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*Brigham Young University*

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A Pedagogy of Constraints: How Self-Imposed

Limitations Influence Art-Making

and Teaching

Emmalee Glauser Powell

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### A Pedagogy of Constraints: How Self-Imposed Limitations Influence Art-Making and Teaching

Emmalee Glauser Powell  
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Master of Arts

This study explores how self-imposed limitations affect anxieties about art-making and the art-making process. As a teacher, I was interested in how limitations affected student art-making. I used arts-based research methodology to explore spiritual and personal quandaries in my own life through the process of art-making. A consistent thread throughout this investigation was using the process of making art as a way to gain understanding about my own life and teaching. I was also able to create a culture of vulnerability and honesty in my classroom and help my students embrace themselves and their physical, emotional, and situational limitations through the art-making process.

Keywords: art education, limitations, creative process, self-imposed limitations, social and emotional learning, students with limitations, vulnerability, arts-based research

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

This study explores how self-imposed limitations affected my anxieties about art-making and my art-making process. It also documents my own exploration of spiritual and personal quandaries in my own life. It includes my reflections on how a strategy of self-imposed limitations affected student art-making in my art classes. Making art was important to me, but I was struggling with my art practice. I not only had artist's block, but the demands of my life made it almost impossible for me to paint. I missed the sense of satisfaction and fulfillment I gained from painting; I missed having the ability to communicate what cannot be said. Art was also a way for me to represent knowledge and strengthen my own faith. In response to the problem of artist's block, I experimented with a series of self-imposed limitations, including painting with my left hand, painting without brushes, and painting with difficult mediums, such as mud and joint compound and even fire and ashes. I also adopted the Surrealist method of looking for images in my work. As a trained illustrator, I could easily draw a portrait, but I was looking for more subconscious images in my work. The surprising result of this experiment in limitation was that I completed 360 painting studies and four large paintings within 15 months. Once again, I was a working artist, making paintings and exhibiting my work. More important, I gained insight into my own limitations and the way art might be a form of knowledge and spiritual insight.

As an art teacher, I noticed that many of my students were also experiencing anxiety about making art. I teach a course called Art for Elementary Educators for preservice elementary teachers. If these students have one common characteristic, it is that they lack confidence in their own artistry. To increase my students' confidence and to mitigate their anxiety about making art, I designed a series of art projects that included a constraint or limitation. After my students

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completed these projects, I asked them to design their own set of limitations and work within their self-imposed constraints. This study explores how self-imposed limitations affected art-making and whether or not limitations can be an effective teaching strategy.

### **Response**

My response to my own anxiety in art-making was to experiment with using limitations as a catalyst for art-making instead of as an excuse for not making art with myself and my students from fall 2018 through the spring of 2020. Throughout this study, I asked, “What is the relationship between anxiety, limitations, and art-making? How can failing be a good thing? What types of knowledge are gained through limitations in the art-making process? What is the effect of self-imposed limitations on my student’s art making?”

In this study, I was exploring spiritual and personal quandaries in my own life through the process of art-making. This study recounts my journey as a teacher, artist, and researcher seeking to embrace my own anxiety, perfectionism, spirituality, and lack of time by making art with self-imposed limitations. At the same time, I was attempting to create a culture of vulnerability and honesty in my classroom and help my students embrace themselves and their physical, emotional, and situational limitations through the art-making process. Although I used aspects of action-based research to explore my own teaching, this is primarily a self-study that engages an arts-based research methodology. As an arts-based researcher, I am interested in art-making as a form of inquiry and in what kinds of knowledge art-making might generate. I like the advice of Alex de Cosson (2003): “I am researching the process of my own doing” (p. ii). My procedure was to work through personal questions about art and life through my own art making using self-imposed limitations. My data included both my self-reflections and my own artwork. An important element of this self-study including reflections about my teaching and how my

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personal investigations into limitations and art might be applied to teaching. Consequently, I created a unit of lessons focused on limitations in the art-making process, with topics such as embracing yourself and limitations, embracing limited time and resources, embracing anxiety about getting started, embracing changing emotions, embracing messiness and lack of control, embracing weakness, and embracing mistakes (see appendix). I incorporated my reflections about the affordances of this approach within my teaching practice.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

I explored the following topics in the research literature: importance of creativity and art making, anxiety about making art, play as a method of combating art anxiety, art-making and emotional well-being, the role of chaos or messiness in the creative process, and artists who use limitations. Important questions that guided this research included, “What is the relationship between artistic production, creativity, and limitations?” “How do artists embrace the uncontrollable?” “What is the conversation about art-making for students whose learning approach might be atypical?” For the purposes of this thesis, I define “creative block” as whatever is preventing the artist or student from making art, and then I explore the importance of creativity and making art.

### **The Importance of Creativity and Art-Making**

My students have expressed various concerns about taking an art class, including, “I’m not creative enough” and “Being creative is hard for me.” Why is creativity and art-making important in an education system that emphasizes success and educational funding based on measurable results from standardized testing?

According to the recently updated National Core Arts Standards: “What are the National Core Art Standards?” creativity is described as a vital learning skill across subjects and in life. Creativity is essential for learning because it fosters “flexible thinking, creative problem-solving, inquisitiveness, and perseverance” (p. 21). This document further stresses arts education is a 21<sup>st</sup> century skill because not only does it contribute to their overall development, but art education gives them powerful preparatory skills for a career, college, and a fulfilling life. In addition, creativity as a teaching strategy builds “student ability in problem formulation, research, interpretation, communication, precision, and accuracy” (p. 21). They found that the creativity

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practices of imagination, investigation, construction, and reflection were also in the common core Standards for Mathematical Practice and the Anchor Standards for Reading. Their findings support the argument that creativity is vital, not just in art education but in core subjects, in our culture, and in life.

