

Oliver Herring's **TASK** in the Classroom

A Case for Process, Play, and Possibility

Jethro Gillespie

Figure 1. "Paper mascot girl." Oil and acrylic on canvas, 48" x 30". This student's task started as "Make paper pants" and then quickly became the site for many other students' paper and cardboard accessories (painting by the author).



It was the first day of school. In my high school art classroom, I had welcomed a group of apprehensive students to their new art class, which, judging from the set-up of the room, must have appeared slightly strange to them. The tables and chairs were arranged in a large circle around the perimeter of the room, encompassing a central table holding many inexpensive art supplies: large rolls of colored paper, rolls of tape, markers, cardboard, pens, charcoal, newspapers, colored pencils, paint, brushes, magazines, and scraps of paper. There was also a large box on the central table, labeled "TASK box," surrounded by many slips of blank paper.

"We'll cover the syllabus next class," I said, as the students tried to find a seat. "Today I want to start class with a TASK party." I then tell them about the box located on a central table in the room.

"There are two simple rules for this party: The first rule is that you can take one of these slips of paper and write a TASK on it— anything that you can imagine someone doing. Then you deposit the paper in the 'TASK' box. The second rule is that whenever you put a new task in the box, you then take a different one out. You get to interpret your new task with your choice of supplies from the table. When you have completed your task, you simply repeat the process. The party keeps going until the end of the class today. Alright?"

What is TASK?

TASK is the brainchild of Brooklyn-based artist Oliver Herring (2011). He defines TASK as:

[a]n improvisational event with a simple structure and very few rules... TASK's open-ended, participatory structure creates almost unlimited opportunities for a group of people to interact with one another and their environment. TASK's flow and momentum depend on the tasks written and interpreted by its participants. In theory anything becomes possible. (p. 6)

History of TASK

The origins of TASK are interwoven with the history of Herring's own artistic practice. The first TASK events, starting in 2002, were essentially conceived as performance works, with Herring choosing participants from a pool of submitted applications. As time passed, Herring's concept of TASK evolved into a more open-ended endeavor, replacing the limited number of applicants with open invitations to many participants. By 2008, it was not uncommon for a TASK event hosted by Herring to have hundreds of participants engaged in a TASK event that would sometimes last upward of six or seven hours. One TASK event in London went on for two consecutive days (Herring, 2011, p. 17).



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TASK in Education

One especially potent audience for TASK in the recent past has been educators and their students. In the summer of 2013, Herring was invited by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities to conduct a TASK event with over 40 adult educator participants, from eight different schools in Washington, D.C. This event was part of the Turnaround Arts initiative, a public-private partnership designed to help transform some of the nation's lowest performing schools through comprehensive and integrated arts education (Turnaround: Arts, 2015). Since 2013, Herring has been invited back to work with the President's committee for the past two years, each time with more educators and administrators than the previous year (personal communication with Herring, 2015).

Herring's work with involved educators involved with TASK facilitates an open dialogue to help the participants consider the importance of creativity in every discipline, not only the arts. He encourages teachers to recognize the crucial role and influence that they can have by enacting creative, open-ended student engagements in their schools.

Herring continues to be invited to host TASK events with educators in many capacities, such as district-wide K-12 school professional development sessions, museum educational settings, and with other art and educational institutions. Personally, I was introduced to TASK through my association with *Art21 Educators*, a professional development initiative and community for teachers who are interested in bringing contemporary art, artists, and theme-based pedagogy into classroom teaching and learning (art21.org). Herring is also one of the featured artists in the third season of the *Art21* documentary series. With all of the energy that Herring has put into the development of TASK, as well as the attention rendered by *Art21 Educators* for TASK, it is not surprising that other interested educators are embracing these ideas about contemporary art practice with their students. Many educators, like me, who learn about TASK, have begun adapting it to their own classrooms.

Figure 2. "Become someone's sunshine." Oil and acrylic on canvas, 48" × 30" (painting by author).



Figure 3. "Kiss a stranger." Oil and acrylic on canvas, 48" x 30" (painting by the author).

My Students' Experience With TASK

Back to the first day of school in my classroom: I had just invited 36 teenagers who were already navigating the stressful and complex difficulties of the first day of school to jump into a TASK party. I did this with all six of my classes (four sections of Art Foundations, one section of Painting 1, and my A.P. Studio Art class) over the first two days of school. As could be imagined, my invitation to begin was necessarily met each time with reluctant hesitation. During the first several minutes of each class, only a few brave students dared write tasks, let alone interpret and perform other students' tasks. I noticed many students seemed apprehensive, some even scared outright. Others were watching the clock; I can only imagine that they were wondering how long they might suffer this awkward situation, perhaps already making plans to transfer out of my class.

Then a student, one of the brave ones, stood up on a table, smiling and holding his slip of paper, confidently started singing "Mary had a little lamb" at the top of his lungs. His off-key sonic

crooning pierced the air with an affectionate dissonance that could only be received with laughter and affection by everyone else.

