



Preliminary map by a 4th grader



Community Map by Four Art Buddies

## The Community Maps Project

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The Community Maps Project represents a collaborative effort between the University of Florida's School of Art and Art History and the local school district in Gainesville, Florida. In this paper, I will summarize the principal ideas behind this three-year project as well as offer an overview of the process and the outcomes of the project.

The project began in the Fall of 1997, when UF art students enrolled in a course titled Art and Community, were paired with children in Kanapaha Middle School, Prairie View Elementary School and Stephen Foster Elementary School in Gainesville. During the 1998 and 1999 school years, new elementary schools and participants were brought into the project. Each year, the art buddies met and worked once a week for six weeks on creating mental maps of their community.

Initially, the buddies worked on drawing maps of their community separately. Once finished, they shared their maps with each other and discussed ways to incorporate elements of each map in a larger collaborative map. These maps are more conceptual than realistic or geographically correct and are intended to show how the artists think and feel about their community.

In addition to the school-based project, UF art students directed the creation of a huge sidewalk map during the 1997 Fall Downtown Arts Festival in Gainesville. This was truly a community effort as 100s of children and adults participated in creating what was billed as "the largest map of Gainesville ever drawn."

## **What is a Map?**

map (map), n., v. mapped, mapping, n. 1. a drawing representing selected features of the earth's surface or part of it. 2. a map like drawing of anything: a highway way, a weather map. v. 1. to make a map of; show on a map. 2. to collect information for a map by exploring or surveying a region.

Simply stated, a map is a picture of a place. There can be many different maps of the same place and one map cannot show everything about a place. In order for a map to communicate clearly it must show a limited number of things. Thus, all maps are inherently biased in that they only show what the mapmakers choose to show.

Maps are made for different reasons. Some maps are made to show property lines and other maps show us how to get where we want to go. Pirates once used maps to hide and find buried treasure. There are also weather maps that show precipitation (rain, sleet, snow) and cold fronts in a particular region. The most important function of a map is to show location—where certain things are. Maps also show the characteristics of a place that make it unique and different from other places. Another common feature among most maps is that they show distances between things.

## **Mental Maps**

As infants, we gather information of our immediate physical surroundings and begin to form impressions of the places we inhabit, we visit, and we hear about from others. From these beginnings, we span out into unfamiliar territories revising our initial perceptions of other places. In the process of exploring our environment, we construct and reconstruct mental maps that provide a basis for our understanding of the world and where we are within it.

The maps we make in our minds incorporate our knowledge and experience of places, accumulated as we make our way through the world in the activity of living. These mental maps allow us to make order of our known and unknown world. How accurate and detailed our mental maps are depends upon the amount and the type of information we have of certain places (i. e., first-hand experience, oral history, formal education, social class, mass media, and so on all play a role in shaping our mental maps of the world.)

The Community Maps Project is based on the notion that we all have visions of the places in which we live. These visions are different for each inhabitant of a place. By providing children with the opportunity to draw and share their artistic visions of the communities in which they live, we discover how they order the space around them, the connections they have formed with their nearby world, the things that are emotionally important to them, and their evolving sense of place.

## **Materials and Activities**

The materials used in The Community Maps Project include pencils and 12 x 18 inch drawing paper (for the preliminary maps) along with white colored-pencils, oil pastels and 18 x 24 inch black construction paper (for the collaborative maps). Several groups taped together sheets of the black paper to produce even larger maps.

During the first meeting, participants examined examples of maps (that were particularly graphical in nature) and discussed questions like: What is a map? What does a map look like? What kinds of things might be shown on a map? In classrooms with Internet connections, several map-related websites were used as resources. Afterwards, each participant drew a map of where he or she lived.

In the next meeting, participants shared their “home maps” and talked about the things that exist around their homes including places they frequent in their local neighborhoods. This dialogue is meant to expand the frame of reference and to introduce the idea of mapping the community. The focus is on how each participant views his/her community and the kinds of places that seem most important to that individual.

Lastly, the following directions were given: *Draw a map of your community, however you imagine it. This map should show the people, things, places and landmarks in your community that are most important to you, their location, and how you get to these places (e.g., using roads or pathways).*

Participants first drew their own maps that they shared with their partners. For some youngsters, the idea of “community” is difficult to grasp. In those cases, we simply substituted the name of the city they live in (e.g., Gainesville.)

A discussion then followed on ways to incorporate elements of each map into a larger collaborative map; this lead to the development of the larger maps that typically took 3 to 4 meetings to complete.

## **Public Exhibition**

Upon completion, the collaborative maps were exhibited during the Fall Downtown Arts Festival in Gainesville. This was an exciting event for project participants as they shared their accomplishments with family, friends and other members of the community. The maps were also displayed on the University of Florida’s campus, at the local public library in Gainesville, and on the World Wide Web. These public exhibitions brought added recognition to the project and to its participants.

## **Outcomes**

While the results of this project are seen in the maps produced by participants, the real benefits of this endeavor lie in the experience gained by university art students and younger students during the collaborative creative process.

In implementing this project, we had two major goals. One was to provide a framework for a community outreach program within the University of Florida's School of Art and Art History. Another was to offer university art students an opportunity to make a difference in the lives of younger students.

Over the three years of the project, we were been highly successful in achieving both of these goals. For many of the university art students involved in the project, mentoring young artists has had a profound impact on their attitudes about art and their roles as artists or designers. As one art student wrote, "I really enjoyed working with the kids. They were inspiring to me and affected me in a positive way. This project opened my eyes to the possibilities of art as a means to affect positive change."

The name art buddies came to represent the relationship that developed between the participants during the creation of the collaborative maps. Another art student wrote, "Meg and I discovered we had a lot of places in common, so it was exciting to draw them. This project not only brought our places together, it brought each of us together."

In selecting the younger students for the project, art teachers at the participating schools were asked to choose children "who would best benefit from an extended relationship with an older student." This led to a range of young participants including some considered "at risk" and others thought to show "talent" in art. For these young artists, the project afforded the opportunity to relate their school activities to their lives outside the classroom as well as to enhance their knowledge of their community. More importantly, it gave them the chance to garner adult respect and approval for their ideas. Through the process of working collaboratively with older art students these youngsters learned that their ideas and experiences have value. Such knowledge is empowering.

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## **Resources**

For more information and ideas on maps and map-making with children, see the following books:

*How to Lie With Maps* by Mark Monmonier, Chicago: IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

*Mapmaking with Children: Sense-of-Place Education for the Elementary Years* by David Sobel, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998.

*My Map Book* by Sara Fanelli, New York: NY: Harper Collins, 1995.

*The Lure of the Local* by Lucy Lippard, New York: NY: New Press, 1997.

*The Power of Maps* by Denis Wood, New York: NY: Guilford Press, 1992.



A Community Map by Valerie and her two art buddies