In an interview with Berglin (2017) regarding the updated National Arts Standards, Gude explained:

It's our job to expand students' aesthetic capacities for engaging and making. . . . The most interesting artistic practices of the early twenty-first century have yet to be invented. The ideal endpoint of all arts education is that students think of themselves as cultural creators—whether that's the process of actually making an artwork or it's being part of an extended community of people who experience, process, and interpret artworks and think together about the meaning such work contributes to their lives and the lives of their communities. (pp. 62–63)

The idea of art as a life skill is prevalent in Eisner's (1992) writings on educational reform and the role of arts in human development. Eisner stated, "Not all problems have single, correct answers" (p. 594). In school, students are taught to find the correct answer, but in the real world and the workplace, problems can have multiple answers. Art teaches and celebrates finding new solutions to hard problems. In the arts, we learn "that goals need to be flexible and surprise counts" (p. 594). Life often doesn't work as planned, which means that practicing, learning, and teaching creativity within limitations are essential educational skills.

In his curriculum, art educator and therapist Seung Yeon Lee (2017) applied Eisner's (1992) ideas by using imaginary dilemmas while working with inner-city children. He found that facing the imaginary challenges (such as crossing a canyon), looking at an obstacle from

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multiple perspectives to find multiple solutions, and solving problems using their imaginations increased students' self-competence (Lee, 2017). In one instance, Lee introduced “an imaginative problem-solving drawing” by challenging students to draw solutions to problems, such as how to cross a chasm. In his study, students learned that they could find more than one solution to any given problem and that questions could have more than one answer (p. 46).

Lee (2010) believes that “the creative process fulfills an individual’s need for competence, especially in the case of children who do not receive much pleasure or satisfaction from schoolwork” (p. 44). He concluded that “students become more aware of their own abilities, and able to draw on a range of alternatives when coping with daily challenges. This ultimately makes them feel empowered rather than vulnerable” (2000, p. 49). I agree that art-making through problem solving can instill confidence and empower students in and outside of the classroom.

### **Anxiety About Art-Making**

A number of educators and researchers have reported that many students feel anxiety about making art in classes, which causes them to feel creatively blocked and prevents them from making art (Baer, 2012; Gude, 2010; Metcalf & Smith-Shank, 2001; Wilcox, 2017; & Zande et al., 2014). Reasons for this anxiety include the idea that there is no right answer in art, the fear of failure, and trouble getting started. Some researchers have found play an effective strategy for combating anxiety about starting and making art.

### ***The Wrong Answer***

As previously described, my undergraduate students struggle with ambiguity in art and worry about doing something wrong in art which leads to increased student anxiety regarding art making. Zande et al. (2014) noticed a similar problem in their study among undergraduate

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students in art class—students were seeking one right answer and were afraid of making mistakes (p. 21). According to Eisner (1992), however, in art and life, there are multiple solutions. Eisner stated, “The problems of life are much more like the problems encountered in the arts. They are problems that seldom have a single correct solution; they are problems that are often subtle, occasionally ambiguous, and sometimes dilemma-like” (1992, p. 594).

This can be particularly challenging for students with fixated interests or perfectionistic tendencies. These students often don’t know how to measure their success or even begin a project because they don’t know what “kind of solution will be acceptable” (Gude, 2010, p. 32). As Gude has stated, however, art is immeasurable. Gude (2010) explained that students don’t “even consider that the final product might be personally meaningful because this has not been [their] experience of schoolwork in art or in other classes. [They don’t] understand the purpose of making such a project and yet [they] will be judged on how well [they] complete it” (2010, p. 32). Not knowing the “correct” answer and how a project will be evaluated can increase atypical students’ anxiety about getting started and completing the project because they fear the prospect of failing.

### ***Fear of Failure***

Undergraduate preservice educators often have a fear of failure, according to a study by Metcalf and Smith-Shank (2001). They observed, children are first very excited and delighted in the creation process but as they grow something changes and they begin to fear failing. Metcalf and Smith-Shank posited that negative past experiences with art in school may have affected the art-making process, explaining, “In the eyes of their teachers, there is a right and a wrong way to make art” (2001, p. 46). According to Wilcox (2017), “When students take risks, and fail, many believe they are flawed and do not belong in an art class” (p. 11).



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Bart Francis (Francis et al., 2018) shared an experience from one of his high school student's process journals about how the anxiety surrounding making art can lead to inaction. The student wrote, "This project is hard. . . . I'm second guessing my idea. It's not a bad idea; it just might not turn out well" (p. 80). In response, Francis decided to share his insecurities and fears with his students in his *Apron of Reflection* 2018 artwork. He screen-printed his fears and doubts on an apron and wore the apron in class. Francis observed, "The act of wearing these fears and insecurities in front of my students was frightening. I wondered how they might react" (2018, p. 82). But wearing his apron and being open with his students about his own insecurities turned out to be an effective teaching strategy. Francis said that the experience led to "conversations with students about the fears we share as artists and teachers" (2018, p. 82).

Bayles and Orland (1993) believe that learning to fail artistically is essential in art-making. Art critic Jerry Saltz (2017) recalled his anxiety-ridden experience as an artist in the 1970s, which caused creative block and halted his art-making process: "On the outside things were great. On the inside I was in agony, terrified, afraid of failing, anxious about what to do next and how to do it. I started not working for longer and longer periods. Hiding it. Then not hiding it. Until all I had left was calling myself an artist" (para. 20). He stopped creating art and became an art critic.

