



Designing for Children

- With focus on 'Play + Learn'

SoulCollage® for Children

Process art as a pathway to creativity

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Abstract: This paper explores the use of SoulCollage® to encourage right-brain thinking in children. SoulCollage®, developed by Seena B. Frost, is the process of creating a deck of cards using collaged images. The images are constrained to an 8" x 5" card, creating a self-imposed size and shape limitation, similar to the limitations in a design project. The cards are arranged in four suits creating an organization for the primary purpose of self-exploration and self-acceptance. Assemblage allows even the youngest children to create interesting and exciting images. These images allow a new range of expression, regardless of artistic talent.

Process art making is one pathway to achieve creative flow. The flow state was first described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his book, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (1996). Experiments by the author in 2007 revealed that adults were able to enter a creative flow state through process art making using collage as a medium of expression. The results of this study were documented in the paper, *Dancing in the Moment: Unlocking your Creative Flow* (2007).

The process of SoulCollage® allows children, as well as adults, to access and communicate preverbal thoughts and feelings. Even the youngest child is able to express through imagery what is inexpressible by other means. When flexible thinking is introduced early in a child's development, it will become a lifelong practice.

Key words: *SoulCollage, Collage, Creativity, Process Art, Children, Design, Creative Thinking, Out of the Box Thinking, Carl Jung, Lev Vygotsky*

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Background	3
The Four Suits	4
A. The Committee Suit	
B. The Community Suit	
C. The Companions Suit	
D. The Council Suit	
3. The Psychology of Collage	5
4. Workshop Methods	5
5. Workshop Results	6
6. Conclusions	12
7. Acknowledgments	13
8. References	13

1. Introduction

This paper explores the use of SoulCollage® to encourage right-brain thinking in preteens and teens. The experience of creating powerful visual statements is usually reserved for professional artists. However, this technique opens the possibility for all children to create nonverbal expressions of their innermost thoughts. The psychological underpinnings of this process encourage self-expression and flexible thinking.

When teaching children today, we must consider the whole child, as the creative process requires whole brain thinking. The problem solver must be able to quickly assess all possibilities and choose the best solution. Flexible thinking requires an uncritical examination of limitations. This type of thinking can be taught. The earlier it is introduced into a child's process, the more facile that child will be in practicing problem solving behavior as an adult.

Children are sometimes guided by unconscious forces. Sigmund Freud identified the personal subconscious, where the Id forces are powerful urges that people struggle with throughout their lifetimes (Freud S., 1955). Carl Jung added the idea of the collective unconscious, which involves the unconscious archetypes that all of humanity share (Jung C.G, 1968). Many of these originate in infancy, prior to the development of speech and language. These kinds of expressive, psychological exercises help all children express and bring to consciousness primal urges and secret longings.

Creative thinking is all about problem solving and communicating that idea to others. The key to effective problem solving is in opening up unconscious pathways to thinking. This simple practice allows any child, regardless of visual ability to express abstract nonverbal thoughts and feelings. The cards allow the child to tell a story. The images and juxtapositions on these cards are the working out of each individual's subconscious thoughts. As in dream imagery, the problem and solution are illustrated in the cards themselves.

2. Background

SoulCollage®, developed by Seena B. Frost is a process through which allows one to contact your intuition and create an incredible deck of cards which have deep personal meaning and which will help you with life's questions (Frost S.B., 2001). The process of collage is a multi-layered creative process, yet its simplified structure allows anyone to participate, regardless of artistic ability. The materials are common household items, such as scissors, glue, matte board cards and found images from magazines, greeting cards, personal photos, postcards, catalogues and calendars.

Originating from Seena Frost's final project for a human capacities program led by Jean Houston from 1987 to 1989, SoulCollage® is a trademarked process with specific requirements in order to differentiate it from other collage/art therapy processes and to provide training and support (Frost S.B., 2009). "The card-making process evolved over time with the aid of many women in my therapy groups. As they made their powerful, personal cards, shared them with each other and consulted them, we discovered the transforming possibilities of these images" (Frost S.B., 2001).

Developed as an art therapy tool for adults, SoulCollage® is a creative tool, but not in itself, therapy. Facilitator Training recommends that SoulCollage® Facilitators develop a referral list of licensed therapists (Frost S.B., 2009).

