culture. His use of showing behind-the-scenes filming or the scene where he "flips" the channels shows a reflexivity toward the systems through which media is conveyed (at least at that time) through the one-to-many format of television production (Figure 1).

Figure 1
*Screenshot of John Berger's "*Ways of Seeing," *Episode 1 (aired 1967)*

Collage's reliance on already-produced media questions originality in authorship and creation and the audience's ability to read decontextualized/(re)contextualized elements assembled together. If we think of collage as a kind of critical consumption and cultural production, we can use Barthes' work (1977) to

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consider a collagist as a reader. Barthes places firmly within the reader's grasp their power to interpret a text to fit the needs and experiences of their own lives, saying that

> ...a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. (p. 148)

Barthes notably decenters authorial intent as the main locus of study to understand a work; rather, the reader's response is the most crucial element. In this frame, collagists are akin to readers: able to take meaning from others' work and create culture as they digest and translate those original ingredients into new expressions.

Bricolage and Assemblage in Critical Theory

Concepts related to collage influence continental philosophy, particularly through the work of Levi-Strauss (2022) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Levi-Strauss' concept of bricolage compares systems of assembling disparate structures to sensemaking and mental models: the bricoleur assembles constructs based on what they already are familiar with when encountering something new. Levi-Strauss' mobilization of assemblage is further expanded by Deleuze and Guattari (1987). As Deleuze states, "It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations … the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a 'sympathy'" (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987, p. 69). This gesture, action, or pattern can occur at the intersection of people, objects, nature, and beyond. Collaging can be thought of as itself a Deleuzian assemblage.

Pedagogy

The bricolage and assemblage theories referenced above are analogous to constructivism in learning theory: in each instance to learn means to piece things together. Critical and feminist pedagogy are both constructivist in origin: they center students as fully-fledged individuals with important experience and connections to bring to bear on the topics at hand. Both Freire and hooks tried to de-emphasize the role of the teacher as the authoritative source in the classroom. Instead, students and teachers share the power to shape and develop course goals, community, and culture in the learning space. This approach opens up the potential for everyone to be teachers and learners, simultaneously creating a more utopian and realistic view of the world. hooks celebrates freedom in the classroom as essential to self-actualization and growth. As hooks (1994) says, "I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom" (p. 12). One can perhaps read hooks' use of "transgression" here as freedom to assemble ideas. For Freire, the prime strategies and structures the teacher sets in place are all to create opportunities for students to know themselves better: "The teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves" (Horten et al., 1990, p. 181). Here, I read "becoming themselves" as a liberating act of self-determination and acts in the service of self-creation or assembly.

This mosaic of critical pedagogy moves us toward creating a miniature version of society that we want to see taking place in the classroom. Horizontalized contributions are celebrated: the source of information or knowledge or how you attain that understanding is valued. Collaging here is an activity and an end result

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that aims to facilitate knowledge and growth, adding to your ability to articulate and appreciate how we all can contribute to a better society.

Freire and hooks set the stage for a vision of education that contributes to a liberatory potential—that is, people freeing themselves from oppressive power structures. Using critical analysis tools, such as collage, furthers that vision.

Assemblage and the Library

The perspectives I outline above are shaped by my profession as a librarian. A library itself is an amassment of ideas put together in a partial, peculiar, situated way to serve a group of people. The assembled and organized nature of its holdings and physical layout fosters combinations and juxtapositions of ideas. When we browse we are where a particular synthesis takes place. The library brings the world to you: pulled from context and enriched with other information and associations. Certain things are emphasized, like the written word, and others are de-emphasized—like the multi-sensory. You certainly can imagine being in the caves of Plato or of the Dunhuang Buddhas or experiencing the vernacular building forms of Cameroon, but you cannot actually smell, touch, or taste those experiences from your situation in the library. Berger's critique of cropping and focusing on specific elements speaks to the strictures of the lens or the frame.

Speaking of control: libraries can also be reduced to representing and facilitating an antiquated idea of whose voices and what topics are deemed worthy of being kept as part of the cultural record, instead of others that have been left out. It can feel as though you are on the receiving end rather than the creating end. Yet, in the light of Berger's analysis of art and reproducibility, the library can also find a productive friction between authenticity and reproducibility. (And, one way how collage and assemblage are both a potent critique for those who would only allow one reading of history.) Berger discusses how people hang art reproductions and, through this action, reify authority from the art object's *bona fides*. Do libraries, in turn, limit their potential by gathering *bona fides* from the famous and masterly objects, monuments, and authorities in their collection—operating as repositories of institutionalized "nouns" as it were, over their collections' ability to inspire research and expression or as places to assemble "verbs"?