Failure is not normally encouraged in schools. In her observations of art students, Wilcox (2017) observed, "Some students embraced these so-called failures and started again, while others were paralyzed by them; they feared what other students thought about their abilities" (p. 11). I have also observed my students' fears and frustrations when their art-making efforts didn't turn out as planned. To overcome that fear of failing, Wilcox emphasized the importance of creating "a psychologically safe environment where students can be creative" and not worry

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about failing (2017, p. 11). Students need to feel emotionally safe about the idea of failing in order to allow themselves to make art through play and curiosity.

According to Smith and Henriksen (2016), failing in art is an essential part of the creative process. They reported that reflecting on failure and struggling with uncertainty and ambiguity was a “means of heightening creativity” for students and was essential to the creative process (p. 6).

### ***Trouble Getting Started***

Some students struggle making art because they are unsure how to get started or deciding what to create. This can be addressed through giving students limitations or specific problems to creatively solve.

Artist Phil Hansen (2013) learned having too many options led to indecision, but when he limited the supplies, such as only using Starbucks cups and a pencil, or chewed up food to create portraits, he was able to move forward creatively. Temple Grandin, autism spokesperson and animal science professor, encourages having a specific limited purpose, such as a problem or task to solve (2010). In Grandin’s experience, her problems to solve involved livestock issues, such as figuring out what cattle were balking at or how to improve the treatment of cattle at cattle-handling facilities through structural design (Grandin, 2010).

Perhaps this is why art education professor Olivia Gude and Jessica Poser’s (2009) Spiral Workshop series about playing with dirt and messes was so successful because it focused on solving problems within limitations. Their narrative project *Mess Is the Stuff of Life*, for example, included a “dirtsheet” worksheet with specific prompts and questions for students to answer, such as, “Tell about a time you got really dirty.” “Were you ever punished for being dirty?” “Did you ever get dirty on purpose?” and “What’s the longest you’ve gone

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without brushing your teeth? Changing your clothes?” (Gude & Poser, 2009, p. 38). Guiding students’ thinking allowed them to recall their specific feelings and experiences with dirt before starting their art project.

### *Play*

In addition, Olivia Gude has published a number of articles and workshops to encourage educators and students to find an element of play in creating art. Gude (2007) believes that “students of all ages need opportunities to creatively ‘mess around’ with various media—to shape and re-shape lumps of clay or to watch as drops of ink fall upon wet paper and create riveting, rhizomatic rivulets” because curiosity and play is a natural way to learn (p. 7). Gude (2010) emphasized play as a technique for starting because “it is not always easy to summon up a creative spirit on demand. Thus, simply telling students that this is their ‘creative time’ does not necessarily result in focused, creative activity” (p. 35).

Mark Graham (2015) further explored the idea play using boundaries and creative constraints as both limiting and encouraging creativity (p. 2), Graham compared constraints to a game with rules. Structure, or rules, are required, otherwise the game would have little purpose and wouldn’t be infinitely playable and engaging. By using enabling constraints, students have just enough direction to move forward but have boundaries to push and cross.

Graham (2015) successfully implemented the idea of play in his classroom by having students abstractly paint paper and newspaper. Students cut and collaged their pieces together and added text to give the work increased meaning. Through playing with paint, text, and collage, students felt safe to experiment and try new ideas.

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### **Art and Emotional Well-Being**

According to a 2017 report by the Center for Collegiate Mental Health, anxiety among college students continues to rise. This report is unique in that it is based on data derived from students actually receiving psychologic services and not self-reported surveys. Students need a variety of coping methods to deal with this increasing anxiety.

### ***Coping with Stress and Anxiety Through Art-Making***

In a 2016 preliminary study on the physical effects of art-making on the brain, art therapists Girija Kaimal, Kendra Ray, and Juan Muniz found that art-making reduced cortisol levels among participants. They collected saliva from 39 participants to measure cortisol levels before and after a 45-minute art-making session. They also collected written responses from participants about their experience and how they felt before and after art-making. Participants' responses indicated that they found the art-making session to be relaxing, enjoyable, helpful for learning about new aspects of self and freeing from constraints. Art-making was an evolving process of initial struggle to later resolution, and about flow/losing themselves in the work.

According to Kaimal et al. (2016), "Efforts have been underway in the past decade to examine the biological substrate of creative self-expression" (p. 74). In their study of both artists and nonartists, the stress levels of participants were measured before and after making art. Participants were allowed creative freedom to use clay, markers, or collage, or a combination of their choice, and were not restricted to a specific medium. They found decreased stress levels among the majority of participants after the art making session.

Another study among medical students and staff at Eastern Virginia Medical School by Mercer et al. (2010), found that making art in visual journals decreased participants' anxiety. While the number of participants in the study was not large enough to show statistical

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significance, the study showed that visual journaling was a promising intervention for stress reduction in a medical environment.

Math teacher David Rufo (2017) shared his experience with a fifth-grade student who overcome her math anxiety through art. He observed that as she was “allowed to express her math anxiety through her drawings, her defeatist attitude began to wane and her creative work became more light-heartedly humorous and less dark. Eventually her alter ego, Math Hater, was relegated to the pages of her comics and she spoke less and less about her own feelings of inadequacy in math class” (p. 9). By the end of the school year, she was not only finishing her math tests early but was also volunteering to help other students, transforming from Math Hater to Math Helper (Rufo, 2017).

