

Unit Title: Threads of Memory**Commonwealth Senior Living at the Ballentine**

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Unit Rationale

This unit plans a community outreach project with the Old Dominion University (ODU) art education cohort and the Commonwealth Senior Living at Ballentine that will culminate in an extensive, woven work of art to be exhibited and contributed to at the National Art Education Association (NAEA) Conference in Norfolk. The unit revolves around the engaging theme of storytelling through fiber arts, using various mediums such as painting, embroidery, crochet, and weaving as a mode of visual communication. Students, senior citizens, and art education students will create strips of fabric that individually represent personal stories, preferably from their educational or artistic careers. These individual segments will be woven together in a communal tapestry at the NAEA Conference, where members are also invited to contribute, building a continued communal dialogue through art.

The worth of this unit is that it can bridge generations, provide a voice for marginalized groups, and explore the healing power of the arts. As Elliot Eisner presented in his "10 Lessons the Arts Teach," arts teach students that more than one solution to a problem is possible and that more than one perspective is not only possible but essential (Eisner, 2002). This project manifests that principle in practice as it pushes to the forefront the unique life experiences of older citizens, who are often voiceless in educational and societal contexts. It also allows students to learn how to facilitate, honor, and diversify storytelling in teaching practice.

This unit is not merely an exercise in skill acquisition in fiber arts; it is a lesson in empathy, communication, and community building. Engaging with elders gives art education students an appreciation for intergenerational discussion, allowing them to recognize how storytelling is an art and a way of preserving culture and history. This ties into the local and global significance of the arts as a medium for storytelling, identity, and civic life. Students find that they are creating stronger inclusive teaching and curriculum design mechanisms by valuing others' tales, especially from underrepresented or aging populations.

Critique is an essential part of this unit since it offers the means to reflect on the artistic process and the shared meaning of each narrative strip. Critics here are less about technical ability but rather about honoring and understanding the voice of each creation. Students are encouraged to reflect deeply on their positionality, privilege, and assumptions and to develop the ability to critique with cultural care and sensitivity. These discussions are imperative in shaping the reflective practice of a prospective teacher.

Exhibiting the finished woven work at the VAEA Conference turns the project from a classroom activity into an engaged public installation. This phase honors the efforts of the older adult participants while providing students with firsthand practice in curating and presenting community-based art. It further demonstrates the value of inclusive and accessible exhibitions, educating students about how museum and gallery spaces can be more welcoming and representative. We have learned throughout our coursework how exhibitions are power tools for managing whose voices get heard and which stories get told. This project disrupts master narratives by bringing aging voices and community stories to the center.

A second critical piece to this unit is parent and community engagement. Though older adults are our immediate participants, including this work in a national conference draws in families, educators, and arts professionals. It explains how schools can partner with community organizations to create meaningful, inter-generational learning opportunities. It also illustrates how future teachers might facilitate similar efforts in their teaching practice, striving to rethink schools as community dialogue and inclusion sites.

This unit also draws on the practices and philosophies of other fiber artists such as Anne Wilson, Sheila Hicks, and Marianne Fairbanks. Each of these artists has used fiber as a tool for storytelling, community, and challenging the boundaries of traditional fine art. Their practices serve as inspiration and theoretical underpinnings for the project, illustrating how textile art is inherently inclusive, tactile, and filled with memory. Using their practice as a model demonstrates to students how to engage contemporary art and artists in curriculum design in culturally responsive and highly engaging ways.

As pre-service art teachers, our participation in this community outreach project is invaluable. It provides real-world experience in collaboration, communication, and curriculum design that extends beyond the classroom. It strengthens our ability to develop inclusive, socially relevant art experiences and confirms the value of empathy and relationship-building in education. In addition, presenting our work at the VAEA Conference offers professional development opportunities, networking, and visibility that will serve our future careers. It is a unique chance to demonstrate our commitment to community-engaged pedagogy nationally.

There are also difficulties in this project that provide additional learning opportunities. Some elders may have compromised mobility or cognitive impairments that make them unable to participate in typical artmaking processes. As facilitators, we must be flexible, provide alternative tools, work individually, or adjust expectations while maintaining dignity and creative control. This teaches flexibility, accessibility, and the importance of universal design, all basic principles of contemporary art education.

Lastly, this unit is what it is to teach through the arts: to create community, to tell and listen to stories, and to create common ground in the face of difference. In weaving our stories together, literally and figuratively, we act out the continued strength of art to connect, transform, and teach.

Big Idea

Story Telling

1. How can art be used to tell personal or community stories?
2. What can we learn from the experiences of older generations through collaborative art-making?
3. In what ways does weaving serve as both a functional and symbolic art form?
4. How do artists like Anne Wilson, Sheila Hicks, and Marianne Fairbanks use textile art to express identity, memory, or social themes?
5. What role does collaboration play in the creative process and in building community connections?

