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Lesley Graybeal
University of Central Arkansas, lgraybeal@uca.edu

Kristen Spickard
University of Central Arkansas; The Ohio State University

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Project Profiles

The CitiZINE Project: Reflections on a Political Engagement Project

Lesley Graybeal and Kristen Spickard

Abstract

Zines, or small, self-published magazines, have emerged from counterculture origins to gain popularity in recent years as a tool for democratizing writing in the classroom and community. This essay shares reflections on a campus-community zinemaking project at the University of Central Arkansas called the CitiZINE Project, which focused on creating opportunities for university students, faculty, and staff as well as local community members to engage in political zinemaking following the 2016 US presidential election and inauguration.

As Melanie Ramdarshan Bold has argued, “Historically, zines have been an alternative outlet for niche topics, or writers and writing, that are ignored by mainstream media” (216), and they are “typically considered to be a safe space for self-expression” (218). Following a US presidential campaign season characterized by divisive rhetoric broadcast through both mainstream media and social media outlets, the authors of this essay turned to zines for exactly this purpose: self-expression for ourselves and our colleagues and neighbors, which could explore the vast spaces beyond polarizing partisan politics, articulate ambivalent or emergent viewpoints, and simply share a perspective without inviting reactionary comments from others in our social networks.

Recent scholarship has explored the power of zinemaking among specific communities, including youth (Poletti), people of color (Bold), and Asian Americans (Honma), to name only a few. As Todd Honma has noted, “Because of their do-it-yourself ethos, zines are often embraced by those from marginalized backgrounds because of their freedom to experiment with different modes of writing, expression, and presentation” (34). The flexibility and ease of production of zines has also led to their use as a pedagogical tool in both K-12 (Yang) and higher education classroom contexts (Jacobi). Zines have even become a source of data for social science research (Guzzetti and Gamboa) and teaching university students *about* social science research and their own power and responsibilities as researchers (Etengoff). A recent special issue of *Community Literacy Journal* contextualizes zinemaking today as one of many forms of self-publication (Farmer, et al.). This essay offers zinemaking as a tool primarily for focusing university campus-community civic engagement efforts

and creating a space for positive political expression. As a tool for civic engagement, zinemaking also employs the qualities that Veronica House has noted can be used to *weird* a community writing program: namely, zines are “dynamic, adaptive, and place-specific” (57), giving zinesters the opportunity to explore their highly individual and local positions within shifting political and social discourses.

The Historical and Cultural Background of Zines

A zine is a small-circulation, self-published booklet of text and/or images, usually reproduced by photocopier or by other inexpensive means. Zines vary in topic but share certain characteristics: they are non-commercial, self-published, non-professional, cheaply reproduced, and made in small print runs (Perkins). As Jason Luther describes in *DIY Delivery Systems: The Extracurriculum in the Age of Neoliberalism*, “zines are not defined by a single attribute or aesthetic; however, they are often designed through a DIY cut-and-paste process that remediates the scraps of print culture” (184). Zines are far from the only independently produced publications throughout history. Other forms of self-publishing, like broadside newspapers, Dadaist publications, and samizdat from Soviet Russia, paved the way for zines, while fanfiction, blogs, and other print and digital genres have followed.

The popularity of zines spread from the science fiction “fanzines” of the 1930s to the counterculture movement of the 1960s, the punk movement of the 1970s, the queercore movement of the 1980s, and the feminist movement of the 1990s (Bold 218). While zines started out as a pre-internet idea-sharing method accessible to anyone, they continue to grow in popularity even though (or perhaps because) it is now possible to share ideas freely and easily online through blogs, websites, and social media. Indicating what has been termed a “postdigital sensibility” (Farmer, et al. 4), individuals are drawn to the tactile nature of a zine and being able to share ideas on paper instead of digitally, and communities form through the exchange of zines on special interest topics.

After all this time, today zines are still growing in popularity and relevance and are made on every topic imaginable (Honma 34), even experiencing a “boomlet” in the last decade (Farmer, et al. 2). As Duncombe has articulated, “Zines are an individualistic medium, but as a medium their primary function is communication. As such, zines are as much about the communities that arise out of their circulation as they are artifacts of personal expression. People create zines to scream out ‘I exist.’ They also do it to connect to others saying the same thing” (530).

The CitiZINE Project

The University of Central Arkansas’ Division of Outreach and Community Engagement (OCE) launched the CitiZINE Project in January 2017 in conjunction with Inauguration Day as a campus-community writing initiative utilizing zinemaking to explore what it means to be a citizen and how to actively participate in moving society toward a common good. The purpose of the project was to provide an opportunity for personal symbolic expression using zines. Situated within a contentious and vol-

atile presidential election season, the project included several partnerships with relevant academic courses and numerous campus and community zinemaking workshop events as a way for students, faculty, staff, and community members to positively engage in dialogue about citizenship and political topics.



Fig.1. A group of international students participate in a zinemaking workshop during the CitiZINE Project's Inauguration Day event. Kristen Spickard photo.