### ***Art and Social and Emotional Learning***

Studies have repeatedly demonstrated that art education has a significant impact on students’ social and emotional development. Social and emotional learning is an intrinsic part of education and can be either positive or negative. In school, students learn by observation and instruction how to treat others, work with a team, contribute, and be helpful and productive. Having a range of arts opportunities is crucial in helping students to identify and engage with learning contexts that will fit their own social-emotional needs.

According to University of Chicago Consortium on School Research’s 2019 report on arts education and social-emotional learning outcomes among K–12 students, art-education settings are great potential learning environments because a skilled instructor can shape lessons into spaces for deep and lasting development of social and emotional skills and well-being (Farrington et al., 2019). Exposure to a range of arts opportunities is crucial in helping students identify and engage with learning contexts that will fit their social-emotional needs.

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Regardless of instructor intent, arts education naturally has social-emotional effects, whether positive or negative. For art educators, the key is understanding how arts education can influence the development of this broad set of competencies and attributes that fall under the “social and emotional learning” umbrella.

A growing movement is advocating for the idea that educators’ ultimate outcomes for students should reflect a broader set of concerns related to social-emotional development: Are they good and kind people? Are they contributing members of their families and their communities? Are they able to set goals and pursue their dreams? Are they productive, helpful people in the workplace? (Farrington et al., 2019).

Though arts education can be a powerful force in supporting students’ social-emotional development, a major takeaway from the research is that this process does not happen automatically. While evidence demonstrates that art education has significant effects on social-emotional development, there is much variation in outcomes among participants and across settings.

### *Atypical Students and Art*

According to art educator and art-therapist cooperative teaching team Dunn-Snow and D’Amelio (2000), it is common for students with atypical behaviors to gravitate toward the arts. This has been the case with my own students, especially in the K–12 levels. It is essential that these students learn effective methods of art-making as part of their education. It is important to note that the conversation about art-making with atypical students changes according to the student. I gravitate toward the conversations regarding students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), obsessive tendencies, limited interests, or anxiety in art-making because of my personal and professional experiences.

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Art educator and art therapist Simone B. Alter-Muri (2017) described benefits of art-making for students with a variety of limitations in sensory, tactile, sound, behavior, motor skill, and emotional issues. She emphasized the importance of art-therapy techniques for these students because they can “allow unconscious images to emerge and be contained, which serves as a tool to process otherwise hidden thoughts and feelings” (Alter-Muri, 2017, p. 21).

### *Art-Making for Regulating Emotions*

A benefit of art-making for students is that they learn to “regulate their over- or under-stimulated processing experiences” (Alter-Muri, 2017, p. 21). I have observed the calming effects of art-making in myself, my children with anxiety and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and my students. One of my children obsessively draws using markers when he is upset, while my other son uses tactile and kinesthetic arts such as sculpture or building to help regulate his emotions. When my oldest son gets home from school, he is usually emotionally overwhelmed and insists on being alone in his room for at least 30 minutes to create some type of machine. I have observed that this self-initiated part of his daily routine is essential for his emotional well-being. He usually emerges from his creative time alone smiling and proud of something he has created. This experience appears to be in line with studies that show the “advantages of art therapy for reducing, stress, frustration, and anxiety that occur due to the nature of ASD” (Alter-Muri, 2017, p. 23). As previously noted, Rufo (2017) also observed that art-making was an effective tool for a student experiencing math anxiety to cope with her frustrations and overcome them.

### **The Role of Chaos or Messiness in the Creative Process**

As a traditionally trained illustrator, I used to believe that any mess was bad, especially in art. I wanted everything to be perfectly organized. But, amid the mess of graduate school, I have learned that mess and chaos are an essential part of the learning and creation process.

Messes can arise organically or they can be self-imposed. In his book *Messy*, Harford (2016) explained, “Messy disruptions will be most powerful when combined with creative skill” (p. 14). He shared the story of improvisational American Jazz pianist Keith Jarrett, the Köln Concert, and the unplayable piano. In 1975, Jarrett was supposed to improvise a one-night, sold-out, 90-minute show in Germany. After a series of unfortunate events with the piano, Jarrett agreed to play on what he and his agent deemed an “unplayable piano.” It was a poor-quality, out-of-tune upright piano with black notes that didn’t work and pedals that stuck, a far cry from the grand Bösendorfer piano he specifically requested. Surprisingly, the live recording created from this concert sold over 3.5 million copies and is the top-selling solo jazz and solo piano album (Harford, 2016). Harford affirmed that messes create moments of unexpected magic, as demonstrated by Jarrett, because they force people to find new solutions.

### ***Surrealism and Making Meaning from a Mess***

Seeking to build a bridge between the subconscious and conscious mind, Surrealist artists explored “automatism,” in which the artist creates an unconscious mess using a variety of techniques and materials as a starting point and then “plac[es] their trust in the creative power of a visual language” to finish their artwork (Bradley, 1997, p. 21). André Breton, cofounder of the Surrealist movement, believed automatism was a way to “catch the unconscious mind unawares and to capture the images of unbridled imagination” (Bradley, 1997, p. 21). By seeking to bridge



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the gap between the conscious and the unconscious mind, these artists developed many ways to create a mess, which the artist could later use to create a work of art (Bradley, 1997).

Surrealist artist André Masson explored automatism in his work with drawing and mixed media. His process included dripping and smearing glue onto his work surface and then pouring sand on top of the glue. He would then create an imaginative artwork from the unconscious mess he created, as seen in his 1926 work *Battle of the Fishes* (Bradley, 1997). He used pencil and charcoal to add fish and other details to the scene he imagined.