But what is the antidote? Collecting the subaltern perspective? Oral histories, self-publishing, local and regional material, and other non-dominant discursive material can all provide counterpoints to dominant discourse. Thinking through the gesture of collage, all these sources are worthwhile to collect, but there will always be a tension toward the library's place in culture as a collector of knowledge and what that has meant over time. This dynamic between old and new, established and emergent, is ever present in the library, and thus makes it a productive site for exploration, growth, and criticism.

Case studies

The sets of ideas explored above add nuance and complexity to the role of collage in the broader realm of visual literacy and critical theory. But how does this come into being in the classroom? Like collage and visual literacy, my pedagogical approach is process-driven, iterative, and learns by doing. Here's a spectrum of collage and assemblage activities I have led across a number of disciplinary practices and student levels in higher education: from architecture to art history, from sculpture to new media: these activities empower students, question authority, and foster dialogue.

Zine workshops

Zines are self-published mini-publications that are intentionally low-stakes and low-entry. I also like the gesture of the zine since you are transforming a flat piece of paper into something that introduces narrativity

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and dimensionality. Making strategies include collage, drawing, writing, and various combinations thereof. Zines cover anything you need to express: politics, self-expression, and finding others experiencing something left out of mainstream media. The publishing aspect is where I see the community coming in. While it is perfectly fine to express and keep that to yourself, others find satisfaction in communicating that to others to be seen. By putting it out in the world, you create an opportunity to find like-minded people and gain solidarity. It is a deeply prosocial gesture.

The library I lead has been hosting zine workshops in collaboration with the student group National Organization for Minority Architects Students (NOMAS) for four academic years (Figure 2). The group is a student chapter of a larger organization, the National Organization for Minority Architects (NOMA). Founded in 1972, NOMA is dedicated to advancing the cause of marginalized architects in their professional journey. The UIUC NOMAS chapter advocates for the interests of marginalized identities in the school through working with the administration toward social justice goals, holding an annual symposium, and hosting events throughout the year.

Figure 2
NOMAS Students Engaging in Collage-Based Zine Workshop (April 2022)

Since they were working toward increasing exposure and solidarity while developing themselves as future architects, I wanted to offer them the idea of zines as a tool: a way to self-publish their ideas and to create community. This dynamic reflects an aspect of marginalized identity and publishing opportunities—since much mainstream information is produced and published by white individuals, this is an opportunity to create platforms for counter-storytelling. Using collage in this context solicits the enfranchising aspect of taking everyday materials and shaping them to channel your voice.

New Media and Non-Narrative Storytelling

In this set of examples, I worked with a faculty member in new media within the studio art program. The classes included non-narrative storytelling and working with images, both created by the student and

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reassembled from already-made images. At this point in the paper, I start to break off from fairly traditional collage and assemblage, into inserting the self and the body into what is being expressed. In both classes, we used prompts, many of which were drawn from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago *bibliodérive* activities (Salisbury & Ferreira, 2017) and also influenced by chance operations (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Prompts from Situationist International Activity

1. Write and/or draw a description of a family member. Label what you have made with "this is NAME" using the person's first name only. Search the library catalog using the first name of that family member as a keyword. Select a book from the search and leave the description folded inside.

2. Grab 10 books and arrange them by the most recent due date. Tell a story about them in chronological order

3. Imagine the collection as an orrery and trace planetary motion through the collection.

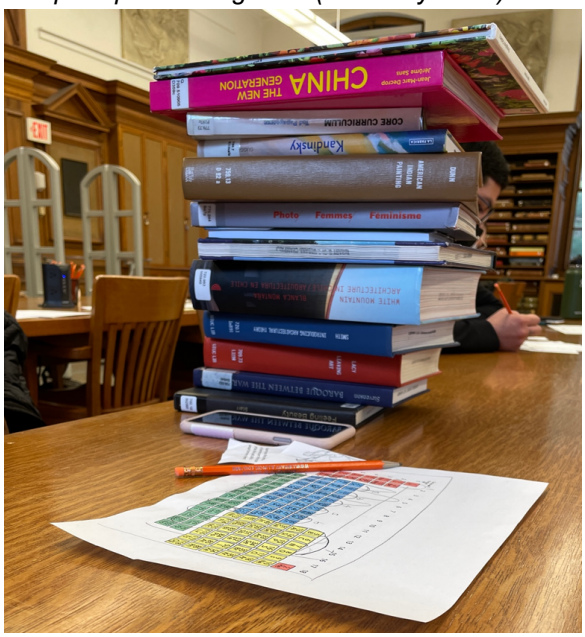
4. Superimpose the periodic table of elements over the floor plan of the library and collect a sample from every element.