Learner Objectives:

- Conceive of and develop a personal or community-based narrative to be visually represented on a woven fabric strip.
- Create a collaborative textile artwork by learning and applying fiber arts techniques such as weaving, painting, embroidering, and crocheting.
- Understand the historical and contemporary significance of fiber arts and how they have been used by artists like Anne Wilson, Sheila Hicks, and Marianne Fairbanks to convey stories, identities, and cultural memory.
- Collaborate with senior citizens to engage in intergenerational dialogue and co-create meaning through shared storytelling.
- Evaluate how stories can be translated into visual form and how diverse voices contribute to a collective artwork.

Vocabulary

Community Outreach – Efforts by individuals or institutions to engage and support local communities through education, services, or collaboration.

Intergenerational Learning – The exchange of knowledge, perspectives, and experiences between different age groups, particularly youth and seniors.

Collaborative Art – An art-making process where multiple individuals contribute to a shared final piece, emphasizing unity and shared meaning.

Fiber Arts – Artworks made using natural or synthetic fibers, including techniques such as weaving, crocheting, embroidery, and sewing.

Weaving – A textile technique involving interlacing threads to create fabric; symbolically used here to connect individual stories into a collective narrative.

Narrative Art – Art that tells a story or conveys personal or cultural experiences through imagery and symbolism.

Visual Storytelling – Communicating messages or personal history through visual media rather than text or speech.

Materials Needed for Unit

A. Art Supplies

- Paintbrushes (two per resident, one small and one medium)
- Water cups (one per resident)
- Acrylic paint (ROYGBIV, black, brown, white)
- Disposable palettes or paper plates for color mixing (one per resident)
- Two rolls of paper towels
- Crochet hooks (one per resident)
- Yarn (ROYGBIV, black, brown, white)
- Embroidery needles (one per resident)
- Thread (ROYGBIV, black, brown, white)
- Graphite pencils (one per resident)
- 8x11 drawing paper for sketching designs (two per resident)
- Clipboards (one per resident)

B. Additional Materials

- Design Planning Scaffolding Worksheet

Motivating Students: Personal and Social Relevance

This project invites residents to reflect on meaningful memories and experiences relating to art and education that have shaped their lives. By focusing on their personal stories, participants are encouraged to express themselves. In assisting with their artmaking and recording the inspiration behind their designs, we will promote intergenerational learning. This project encourages conversation and bonding between residents, pre-service art educators, and visitors, therefore building relationships across different generations. Residents will be motivated to share their experiences and stories through this project and see their contributions make a larger impact as part of a collaborative artwork. Allowing them to base their designs on something meaningful to them and having them come together and connect to one another will make the project feel more rewarding and personal.

Lesson Procedures

A. Teacher and Classroom Preparation

Day 1: Design Planning

- Print and distribute planning scaffolding worksheets
- Arrange tables or group residents into 3-4 to promote idea sharing and collaboration
- Prepare name tags for residents
- Distribute pencils, clipboards, and paper for sketching
- Have multiple samples to show different approaches to the project (painting, embroidered crochet)

Day 2: Artmaking session

- Set up tables or workstations for residents
- Set up materials at each table: fabric strips, embroidery floss and needles, fabric paint, brushes, crochet hooks, and yarn.
- Pre-thread some needles for residents who may have difficulty.
- Organize paint colors and yarn into bins by color families for easy access.
- Set up water cups and paper towels
- Arrange finished sketches from Day 1 for easy reference.
- Bring extra fabric strips and supplies in case additional materials are needed

Day 3: VAEA Conference Presentation and Weaving

- Organize a timeline and talking points about the project to share during the presentation

- Insert residents' designs and stories into the slideshow presentation
- Print a brief project description handout for conference attendees
- Set up materials at tables so art educators can weave strips together with guided instructions

Differentiation and Accommodation

To support residents' participation, many strategies for accommodation will be in place. Residents will have the opportunity to work with a partner or in a group if they need help with completing tasks. Instructions will also be provided in clear, short steps supported by demonstrations and the teacher samples, which will act as visual aids. Key points will be repeated throughout the session, and instructors will frequently check in with residents to ensure they understand directions. Sketches and scaffolding worksheets will be available to help residents generate ideas. Background noise will be kept at a minimum to ensure residents who have auditory needs can work. Residents will be allowed to choose their medium for their designs, for example, choosing painting over crocheting. Residents will be given plenty of time to complete each step to avoid rushing.