Max Ernst used “frottage” and “grattage” to involuntarily produce marks in which he would look for images (Bradley, 1997). Ernst’s frottage method involved putting paper over a raw material and rubbing charcoal to achieve a background texture. His grattage method included scraping away wet paint to create a physical impression of the raw materials he was using on his canvas, as seen in the bark-like texture in *Forest and Dove* (1927) (see Bradley, 1997).

Gude (2010) also uses Surrealist methods as a catalyst for creativity in her previously mentioned Spiral workshops. Implementing ideas and games similar to those used by Surrealists, she encourages students to discover creative solutions and new ways of thinking. Some examples from Gude’s Spiral workshop series and resulting student work are featured in a 2009 Post-Neat Art Spiral workshop presentation by Gude and Jessica Poser at the 2009 National Art Education Association Conference (originally part of their 2007 Spiral workshop). This presentation includes lessons on using mess as a creative catalyst. For example, in the lesson *Unconscious Mess: A Paranoiac Critical Project*, the teacher *accidentally* makes a mess of her shirt and paper and turns it into a work of art (Gude & Poser, 2009, p. 13).

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In using the methods of the Surrealists, Gude (2007) has learned that making messes can help students unlearn the idea that there is always a right answer and learn to “access the creative unconscious” (p. 8). She has observed that some students are hesitant at first and claim to see nothing in the mess, but as the teacher and other students excitedly share what they have discovered in their messes, everyone begins to find something to jumpstart their creativity. I have also observed my undergraduate students begin to open themselves to new creative possibilities as they make messes, even though they may feel unskilled in the arts.

French language educator Kathryn Grossman (1979) also found that using Surrealist methods to create an unconscious mess was an effective way to jumpstart the creative process with students in her beginning French class. After instructing students on basic French sentence structure, she presented the Surrealist game the “Exquisite Corpse,” in which each student wrote a word on a folded piece of paper, then folded it again and passed it to the next student. Each student added a word until the sentence was finished. Because students didn’t know what the previous work in the sentence was, they created messy and absurd sentences, a process that helped them “relax and think more spontaneously in a foreign language” (Grossman, 1979, p. 700).

Grossman (1979) found that using the Exquisite Corpse game engaged students and increased student learning and creativity because little ability was necessary. He used the sentences created by the students to teach grammar and syntax. The students weren’t afraid to try creating part of the French sentence. They only had to choose one word in the sentence and thus were creatively freed to make a choice independent of other students. The resulting sentence would be a mess, and that was okay. Grossman concluded that the process was effective partly because of the “effort involved in mentally filling in the blank between divergent terms and

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images, in providing a personal synthesis that brings coherency and order out of apparent chaos” (1979, p. 705). In other words, collaboratively making a mess and then trying to make sense of it is a simple way for students to be creative and enjoy learning something new.

In line with these researchers, I believe that purposefully making a mess, using methods similar to the Surrealists’, is an effective and sometimes necessary way of stimulating creativity in an artist or student who feels creatively blocked or is searching for new methods in their creative process. I conjecture that one reason for this is that the process incorporates the idea of unconscious play and opens the door to new possibilities.

The idea of not knowing the outcome of an art piece before beginning has been particularly challenging to me as an artist who was rigorously trained in the methods of realism and thumbnails and using image references and models to create a work of art. But I am learning by creating a mess and not planning. I have found myself immersed in the “process of making and sensitively interact[ing] with images and ideas as they emerge” (Gude, 2007, p. 8). As Eisner (1992) wrote, “No painter, writer, composer, or choreographer can foresee all the twists and turns that his or her work will take. The work of art—by which I now mean the act of creation—does not follow an unalterable schedule but is a journey that unfolds” (p. 594). Making a mess is part of that artistic journey.

### **Artists Who Use Limitations**

In *Fear and Art* (1993), a popular book among artists and teachers, authors Bayles and Orland posit that an artist’s tools both limit possibilities and afford a means of expression. I believe that new possibilities emerge when tools disappear. Constraints are often a part of artistic or creative endeavors (Campbell & Simmons, 2012). My strategy for this study was to embrace

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limitations or constraints and study how these limitations can influence creative work and teaching.

Pushing the limitations of tools can act as a creative catalyst, encouraging artists to look for new solutions and work imaginatively in ways they may not have considered. Limitations are a natural part of life and art (Reynolds, 2007). Whether or not the artist chooses to use self-imposed limitations, limitations still exist. For example, an artist can't create art in a tiny home with no shower or in an airplane bathroom. An artist can't create a portrait out of chewed-up food. Or can she? The following experiences of artists Andrea Zittel, Nina Katchadourian, Phil Hansen, Cai Guo-Qiang, Mariah Robertson, and Danae Mattes suggest that limitations and constraints indeed create new possibilities.

### ***Andrea Zittel***

Andrea Zittel's work is inspired by daily activities and how they shape our environment (Siegel, 2001). She explored the limitations of daily living, such as eating, sleeping, sitting, working, and even wearing clothing. While living in a two-hundred-square-foot apartment in Brooklyn, New York, which didn't even have a shower, Zittel began experimenting with how to use her space efficiently and limited herself to what was truly essential for living. She wanted to transform her limited, undesirable living conditions into something that others would envy (Siegel, 2001). This challenge sparked her early-1990s series *Living Units*, which featured multifunctional cabinets. These cabinets, which could be opened and moved, provided space for the basic living needs of sleeping, eating, cooking, working, and even bathing, thus transforming a negative limitation into a positive one. Her limitations also extended to her clothing, as she limited herself to wearing only one type of outfit. She created a series of outfits or smocks to wear every day. As Siegel described, Zittel again turned her "negative—a limited wardrobe—

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into a positive, making the best thing she can think of to wear and then wearing it every day” (2001, p. 192). Zittel embraced her space and living limitations as a creative catalyst to simplify and improve her living situation and also to further her artistic career. She continues to experiment with limited living conditions and believes that freedom is found by living within self-imposed limitations (Ruiz, 2015).