5. Find 10 books with the same or similar color book covers. Take the first letter of each title and make an acrostic out of it. Take 10 scraps of paper and write out each word in your acrostic and stick them in the books.

6. Walk into the stacks, find a subject that interests you, and locate one book. Turn around 180 degrees and find the book that is exactly opposite of the first book. Pair them together and analyze how they relate to one another.

Figure 4

Example of student activity from prompt #4 in Figure 3 (February 2022)



https://doi.org/10.52917/ivlatbsr.2024.016

The students were asked to take a prompt and work toward achieving that goal, and at the end, we shared projects. Students created sculptures, wrote stories and poems, led tours, and, in the process, leaving traces and activating spaces with their movements. These materials, interventions, and interactions were performative assemblages in and of themselves (Figure 4).

In the non-narrative storytelling class, the professor and I conceived an activity in the middle of the semester, on the way toward developing a larger piece that would be conveyed through digital media. Following the non-narrative storytelling activity, the faculty member approached me about hosting an image practices class in the library the following semester as a kind of “class-in-residence,” akin to an artist-in-residence. In practice, the class in residence meant that the class visited the library about five times throughout the semester for library instruction and project critique, and had a show that took place simultaneously in the art school gallery and in the library.

The image practice class started with the prompts discussed above on the first day of class, and then collaged images from photos and scanned taken from the library’s collection. This assignment had its critique in the library. The next major assignment required them to design bookmarks and place them in specified library books chosen by the students (Figure 5). They produced a checklist of all the student’s book choices so that people could independently find all the bookmarks in the library. They also had their bookmarks and the collages they had previously created exhibited at one of the gallery spaces in the art and design building on campus (Figure 6).

In addition to works on paper traditionally associated with collage, the bookmarks could be considered an assemblage in multiple senses of the word. This gesture created a two-fold trace with the opportunity for a cascading effect. The first trace happens in the intersection of student and book, as they seek and decide the books that are the best conveyors of their meaning, creating a contextual relationship. Then, the relationship gets extended as other people come across these bookmarks, with the possibility of eliciting a response and possibly influencing that person to do something similar. It starts to verge on a kind of virality. We still encounter the bookmarks two years later, making us a very long-form and slow gallery.

Figure 5
Example of Bookmark Placed in Ricker Library Book (October 2022 to present)

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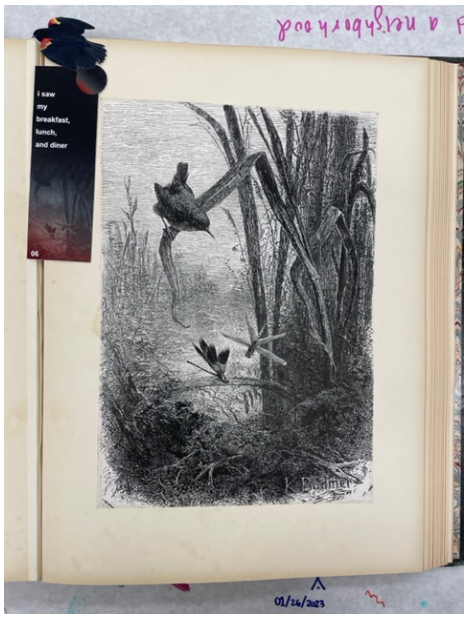

Figure 6
Bookmarks from Image Practices Class in Gallery (October 2022)

Sculpture bricolage

I extended this activity into the sculptural realm by collaborating with a faculty member teaching a sculpture for non-majors class. This collaboration was a quick, two-week assignment devoted to practicing art of the everyday. They were inspired by Brown's work intervening in space not thought of as art spaces and sculptures created from consumer objects (Brown, 2015). The goal was to help them see connections and find beauty and serendipity in their surroundings. This opportunity was particularly exciting because the students were non-majors: in order words, they had the opportunity to use creativity to enrich their everyday experiences and those around them with art practices, even though they were not majoring in art. They practiced expression, in this case, using books in a library as tools and objects for conveying meaning (Figure 7). It is everyday in that it is part of the environment of the campus at which they attend.