The use of found images allows for a speed of movement and range of expression necessary for the experience of making process art. The images are constrained to a predetermined size (8" x 5") creating a self-imposed size and shape limitation, not unlike the limitations in a design project. The size and shape of the cards are an approximate golden rectangle proportion or the proportion on which all of nature is based. This size and shape is a particularly organic, pleasing proportion. Design students all over the world are encouraged to learn and use this proportion in their work.

The cards are arranged in suits creating an organization for the primary purpose of self-exploration and self-acceptance. The elements that define SoulCollage® work are a non-competitive artistic expression and *I Am One Who* exercises. SoulCollage® cards are for personal and inner exploration (Frost S.B., 2001).

Facilitators offer explanations and experiential exercises to introduce the process. Competition is discouraged, and all cards are honored. Each person is encouraged to interpret his or her own chosen images before either the facilitator or group members offer suggestions as to further possible meanings.

There are four suits based on Carl Jung's principles (Frost S.B., 2001):

A. The Committee Suit: The Psychological Dimension

These cards represent aspects of the self. Some of the cards in this suit may include the critic, the judge, the angry one, the hurt child, the jealous one, the shy one, the organizer, the joyful child, the hard worker, the computer whiz and the loyal friend.

B. The Community Suit: The Communal Dimension

These cards represent images of real people and pets in your community. Some examples are family, friends, teachers, healers and pets.

C. The Companions Suit: The Energetic Dimension

These cards pair the seven energy centers of the body (chakras) with companion guides. "Energy moves up and down our bodies along the spinal column, concentrating in at least seven vortices along this route" (Frost S.B., 2001).

D. The Council Suit: The Archetypal Dimension

These cards are based on Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious. These are the unconscious forces that drive mankind. Some common archetypes are the great mother, the great father, death, the divine child, the creator and the fool.

3. The Psychology of Collage

Artists have used collage techniques for many years. Whether adhering bits of paper, words or pieces of images, the technique adds texture and interest to painted compositions. Due to copyright laws, artists are discouraged from using images in their entirety; the images should be cut into unrecognizable textures. Those with limited artistic talent will be limited in their expression by the inability to produce or reproduce images.

One of the difficulties in working with adults or children who have no formal art training is the inhibition to make art. Collage is a great technique to encourage freedom of expression, but abstract art is difficult to analyze with an untrained eye. Those with limited visual or artistic ability are often frustrated by the inability to visually express their ideas. The process of SoulCollage® resolves many of these issues by using existing imagery. The prohibition of selling or profiting from the art is key to the success of this technique. This is process art in its purest form, because the art that is produced is meant for the maker only.

Since these cards are considered tools for personal use, people are not limited to unidentifiable or non-copyrighted images. The maker may put together these images to create meaningful compositions, regardless of copyright restrictions or artistic talent. Everyone has ideas. The people with the ability to visually or verbally communicate a good idea have the advantage over those who do not. Whether one articulates in words or pictures, the execution of an idea is paramount to its success. Many have experienced the frustration of explaining a visual concept or story to another, only to exclaim, in a moment of frustration, "If I could only let you see what's inside of my head, you'd understand!" This process brings people closer to that result.

4. Workshop Methods

Three workshops were conducted at the Art Center College of Design. The *Art Center Kids* and *Saturday High* programs were used to market the free workshops. Two 1½-hour workshops were conducted for the preteens and one three-hour session for teens. All of the supplies were provided, but children were encouraged to bring their own magazines or imagery for inclusion into their compositions.

Several parents asked if they could stay and observe. Some had heard of SoulCollage® and were personally intrigued. All parents were encouraged to stay and take the workshops. Five parents eventually participated in the workshop alongside their children.

By way of introduction, all groups were encouraged to choose an existing SoulCollage® card from one of those displayed around the room. The concept and basic suits were briefly explained and written on the white boards. The group took turns practicing *I am the one who* statements. The children were encouraged to make as many cards as they wished. The two limitations were also explained: First, their compositions had to be made on the 8" x 5" cards supplied. Second, for their composition to be considered an original collage, they were also required to use a minimum of two images. The cards were scanned as they were completed and the individual cards and statements were documented.

Children were given a preprinted sheet when they finished a card, which read *I am the one who* at the top of the page. Halfway down the length of the page, the word *Story* was printed. Several methods were employed to encourage children to talk about their cards. Seena Frost's suggested format for adults calls for three people to explore the individual's cards together. An interpreter is accompanied by a witness who listens and prompts the reader with questions. In addition, a scribe is present to notate the interpretations.