### ***Nina Katchadourian***

Nina Katchadourian is an engaging creative contemporary artist who commonly uses found objects in her photographic and video work. In part of an ongoing art series called *Seat Assignment*, she challenges herself to create photo and video art while on airline flights using only her cell-phone camera. Part of this series is *Lavatory Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style*, in which she creates artwork using airline lavatory materials, a series she began on a short flight to Atlanta, when she didn’t have much time or materials to work with. Katchadourian (2010) explained, “While in the lavatory on a domestic flight in January 2011, I spontaneously put a tissue paper toilet cover seat cover over my head and took a picture in the mirror using my cellphone. The image evoked 15th-century Flemish portraiture” (2010, para. 2). What began as more of an accidental limitation has been a catalyst for her to create “over 2500 photographs and video, made on nearly 200 different flights to date” (2010, para. 2). While other people were sleeping, Katchadourian used her limited time and resources to create a large quantity of art. An airplane is not typically considered a choice location for art-making, but in the case of Katchadourian, this limitation became the catalyst for a new and exciting art-making experience.

### ***Phil Hansen***

Phil Hansen’s artistic career ended, or rather began, with a debilitating shaking hand caused by nerve damage from obsessively creating pointillist-style artwork while he was an art

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student. After learning that the damage was permanent, Hansen entered a deep depression and stopped creating art at all. He eventually decided to take his doctor's suggestion to "embrace the shake" instead of fighting against it. Hansen began creating scribbly-styled artwork and loved it. After finishing art school and getting a job, he finally had money to purchase all the art supplies he wanted, but then he stopped making art. He related, "I was in a dark place for a long time, unable to create. And it didn't make any sense, because I was finally able to support my art, and yet I was creatively blank" (Hansen, 2013, 2:51). I have experienced this problem as an artist many times and have repeatedly observed it while teaching students of all ages.

Feeling stuck and remembering his past success making art with his shaking hand, Hansen decided to try setting limitations for himself as a catalyst for creating art. He began the process by asking himself questions like, "What if I could only create art with a dollar's worth of supplies?" (Hansen, 2013, 3:51). In his current *Expressions* series, which he began in 2016, he uses a giant stamp pad he created and a shoe to paint self-portraits that feature his changing expressions (Hansen, 2016). He painted and photographed each step of his changing expressions to create several Gif images that change from one expression to another:

Hansen (2013) observed, "Looking at limitations as a source of creativity changed the course of my life. Now, when I run into a barrier or I find myself creatively stumped, I sometimes still struggle, but I continue to show up for the process and try to remind myself of the possibilities, like using hundreds of real, live worms to make an image, using a pushpin to tattoo a banana, or painting a picture with hamburger grease" (8:31). In other words, he found liberation through embracing his limitations. When encountering limitations, "the dilemma every artist confronts, again and again, is when to stick with familiar tools and materials, and when to reach out and embrace those that offer new possibilities" (Bayles & Orland, 1993, p. 59).

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### ***Cai Guo-Qiang***

In much of his artwork, Cai Guo-Qiang finds beauty in the chaos caused by destruction. One of his creation methods includes making art with gun powder and exploding it. Guo-Qiang believes that it is important to make violent explosions beautiful because, like an alchemist, an artist can symbolically transform the negative into gold (Sollins, 2005). In his large-scale, nine-panel work *Tigers with Arrows* (2005), he ripped paper shapes of tigers and placed them on wood, then sprinkled different types of black powder and pigment with his fingers on the wood and paper. With his team of assistants, he inserted fuses, covered the artwork with cardboard and rocks, and lit them. After the explosion, he removed the cardboard and rocks to reveal the beautiful images, patterns, and textures created in the destructive process.

Guo-Qiang continually experiments with new ways of letting go of control. In a 2005 Art21 interview with Susan Sollins, he explained, “There’s so much in this life that we cannot control, so expressing your thoughts and ideas and ideals naturally can ease our state of mind” (para. 1).

### ***Mariah Robertson***

Mariah Robertson creates abstract work using uncontrollable or unconventional methods in the dark room with paper film (Art21, 2014). What began as a mistake when a friend accidentally exposed a large roll of paper film has become an essential part of her art making process. She exposes large rolls of paper film prematurely to light and uses different concentrations of developer and fixative to create a beautiful, vibrant, color effect. The drips caused by working quickly with water, fixative, and developer show what is happening chemically in an otherworldly way. While her skillful manipulation of the chemical reactions involved in the developing process is improving, her results still vary, and each piece contains an

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element of accidental and unexpected surprise for her and her audience. In a 2014 Art21 New York Closeup interview, she explained, “Your attempts are gonna fail at controlling life, so you should let that go so you can actually see what’s happening” (Art21, 2014, 8.43).

### *Danae Mattes*

Danae Mattes is a ceramics artist who uses unfired clay, water, and pigment in an uncontrollable and natural way to create clay paintings. Her *River Tide* (2015) paintings are a series of large deep-blue-and-gray mixed-media paintings created using clay and pigment on canvas. The blues and gray reflect the constantly changing water in a river. Sunlight cracks the clay, creating canyons in what was once smooth. Paint drips down, changing the tan mud color to blue. White speckles echo water spots left by evaporating water. Each painting is evidence of the passage and change in time. In one clay painting, a brown mud volcano erupts from the deep-blue river, spewing light-colored mud and clay into the sky. In another piece, the dark-brown oval reminiscent of a head raises out of the rivers, ejecting bubbling, arcing cream lines. The dark blob rises and falls while the river level remains about the same.