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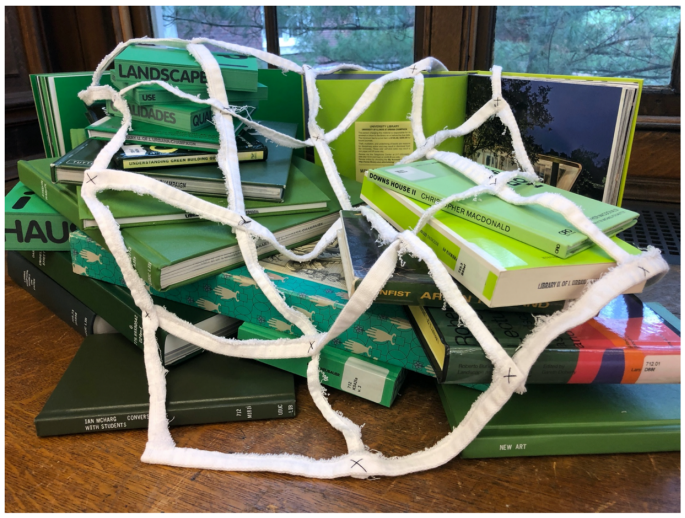
Figure 7

Example of Student Work from Sculpture Bricolage Activity (March 2022)



Gallery installations

Finally, I want to draw attention to a set of projects I did in gallery spaces, both in the art and design school and the art museum on campus.

First, the gallery installation: I collaborated with student leaders of the Society of Art Historians and Archaeologists; a graduate student group dedicated to creating discourse around visual culture on campus. The premise was to create a platform and space for community expression using collage as a method. We highlighted critical thinking on art magazines and how they frame and shape artists' public reception. Interactive elements included voting boxes *á la* Hans Haacke's Voting Poll (1970), a collaging station, and plenty of Post-its. We invited a number of classes to visit the installation and participate in the collage-making; in the end, we had seven classes over a week, drawing across new media, art education, studio graduate critique classes, and an art history seminar (Figure 8). I enjoyed this iteration of the collaging gesture because while each participant had the opportunity to contribute their collage, the amassment of collages and the dialogues created between them became more and more concentrated and layered as time passed. I particularly enjoyed the reflexivity of the gesture, to deconstruct publications about art and to use those as the base material to "talk back" to the publications.

Figure 8

Class in situ *at Collaging Station, exhibition Reviewing the Reviews: What Critics Say about Art, (November 2021)*

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Lastly, inspired by the success of the gallery installation, faculty members approached me to create something similar for a show they were assembling in the art museum. This show celebrated the creative practices of the four black faculty in the School of Art & Design. I invited fellow librarians across subject disciplines of literature, pop culture, music, and art to curate a collection of browsing materials to accompany the artwork and provide a more casual and reflective way to engage the ideas brought forth in the exhibition. These resources invited people to browse, relax, learn, and get inspired by their surroundings. Together with the featured artists and museum staff, we offered these materials as a community resource to reimagine how the public engages with the museum and to grow together.

While the books themselves could be thought of as an assemblage of ideas, how I activated them through pedagogy stands out. That semester, I worked with an art education class called Museums in Action, whose professor was one of the faculty members in the show. We met in the museum at the bookshelf, and after prefacing the ideas behind the display, I asked them to consider the show's themes, match the books with the artists, and place the books physically in the gallery spaces in dialogue with the artwork (Figure 9). The students considered each book carefully and drew connections to extend and augment ideas they resonated with the galleries. Here is where we can incorporate assemblage and actor-network theory: we have a deeply social combining of not just objects but also people and actions. These actions come together, as Deleuze and Guattari (1994) suggest, as people think through ideas, essentially constructing their own philosophies. In other words, everyone is a philosopher.

Figure 9

Class in situ *in Community Resource Center, embedded in Black on Black on Black on Black, Krannert Art Museum (September–December 2022)*

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Conclusion

In this paper, I brought together a broad variety of sources to create my own assemblage of ideas, actions, and contexts. Together, these ideas suggest an enfranchised, empowered subjectivity in relation to others. I would suggest this again could be thought of in the context of the library. A living library is activated, not divorced from context, in dialogue with ideas and people. That's how we invigorate and vivify connections, an annotated bibliography in action. Moreover, to use our circumstances and the objects around us deliberately to create that vision. I see the pedagogy approach as a way to channel growth as individuals and society. I argue that this is a way to use visual literacy skills as a foundational principle to a life well-lived, full of meaning and purpose. And what’s more important than that?

https://doi.org/10.52917/ivlatbsr.2024.016

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APA citation format (7th edition) for this publication:
Mathews, E. (2024). Centering Students through Collage and Assemblage. In J. Lee, L. Okan, F. Rodrigues, C. Huilcapi-Collantes, E. Corrigan, G. Chesner, & H. Han (Eds.), *Ways of Seeing: The Book of Selected Readings 2024* (pp. 71-84). International Visual Literacy Association. https://doi.org/10.52917/ivlatbsr.2024.016