This student not only broke the ice for the other students, he also helped his classmates recognize the possibilities of this situation. Before long, my classroom would be surging with laughter and adrenalized energy. There were bouncing conga lines of students, wearing outfits that had been tailored from paper and tape, garnished with marker-drawn signs and a variety of cutout decorative embellishments. Other students were singing improvised poems, or performing monologues about their pets, some were trying to convince a small group of their peers to participate in a parade to celebrate their un-birthdays, while others were meeting strangers with a variety of unconventional greetings. I was also able to discern many quiet, more private activities of various students as they interpreted their TASKs in different and sometimes less-public ways.



Figure 4. "Approach w/caution, Handle w/care." Oil and acrylic on canvas, 48" x 30" (painting by the author).

What Does TASK Do for Participants?

Student Experience

One of my former students, Lindsay, was a participant in the first TASK event I facilitated as a teacher in 2011. She describes her experience:

Some of us had never really interacted before, so we were initially hesitant to share tasks that required mingling. But as the party went on, we collectively began to figure out the “game,” and people began to make and perform tasks more creatively.

It became so bizarre that at one point I had a “French mustache” painted on me and I was chanting unintelligible things as someone carried me piggyback around the classroom. As I looked around the room there were plenty of other strange behaviors and interactions taking place, but it was so real and natural. Pretend funerals, interpretive dancing, pirate accents... I left class that day smiling at all the funny things that had occurred that I completely forgot I still had a mustache. (personal communication, 2013).

Figure 5. Several examples from TASK parties in my classroom.



1. My classroom set up before starting TASK with students.
2. “Build a fort”
3. This began as “lay on the table with a friend for 5 minutes” and then other TASKs quickly emerged responding to these students’ position, taking the shape of adding materials onto the students.
4. “Get 5 other people to touch the teacher’s beard with you.”
5. “Step on someone’s foot then look them in the eye and apologize.”
6. This began as “Tape someone to the wall” and then became the site for “make a human Christmas tree,” which then led to “tape someone else to the wall.”
7. “Be the darkest one in the room” + “have a sword fight with somebody” + “take Annie’s* mask” + “put a unicorn horn on somebody.”
8. This was a collective task to “adorn a girl and take a photo”
9. “Make Trevor* a fancy hat.”
10. “Wrap someone up like a package.”
11. “Make fancy fingers” + “Create a centerpiece.”

*(names have been changed)

Emphasis on Process Over Product

TASK embraces many characteristics of contemporary art practice. One of the most evident effects of TASK in the classroom is the emphasis it places on process over product. Richardson and Walker (2011) take up the important notion of conceptualizing *process* in artmaking as more than the state of an artifact as it simply progresses from a less developed state toward a more refined or finished one; rather, they suggest that *process as event*, as it implicitly relates to time, is the experiential engagement with artmaking that affects meaningful ways of learning and knowing.

Students' involvement with TASK provides perpetual opportunities for participants to delve into the raw processes of interpretation and creation. They are free to interpret their given TASKs with whatever amount of commitment, attention, and energy that they wish, without the anxieties that often accompany an overly polished or precious final product that might be expected in a traditional art classroom setting.

Invitation to Play

TASK invites participants to experiment, to improvise, and to play. The role of play as an important learning experience for children has roots dating back into the early 20th century (Groos, 1901; Severance, 1919; Dewey, 1934). In recent years, there has been a renewed interest by education scholars of 21st-century skills who have addressed the importance of play in education (Gray, 2013; Gude, 2010; Jones & Reynolds, 2011; Matta, 2013); in creative problem solving (Pitri, 2001), in embracing imaginative possibilities (Deleon, 2011), and as a way to access genuine student engagements that help to "revise and enlarge understandings" (Matta & Hostetler, 2003).

Aligning reasons to participate in TASK with a description of why art is important to him, Herring says that TASK is an invitation:

... to experiment and risk; to fail without consequences; to invest in something idiosyncratic, messy, potentially paradoxical, or inconclusive; to engage people in adventurous and unusually intimate circumstances; and to *continuously* challenge how a material, a space, a situation, and a human interaction can be engaged... TASK is a creative outlet, but it is also a direct (and self-directing) point of access to contemporary art. (Herring, 2011, p. 50)

Kendra Paitz, a museum educator who has been both a participant and facilitator of TASK, noted "through my involvement with TASK, I have witnessed how a participatory approach to art can effect changes in people's behavior and outlook, whether for one afternoon or more long term" (Herring, 2011, p. 114).

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What Does TASK Do for the Classroom?

Constraints That Enable

The parameters of TASK provided to my students were very simple, but within this simple structure existed the open-ended potential for students to interpret their given tasks. TASK's initial structure may be conceptualized as *constraints that enable*, an idea discussed by art education scholars Castro (2007) and Barney (2009). Instead of interpreting the term *constraint* as a limiting or oppressive term, it is taken here to mean a liberating one that enables students to function within the given situation that is neither too overwhelmingly open, nor oppressively limited. In the case of TASK, the teacher or facilitator sets up the conditions for creative interactions to occur, and the students' experience of interpreting their tasks within the given constraints unfolds in new and exciting ways.