Mattes has described her work as lifelike, responsive, and interactive, like water (Fancher, 2015). Her limitations include working with the natural cracking caused when water evaporates from the clay in her artwork which causes her to have limited control.



## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This is a qualitative research study based on my reflections on my own art-making and my experiences working with preservice elementary educators. My methodology blends arts-based research with an autobiographical approach. My data includes my detailed reflections about my own artistic experiences within a context of self-imposed limitations, visual data and insights gained through the artistic process, and my artwork. As an arts-based researcher, I am interested in art-making as a form of inquiry and in what kinds of knowledge art-making might generate. I am also interested in improving my own practice as a teacher. Hence, my research was informed by action-based research methodologies. Although I used aspects of action-based research to explore my own teaching, this is primarily a self-study that engages an arts-based research methodology. In this study, I was exploring spiritual and personal quandaries in my own life through the process of art-making and how self-imposed limitations affected my anxieties about art-making and my art-making process. It also examines how a strategy of self-imposed limitations affected student art-making.

### **Arts-Based Research**

I have utilized arts-based research methodologies for this study because an important part of my research is based on my experiences as an artist while engaged in a series of self-limiting strategies. In this inquiry, my art-making practice contributed to my understanding of the issues I was exploring. According to Hafeli (2013), “The use of artmaking in the examination of educational practice and theory is one form of art-based research” (p. 111). Art-based research includes “studio based approaches that stem from art production, and highlight the tools, processes, and presentation forms” (2013, p. 111). As seen in my Results chapter, I experimented with the creation process and presentation forms. I used art to generate research questions,

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analyze and interpret data and information, and communicate findings of the study (2013, p. 112). Hafeli explains that “art-based researchers may arrive at a topic of inquiry and questions that are shaped and reshaped during the research process” (2013, p. 112). My questions evolved as I created artwork, taught and discussed limitations, fears, and failing with my students, and continued to produce and display artwork to encourage viewer participation to connect new kinds of knowledge through interacting with my artwork. The source material was my artistic practices creating a series of artwork with self-imposed limitations and how my audience interacted with my artwork.

Visual mapping is another art-based and presentational strategy that helps generate questions, concerns, and issues. As my students and I discussed art, fears, limitations, and approaches to art making I created visual word maps on the board based my students’ comments and reactions to the various artwork we discussed. At home, as I was developing my limitations and curriculum and figuring out how to present my artwork, I used visual mapping and sketches to identify key ideas and organize them into topics. I also sought the input of my students in displaying and presenting artwork, as a means to help me reach a wider audience, to demonstrate for my students the importance of sharing and brainstorming visual ideas to arrive to new levels of knowledge.

### **Self-Study**

This study explores how self-imposed limitations affected my anxieties about art-making and my art-making process and how a strategy of self-imposed limitations affected student art-making to be open to new types of knowledge. I based my research on my experiences as an artist while engaged in a series of self-limiting strategies. This study also explores how self-imposed limitations affected my own pedagogy and how they might be an effective teaching

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strategy. The participants in this study include myself and the undergraduate students in my classes. Class enrollment is limited to twenty students, most of whom are between 18 and 29 years old.

I have utilized self-study as a methodology because I believe understanding can be gained by starting with the perspective of the person at the center of their own life space (Lewin, 1947). Feldman et al. (2004) have emphasized three key components of self-study influenced by action research: a) the importance of self in the study, b) the need for the person's experience to be a resource for research, and c) the ability "to be critical of themselves and their roles as researchers and teacher educators" (p. 959). Combining self-study and action research may also resonate better with other art educators who read this study because I have noticed several art educators struggle to maintain their own artistic practice while working as teacher (Allan, 2004). For my self-study I repeatedly planned and implemented artistic limitations based on creating artwork in anxious moments, I observed the how my limitations altered and influence my artwork and my mood, and I then wrote reflections to attempt to describe my thought and creation process to arrive at new levels of personal insight and religious knowledge. I was continually trying to solve the problem of how to cope with the emotional turmoil I felt in my educationally, religiously, and my personal family life.

This approach required me to let go of certain aspects of control and be open to the idea of being wrong, "that things will turn out in ways other than was expected" (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 185). Similarly, Dewey (1938) explained, "Occasions which are not and cannot be foreseen are bound to arise wherever there is intellectual freedom," but problems are necessary for growth and learning (p. 79). I sought to address and solve visual problems created in uncontrollable art making processes to attain new levels of understanding. Eisner (1992) further

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reinforced the value of being open to “unanticipated opportunities,” stating that they are “more likely to yield something of value” (p. 594). I tried to paint what I felt emotionally and transform that emotional mess into something valuable.

### **Methods and Data**

My procedure throughout the study was to work through personal questions about art and life through my own art making using self-imposed limitations. My data included both my self-reflections and my own art-work. My process was to create a seemingly difficult or impossible constraint on my art practice and then, relying on my artistic intuition, resolve the work in some way. I then reflected on possible meaning in my art-work and how it might connect to my personal and spiritual life. This was a lengthy process that involved making of hundreds of paintings and detailed journal reflections. I also applied this same approach to my work with students and designed a unit of lessons focused on embracing limitations in the art-making process. My work with students continued my process of self-reflection and art-based research on questions about overcoming artistic fears, embracing limitations, and relying on artistic intuition to find order in what appeared to be impossible or chaotic situations.