The initial iteration of the CitiZINE Project was bookended by two key events: an Inauguration Day event and a campus-community zinefest. OCE staff initiated a collaboration with faculty members whose research interests related to the American presidency, political discourse and rhetoric, and civil discourse. The Inauguration Day event included a livestream of the presidential inauguration, a faculty panel discussion about the history and symbolism of US presidential inaugurations, and a zinemaking workshop. The campus-community zinefest also served as the gallery opening for a multi-week display of individual pages from zines submitted throughout the semester. Between these two events, held in January and April 2017 respectively, OCE hosted several zinemaking workshops and tables, including a workshop at the public library, a workshop for art education students and local artists, tables in the university's student center, and workshops in conjunction with specific academic courses.

In an effort to include both students and community members, the events and workshops included in the CitiZINE Project were physically located in a variety of spaces. While most of the workshops took place in academic classrooms, one took place at the local public library and another at a professor's home. The Inauguration

Day event occurred in a conference center on the university campus, while the zinefest was located at UCA Downtown, a community outreach space in a storefront in downtown Conway, Arkansas, which serves as a visible and accessible location for community events. Both the conference center and UCA Downtown are frequently utilized by both on- and off-campus groups and were designed to serve as spaces for bringing together members of the university community and the broader local community.

To accommodate time slots of 60 to 90 minutes, we implemented several time-saving techniques in the zinemaking workshops. First, participants were invited to create one-page zines created by folding and cutting a single sheet of paper into a booklet with eight pages. This format is also conducive to making copies to share, because the zine can be easily unfolded and photocopied onto a single sheet of paper. In addition to blank paper and scissors, participants were provided with pens, markers, colored pencils, and collage materials. To save participants time searching for the perfect word or image to include in a collage-style zine, we created sheets of photocopied keywords and images related to civic engagement to be used in collage. Finally, to keep participants on track to complete their zines within the allotted time, we guided them through the zinemaking process by prompting participants through creation of the front cover, each interior spread, and the back cover. Using a timer for each page or spread kept participants on track by breaking the entire zinemaking process down into smaller steps.

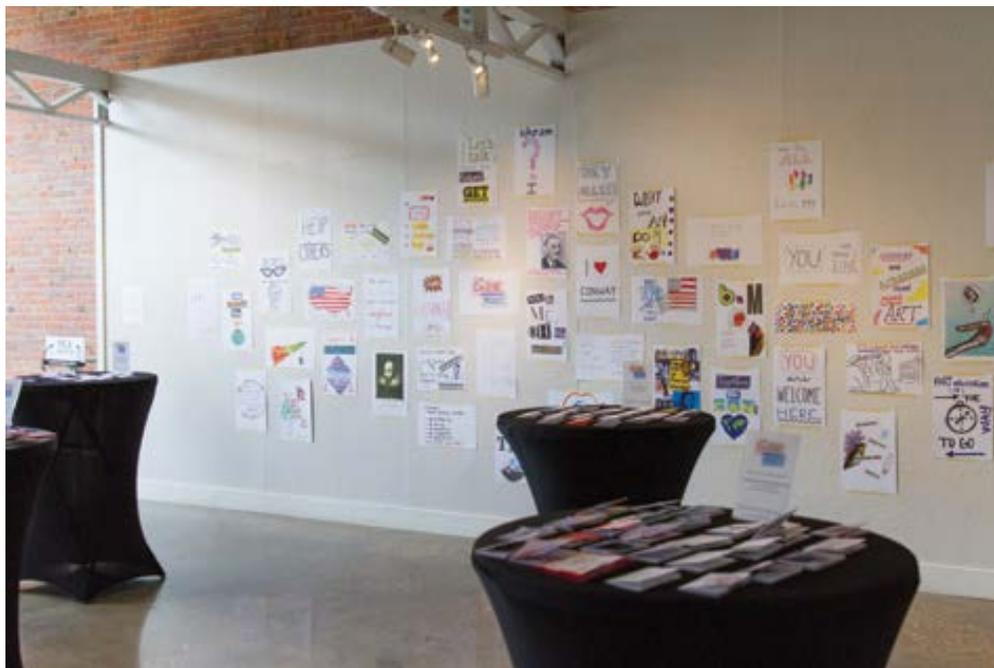


Fig. 2. Zines created throughout the CitiZINE Project and poster-sized enlargements of hand-selected zine pages filled the gallery space for a month at UCA Downtown in Conway, Arkansas. Kristen Spickard photo.

The academic connections to the zinemaking project ranged from an interest in the medium to course learning outcomes related to civic engagement—a Printmaking and an Art Education course both added a zine as a class project in order to participate in the CitiZINE Project, while a Global History of Student Protest course included a collaborative zinemaking project in which small groups of students each identified a social issue and developed a zine informing audiences about the issue and how to advocate for a particular position. Courses that incorporated zinemaking into an existing service-learning project and engaged particular social issues at a local, national, or global level included a Contemporary Moral Problems course investigating the issue of homelessness in the local community; a Gender, Race, and Class course and a Critical Theories of Race course hosting an on-campus event associated with the international advocacy group One Billion Rising, dedicated to ending violence against women; and two sections of a US Government and Politics course creating zines and leading zinemaking peer groups in response to Inauguration Day.