This method was awkward for children. When asked to describe the author's card with the *I am the one who* statement in the initial group introduction, the children struggled to express themselves publicly. Most were not very creative in their answers. Concrete statements were more often spoken such as "I am the one who likes dogs" or "I am the one who likes flowers." Some children were not able to articulate their thoughts at all.

Children were then asked to write their own story about the cards. This proved to be a more effective method, resulting in original thoughts by children of all ages. Most children were able to write their own stories, although some were assisted by their parents or by other adults.

5. Workshop Results

The three workshops were attended by a total of 21 participants. Throughout the course of the three workshops, fifteen children ranging from 6 years to 17 years of age were observed. In a few instances, families, or parent/child groups, were able to participate in the workshop together. In two cases, fathers took the workshop with their children. Children finished between 2 and 5 cards, with an average of three cards each. Table 1 reveals the breakdown of each participant, their age and number of cards produced. The family relationships are shown in Table 2.

Last	First Name	Age	No. Cards
C_	Katelyn	6	4
H_	Eliza	8	3
C_	Nathan	9	3
M_	Lillian	9	4
S_	Carolyn	9	5
C_	Maia	10	2
G_	Uriel	10	2
H_	Selina	10	3
O_	Diana	10	4
G_	Yael	12	2
M_	Michelle	12	3
C_	Jade	13	4
K_	David	14	2
L_	Katherine	17	2
C_	Elaine	Adult	3
C_	Justin	Adult	1
G_	Rosa	Adult	2
H_	Jeanette	Adult	1
M_	Tish	Adult	1
S_	Johnson	Adult	1
A_	Abira	Adult	1

Table 1. Grouping by age

Last	First Name	Age	No. Cards
C_	Elaine	Adult	3
C_	Katelyn	6	4
C_	Nathan	9	3
C_	Justin	Adult	1
C_	Maia	10	2
C_	Jade	13	4
G_	Rosa	Adult	2
G_	Uriel	10	2
G_	Yael	12	2
H_	Jeanette	Adult	1
S_	Johnson	Adult	1
S_	Carolyn	9	5
M_	Tish	Adult	1
M_	Michelle	12	3
A_	Abira	Adult	1
H_	Eliza	8	3

Table 2. Grouping by family relationship

All children responded positively to the art making process. Children generally interpreted the cards in three ways: concrete, psychological and creative. Often, two or more ways of approaching the cards were explored within the same card. A child who created a visually stimulating card might also write an equally captivating story or poem.

The most visually creative individuals were not always able to verbally articulate the profound images they portrayed. Younger children often made cards that were visually stimulating and very creative, but their ability to articulate verbally what they had expressed in their images was poor. Preteens were generally more concrete and less articulate in their verbal statements than teenagers, but tended to tell more stories.

There were certain children who showed particular ability or visual awareness. This group transcended age. The children who created the most visually stimulating cards could not always articulate, even in writing, the ideas that were portrayed. Katelyn, 6, created some visually arresting images, but was unable to articulate a story to go with her cards.

Lev Vygotsky, an early pioneer in cognitive and developmental child psychology, observed that higher mental functions develop within particular cultural groups through social interactions with significant people in a child's life (Vygotsky, 1998). Comparing the children's cards to their parents' cards was particularly revealing. One mother who took the workshop with her two gifted children made some visually arresting cards, exhibiting an intuitive knack for design. In a follow-up interview, she wrote, "I can't draw, I can't paint; just the thought of doing art intimidates me." She stressed that she regularly exposes her children to both music and art. One of her cards (Figure.1) appears next to one of each of her children's cards, Figure.2 and Figure.3, pictured below. All exhibit an innate understanding of visual space.



Figure.1 Elaine C_Adult

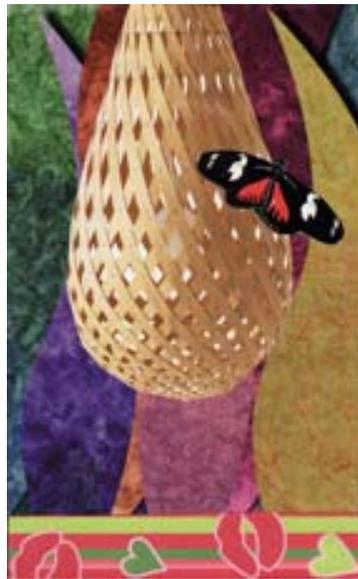


Figure.2 Katelyn C_6



Figure.3 Nathan C_10

Concrete statements describe the cards or the activities on the cards. They are statements of facts, neither interesting nor uninteresting. There is no embellishment. Children who created more concrete cards did not tell interesting stories about them. Their explanations were also concrete.