Lesson Overviews:

Day 1 Senior Visit: Day 1 is important because it sets the tone for the entire storytelling weaving project by establishing a welcoming, collaborative, and thoughtful environment. This foundational day encourages residents to engage creatively while fostering social interaction and shared purpose. Through planning worksheets and group discussions, seniors begin to reflect on their personal stories and how they might visually represent them and promote

Day 2 Senior Visit: Day 2 will consist of artmaking and story sharing. Residents begin transforming their ideas into tangible artwork. This day marks the shift from planning to creation, giving participants a hands-on opportunity to bring their stories to life using accessible and prepared materials. This part of the lesson will encourage the seniors to creatively express their stories and engage in meaningful conversation while strengthening their fine-motor skills.

VAEA Conference: For the last day, conference attendees will be introduced to the senior community weaving project and contribute to the art piece. This day transforms the project from a local activity into a shared narrative that can inspire other educators, fostering empathy and insight into intergenerational, community-based art.

Artists:

Anne Wilson, Sheila Hicks, Marianne Fairbanks (More Information found in the powerpoint)

Powerpoint:  Senior Weaving Project

Lesson Sequence

Day 1: Welcome, Story Sharing, and Sketch Planning (3 Hours)

Theme: Community building + storytelling + creative planning

Opening Welcome and Recap (15 minutes)

"Hi everyone, thank you for joining us! We're so excited to spend time with you over the next few weeks. Together, we're working on a special project called Threads of Memory. You'll each create a fabric 'story strip', something that holds a memory, feeling, or story from your life. Later this year, we'll present this project at an art education conference, where teachers and artists from around Virginia will see your work and hear your stories. We want to celebrate all the knowledge and creativity you have, and we're here to learn with you, not just teach. After the conference, your artwork will come back here and live in your community."

Introductions + Community Warm-Up (30 minutes)

All instructors and residents introduce themselves

Simple prompts such as:

- "What's something you love to do?"
- "What's one color or place that means something to you?"

Provide large paper or whiteboards for tables to jot down shared interests

Artist Inspiration + Technique Demos (30 minutes)

Share visual examples of fabric-based storytelling (quilts, embroidered portraits, crochet projects, etc.)

- Painting on fabric
- Simple embroidery stitches
- Crochet chain stitch

Let residents rotate through quick hands-on trials if interested

Show instructors' personal story strip examples

Story Prompts + Guided Brainstorming (30 minutes)

Distribute reflection worksheets and planning guides

Ask guiding questions:

- "Can you remember a time you made something with your hands? What was it?"
- "Did someone in your life teach you how to make or fix something?"

- “What does creativity or being artistic mean to you?”
- “If you could teach a young person one creative skill, what would it be?”
- “What symbols or colors remind you of someone important to you?”

Sketching + Design Planning (45 minutes)

Distribute paper, pencils, and clipboards

Encourage open conversation during sketching

Instructors sit with groups to offer feedback or help generate ideas

Optional Sharing + Close (30 minutes)

Invite a few residents to share their sketches or story ideas

Thank everyone for their energy and remind them you'll be back with art supplies next time

Leave behind mini sample board or demo sheet for reference

Day 2: Artmaking and Storytelling (3 Hours)

Theme: Hands-on creation + connection through making

Welcome Back + Recap (10 minutes)

" Last time we shared stories and planned ideas. Today we get to bring them to life. You'll use paint, thread, yarn whatever feels right to create your personal story strip."

Technique Review Stations (25 minutes)

Set up quick review/demo tables:

- Fabric painting
- Embroidery basics
- Crochet chain stitch
- Open help table

Let residents try/review techniques again

Story Strip Artmaking (90 minutes)

Residents work on their fabric strips with support from instructors

Instructors rotate between tables

Conversation prompts to encourage sharing:

- “What are you thinking about as you work?”
- “Is there a special meaning to this color or pattern?”

Offer music in the background for ambiance

Provide snacks and water if allowed

Break + Reflection (15 minutes)

Invite residents to take a short break

Provide reflection cards:

- “What part of this process have you enjoyed most so far?”
- “What has this reminded you of?”

Finish Up + Add Final Touches (30 minutes)

Assist with any last stitching, details, or cleanup

Photograph finished or in-progress strips (with permission)

Label each work with resident's name if desired

Group Wrap-Up and Thank You (20 minutes)

Thank everyone for participating

Explain that we will pick up finished pieces later and present them at the conference

Leave an optional journal prompt sheet and a photo printout of the planning phase for residents to keep

Day 3: VAEA Conference – Weaving + Presentation

Theme: Sharing stories with the wider community

Before Presentation

Assemble residents' finished story strips

Create a slideshow with:

- Photos from the sessions
- Snippets of stories or quotes (with permission)
- Set up weaving area for audience participation



Participants will each design their own “storytelling” strip with the assistance of facilitators and scaffolding sheets.



A large community weaving will be assembled at the VAEA conference for attendees to complete.