The zinemaking workshops gave participants a platform for expressing themselves and making their voices heard during a time when many people of all political stripes were grappling with their own and others' reactions to the election results. The broad political themes that we observed in the zines that participants produced during the CitiZINE Project ranged from the privilege and responsibility of voting to the (dys)function of the Electoral College, while the most prevalent specific social issues were immigration, the economy, and women's rights. Zinemaking offered a constructive outlet for participants to engage with the words and images of the campaign season by exploring the nuances of their own viewpoints as alternatives to divisive political rhetoric. As Frank Farmer writes in *After the Public Turn: Composition, Counterpublics, and the Citizen Bricoleur*, by offering zines as an alternative to more traditional writing, "we create an opportunity to introduce students to an alternate vision of democratic participation, a different understanding of *publicness* that they are unlikely to find in our institutions, our textbooks, and, for the most part, our pedagogies" (88). It was precisely such an "alternative vision" that we set out to explore with both students and community members in the conception of the CitiZINE Project.



Fig. 3. UCA's Art Education Club gathers in the evening to participate in a one-hour zine making workshop. The zines created reflected ideas about what art and art education add to the community. Kristen Spickard photo.

Recommendations and Future Directions

We began this project because of our belief in the utility of zines as a medium for authentic expression of views that individuals might not be willing to discuss in more public forums, and the content of the zines that students, faculty, staff, and community members produced as part of the CitiZINE Project reinforced this belief. At the same time, we found zinemaking to be a more time-consuming activity than we originally anticipated. While zines can be produced and reproduced quickly and cheaply, many of our participants wanted to spend further time conducting background research and creating an aesthetically pleasing final product. This realization led us to experiment with different workshop formats, including shortcuts, such as pre-cut words and images or pre-folded zines, and time constraints, such as prompting participants through brainstorming and drafting stages to create a full eight-page minizine in one hour. We even created some template zines focused on specific topics, such as "I [Heart] Conway," which invited participants to respond to prompts about their feelings about and positions within the community and which embraced what Rosanne Carlo, in her discussion of place-based literacies, describes as "the dialectic

of transformation and conservation” (60). Finally, while zines proved to be a unique and fruitful medium, we found that a general lack of familiarity with zines presented a barrier to involvement in the project. Given these challenges, course partnerships in which students received some instruction related to zines and zinemaking and had out-of-class time to research and produce their zines were the most effective strategy for generating high-quality zines for the project.

Considering changes that might be made to the project in other contexts or in future iterations at our university, we recommend a more concerted effort to utilize existing community partnerships. For instance, existing partnerships with local nonprofits and government agencies might have provided opportunities to conduct zinemaking workshops with more targeted audiences. While we reached out to several local partners that work with youth, we were not persistent in seeking partners’ participation and did not consider other audiences served by existing community partners, such as homeless and low-income community members, adults with special needs, and older adults. We had hoped that more of our service-learning course partnerships would position students as facilitators of their own campus and community zinemaking events, so we will also continue to consider how to develop university students as liaisons with their own communities and as facilitators of community writing, and how to more fully integrate campus and community participation.

At the University of Central Arkansas, we plan to continue the CitiZINE Project as part of long-term institutional civic engagement efforts. The role of the CitiZINE Project is to serve as a platform and a hub, facilitating opportunities for students, faculty, staff, and community members to explore and share ideas about citizenship. As Farmer writes, “when zines get made, so do other forms of democratic participation, so do broader understandings of publicness, so do other visions of citizenship” (90). We believe that making zines should be viewed as a creative catalyst for becoming involved in the community in newly understood and imagined ways.

Given the significant administrative effort that the project required from Outreach and Community Engagement staff, including time and resources spent guest lecturing, hosting workshops and events, sorting submissions, and photocopying zines to archive, it is unlikely that we would be able to continue the project at the same scale on a continuous basis. Rather, we envision the future direction of the project as a periodic initiative conducted during election years and reframed as a voter engagement project. As of early 2018, we have outlined plans to use the CitiZINE Project in the coming fall semester to encourage voter registration and education throughout campus and the community during the midterm election season.

Throughout the project, zinemaking provided a useful focal point for engaging campus and community members in both broad conversations about the meanings of citizenship and discussions of specific social issues. Ultimately, we believe that the model of a campus-community zinemaking project capitalizes on a unique medium to create an infrastructure for positive engagement in challenging political times, and we hope that participants in our project and similar projects might translate the do-it-yourself ethos of zinemaking into a similar ethos of community building and place-making in the years to come.

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Author Bios

Lesley Graybeal received her BA and MA degrees in English and a PhD in Social Foundations of Education from the University of Georgia and currently serves as Director of Service-Learning at the University of Central Arkansas.

Kristen Spickard received a BFA in Art from the University of Central Arkansas and an MFA in Art from The Ohio State University. She currently works as a graphic designer and photographer for the Division of Outreach & Community Engagement at the University of Central Arkansas.