The *I am the one who* statements generally elicited concrete answers such as "I am the one who likes fish" or "I am the one who got scared." The children who described their cards this way pasted their images on in a tightly ordered fashion. There was little attempt to intertwine the images or integrate them in a larger composition. These three boys, ranging in age from 10-14, exhibited strikingly similar aggressions in their cards.

Yael and Uriel are brothers who are two years apart. Their stories are reflective of the competition inherent in two siblings so close in age. Yael, 12, made the card pictured in Figure.4 and told this story:

There is lots of competition to each other. They might show off or even battle. I hope one wins to get the mushroom badge. I put new and old games.

His brother, Uriel, 10, expressed the same competitiveness in the one card he made in which he collaged an image of a ninja, as well as a bunny holding a spear. He had several images of boxing gloves and the words "punch-out!" pasted on his card (Figure.5).

The story of me: I like to see people lose at something like competition. I like bunnies and I like weapons so I did a bunny with an evil weapon. I like to make new things that are colorful. LOOK OUT I MIGHT PUNCH YOU OUT OF YOUR OWN GAME!!!!

He admitted to the facilitator that the ninja represented the sneaky things he did. When asked what that might be, he elaborated, "I make things my mom doesn't like. Funny, bloody things."

David, 14, was working out his feelings of isolation in his cards. He struggled between wanting to express himself as a Goth and his conflicting desire to be a soldier (Figure.6).

I am the one who is stuck in between two things I really want to do.
I want to be a soldier but I also want to be a goth. I'm stuck between them. Soldier bps.
Goth artist writer. Ever since I was little I wanted to be in the army. I want to fight and protect people. It's also like a family I've never had.

Although he expresses a concrete problem, he is aware of his underlying psychology and subconscious desire for belonging whether it be goth culture or the military.

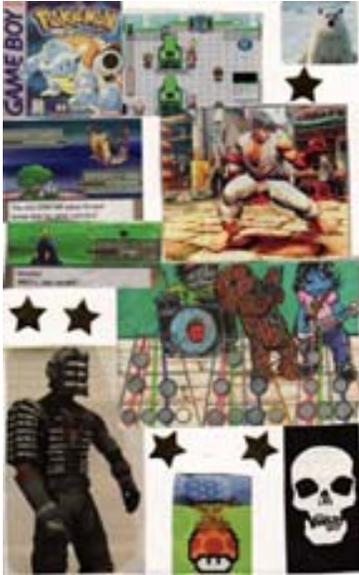


Figure.4 Yael G_14



Figure.5 Uriel G_10



Figure.6 David K_14

Psychological responses describe feelings or ideas beyond the individual images on the cards. Often, this appeared in a profound thought constructed abstractly from the images on the card. Teenagers seemed most psychologically aware and expressed concern about their environment and the future. Katherine, 17, was enrolled in art courses in the *Art Center Saturday High* program. Her cards were visually striking and her reflections expressed her fears for the future as well as her present constrictions. Her card (Figure.7) expresses her desire to break out of the inertia in her life.

People say to do what you want but it's not true. In America, we don't like to think we're sheep, but we are. Even if you want to do your own thing, people are watching you.

Jade, 13, was equally eloquent in her visual expressions. With each new card, she delved deeper into her own beliefs and fears. In Figure.8, she pairs a striking image of nature with collaged fiery buildings.

I am the one who cherishes the last bit of nature we have and knows what takes over that last bit of heaven. The last bit of nature we have is being taken over by condos and houses.

This psychological response was not limited to teenagers. Selina, 10, expressed her own fearlessness in facing her fears in an eloquent card (Figure.9), which expressed her thoughts that "being fearless means you still have fear but (are) facing it."