Social and Relational Implications

Castro (2012) also discusses art educators' classroom media choices as they consider relational and social engagements with art, not as a replacement for traditional media altogether, but instead, as a way to suggest how "the habitual and patterned contexts, relations, interactions and perceptions between people—is a *medium* in itself" (p. 103). Castro inspires art educators to question their classroom practices, asking, "How can we reshape local contexts, communities, and social practices, even if for a moment, to bring us new understandings about each other?" (p. 103).

Margaret Meban (2009) discusses the importance for art educators to re-conceptualize their notion of aesthetics "in a way that recognizes our interconnectedness and relationality as human beings" (p. 34). TASK is an effective method for helping students to realize how art can be comprised from interpersonal relations, contingent upon the given environment, participants, and materials available to them.

Decentralized Classroom Structure

TASK is designed to challenge many traditional structures often associated with teaching and learning, like adhering to a strict hierarchical relationship between the teacher and the students. Instead, TASK creates a decentralized approach for participants to collaborate and feel empowered as they experience "a non-linear exchange of ideas, allowing for necessary dialogue and conversation, ultimately leading to innovative exploration of materials and concepts" (May, 2011).

"Yeah, but That Would Never Work in My Classroom"

Admittedly, before the students arrived, I had some fears about how TASK might translate into a chaotic, free-for-all that would leave my room in shambles. I also worried initially about the long-term consequences of classroom management of doing TASK on the first day of class. I was concerned that offering the students such an open-ended experience might result in a lack of student respect for me; and, if I gave up the control I assumed I needed to earn their respect on the first day, the students would walk all over me and refuse to listen to anything I would tell them in the future.



Figure 6. "Stick this to the teacher." Oil and acrylic on canvas, 48" × 30" (painting by the author).

Was using TASK in the classroom a flawless answer to all of my pedagogical concerns? By facilitating it on the first day of school, was I able to engage every student 100% and help them all become creative masters? Of course not. But did anything go wildly wrong? Did the students destroy my classroom or hurt each other? Not at all.

Herring says that when educators introduce TASK at the beginning of their semester, "everything that follows will be framed by a sense of play and openness, possibility and excitement. It'll communicate to your class that contemporary art is of the moment, molten" (personal communication with Herring, 2014). In my experience, inviting students to participate in a TASK party on the first day of school has not been about finding some clever, curricular silver bullet. Rather, it has been more about setting the tone and expectations for my students. I wanted them to experience an open, participatory exchange of ideas and materials on the first

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day so that they could feel a sense of ownership, possibility, collaboration, and attentiveness that would carry into their own artistic practice in my classroom.

Julie, a former student, recounted her experience on the first day of school, and said that the payoff from participating in TASK came only after she recognized that the students involved needed to lower their inhibitions and take risks. "During a TASK party it's easy to feel vulnerable because your experience is dictated by the tasks other people write. TASK didn't become meaningful for me until I embraced that vulnerability" (personal communication, 2013).

The positive outcomes described by my students were diametrically opposed to my initial worries. By creating the conditions for TASK to occur, as well as the freedoms inherent within it, I was communicating a message of *trust* to my students, which was received and reciprocated, if not amplified, by my classes as a whole.

I believe this trust is related to the vulnerability mentioned by Julie. Engaging with a sense of shared, communal trust is a vital component to a generative art classroom environment that, as the semester went on, helped to build a safe and democratic atmosphere where students were more willing to take risks, discuss ideas, embrace ambiguity, as well as develop a more authentic sense of ownership for their art projects.

Debriefing Session

An essential component of a TASK experience in the classroom is the collective debriefing session that directly follows students' participation in TASK. Following a TASK event on the first day of school, I would devote the last few minutes of each class to facilitate a discussion that helped students unpack and reflect on their experiences together. Some example questions from these discussions were:

"What was the best/strangest TASK you received?"

"What do you think TASK has to do with art?"

"Why do you think I wanted you to do this today?"

"How does TASK build relationships or connect you to other people?"

The debriefing discussions allowed the students to reflect and respond to the notions of process, play, and possibility that connected to their experiences with TASK. In each of my classes, these debriefing sessions helped establish an atmosphere that welcomed contemporary considerations for approaching art in the classroom by allowing the students a time and space for reflection and collective discussion.

Conclusion

Herring says TASK "creates an inclusive and an open-ended atmosphere. Trust is usually met with trust. And with TASK, for which you need to trust those around you, that's the best guideline I can give" (Hamlin & Sandagata, 2012, p. 30). As a facilitator of TASK in my own classroom, I found that this statement was relevant not only for the students, but also for me. As students engaged

with each other through TASK, they were participating in many contemporary art practices: emphasizing process over product, being invited to experiment and play with a variety of materials, engaging with social aspects and dynamics of the classroom environment, and exploring imaginative possibilities. As a teacher facilitating TASK on the first day of school, I welcomed the tone of mutual trust and excitement for art in the classroom that was established not just by me, but also by my students. And we were able to do this even before we went over the syllabus. ■

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Author Note

Figures 1-4, 6: I made these paintings as a part of my personal reflective pedagogical and artistic practice. These paintings serve as larger-than-life snapshots, rendered to document, contextualize, and pay homage to some memorable moments from the TASK parties I've thrown with my students.

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