Figure.7 Katherine L_17



Figure.8 Jade C_13

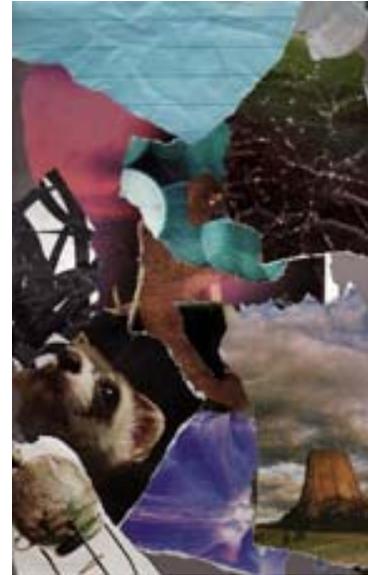


Figure.9 Selina H_10

The creative cards were often psychological in nature, but exhibited a storytelling response. The story was often whimsical or loosely related to the images on the card. Often, the ability to create a visually striking card was paired with the ability to describe it in an interesting manner. Carolyn, 9, struggled with her feelings about life and death. This theme ran throughout all her cards. She wrote these lines to accompany her card in Figure.10:

Alas! The poisonous mushroom-fungus of civilization is poisoning the world. Recycle they say, REcycle-No use! Shut down the fac-tor-ies, the factor is, stop living like kings and settle to the beauty of nature.

The theme of death appears in her next card (Figure.11):

Stories are mixed up...Everything comes together! Everything relates, every little thing can make BIG changes. If Einstein took some other route while walking someplace, a stranger could sneeze into his face a deadly flu. He could have died without teaching us some things because he took another route.

In Figure.12, She continues with the theme of life and death:

A woman sits with a priceless pot in her lap and staring at a famous painting. She is poor and will surely die of starvation soon. But she would not sell her pot and painting for anything. It is too entwined with her past life.



Figure.10 Carolyn S_9



Figure.11 Carolyn S_9

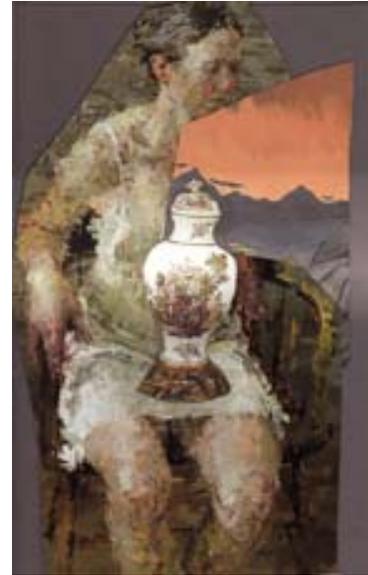


Figure.12 Carolyn S_9

In follow-up interviews, one parent of a teenage girl reported that as a result of the workshop and the encouragement garnered from her cards, she has decided to take more art classes. Other children admired their cards for several days and shared their images with their parents. Both children and parents enjoyed the workshop activities and reported great satisfaction in their experience with SoulCollage® and the cards. Several parents, as well as their children, indicated a great interest in returning for future SoulCollage® workshops.

6. Conclusions

SoulCollage® is a unique technique that can foster creative thinking in children. Collage allows children to experience a sense of play while uncovering their own stories. The use of found images allows even the youngest child to find a voice, regardless of talent. Fostering right-brain thinking in childhood increases the likelihood of developing flexible, out-of-the-box thinking in adulthood.

It is an easy tool to access complex feelings and ideas. Unexpressed feelings can unconsciously inhibit or suppress flexible thinking. The sense of discovery in the juxtaposition of found images can enable children to unlock unconscious forces that may be holding them back. The cards then become a tool to interpret and reinterpret preverbal thoughts and feelings.

The most interesting finding came from the unexpected result of allowing parents to take the workshop alongside their children. It was assumed that children of all ages would feel more free to express their feelings through images without their parents present. On the contrary, the presence of the parents seemed to enhance the creativity and the learning in their children. "At the core of Vygotsky's theory is the sense that children must be actively involved in teaching/learning relationships with more competent others who both learn from children and draw them into fuller membership in their cultural world" (Tudge & Scrimsher, 2003). After each card was completed, the young children, as well as the teenagers, showed each of their cards and writing samples to their parents before submitting them to the facilitator. The children were not required or encouraged to show their cards to their parents. However, the children sought out their parents for support and validation.

Offering parent/child workshops or schooling on a larger scale may be an interesting option to increase learning and creativity in young people.

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