This part of the self-study including reflections about my teaching and how my personal investigations into limitations and art might be applied to teaching based on my experiences teaching the course “Art for Elementary Educators” for three semesters in 2018, 2019, and 2020 at two different universities. The majority of the students enrolled in my classes are preservice elementary teachers because the course is a prerequisite for elementary education majors and meets the general-education requirement for art. Some of my students do not enjoy art but are taking the class because it is required. My students typically have little experience in art-making and have low confidence in their artistic abilities. Curriculum requirements for this class include

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being exposed to art materials, understanding the purpose of art in education, analyzing and critiquing art, and learning methods for integrating art into core subjects in elementary schools. I was also aware that many of my students have their own personal struggles with life and school. I was using a particular, counter-intuitive approach to art-making as a way to explore important personal and spiritual questions through a particular approach to art-making. I was interested in how this approach might influence my students' art making and perhaps be of value to them in their own personal quests or struggles.

As my students completed their limitations projects, I became a facilitator, a “sounding-board against which practitioners may try out ideas and learn more about the reasons for their own action, as well as learning more about the process of self-reflection” (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, pp. 202–203). Together we reflected on their reasons and experiences through verbal and online discussion, as well as in written project discussions and artist statements. I enjoyed being the sounding board as they explored art as new method of learning. My work with students contributed to my perspectives on learning, art-making, and embracing ourselves and limitations.

Teaching and learning are cooperative processes. Along with Dewey (1938), I believe that a teacher should not entirely withdraw from students but should be aware of their “capacities, needs, and past experiences” (pp. 71–72). Although I had a general idea about the limitations students were utilizing, the exact limitations on their out-of-class limitations project were up to them. At the same time, I was working on my own limitations project, documenting my process, and reflecting on my progress and sharing my results with my students. I reflected on the results of my limitations and the presentation of my art, documented my artwork, and recorded my thoughts in reflection journals. This study is my process of repeatedly reflecting and acting.

## Chapter 4: Results

My art-based self-study involved a series of experiments with self-imposed limitations in art-making while simultaneously exploring limitations, anxiety, perfectionism, and letting go of control with my students in 2018, 2019, and 2020. My method throughout the study was to work through personal questions about art and life through my own art making using self-imposed limitations. My data included both my self-reflections and my own art-work. In addition to creating artwork, I experimented with presentation and how to communicate context as well as physically and emotionally engage those who viewed my artwork through interaction.

My work with students continued my own process of self-reflection and art-based research on important questions about overcoming artistic fears, embracing limitations, and relying on artistic intuition. I continually reflected and acted upon new understandings and ideas in my art making. Part of my initial research included learning how my students felt about creating art. During my first semester teaching college, a student reflected:

Art presents an escape for me, which is very important in this crazy world. When I am stressed, I play the piano or take pictures. I like to doodle and create abstract drawings. . . . I think that I am not super artistic. I do a little bit of art, but only when my life isn't too busy, which isn't often. I think that I could definitely implement more art in my life.

As a teacher and as a student, I faced a similar question: How can I make art with limited time? For me, not making art is a problem because it fills an emotional need. In this study, I was also considering the epistemological dimensions of art and the processes of making art. In addition to seeking understanding and knowledge through arts-based research, art had therapeutic value. I needed to make art for my emotional health and to benefit others. When I made art, my overall happiness increased. I usually start to doodle when I am feeling

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overwhelmed emotionally, especially when I feel confronting fears, problems, or uncomfortable situations. My gut feeling says, “Make art,” while another part of me says, “I can’t. I don’t have time, and I don’t know what to make.” For me, the consequences of not making art included feeling overwhelmed and experiencing higher levels of stress and anxiety.

### **Autobiographical Narrative**

How I loved painting in the group studio with fellow student illustrators and painters. The smell of oil paint, the feel of the brush in my hand, and the sound of random conversations. As our BFA graduation neared, a fellow student asked, “Do you think you will continue making art once you graduate?” I answered, without hesitation, “I will always make art. It’s what I do. I’ve been working as an artist since I graduated from high school and through college. I won’t be a ‘quitter’ who gets an art degree and never uses it.”

But then 2008 happened. I’d just gotten married and had been extremely successful working with designers and builders painting murals in model homes and at home shows. I had just received the largest check I ever had from art. The future was bright. Then the economy crashed. My husband lost his full-time benefits and was limited to part-time work while he looked for new employment. Housing prices dropped. No new homes were being built. No one was buying art. I was depressed because I was working from home, and I missed my group of friends. Out of financial desperation and a need for increased personal happiness and fulfillment, I began an art-teaching career to provide a more stable income for my family. From 2008–2017, I taught art at a middle school; had three children, two of whom have been diagnosed with autism and anxiety; and created very few pieces of art. I enjoyed teaching, but I missed making art and working with my hands. In addition, in 2015 my husband’s employment situation worsened, and in 2016 I learned he was struggling with his religious beliefs. It felt like my life

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and my plans for my life were falling apart. I was searching for peace and a healthier way of coping with my stress amidst these uncontrollable challenges which led me to an addiction recovery women's group. There I found support and hope among other women who were in the midst of their own overwhelming situations. I felt true hope and I felt the presence of God. I began to find and experience the presence of God in my own mess and life. I learned that although I couldn't control my husband's choices I could control mine. I learned the more I let go of control over my husband's choices and our life situation and gave the mess to God that I became happier and things worked out miraculously despite limited changes in our circumstances. I wanted to share the message of hope in God with others and so I planned to create a series of artwork to teach about my idea of God, but for about two years I didn't know how to proceed. I knew I wanted my art to be honest and true, to represent a feeling rather than an idealistic scene. But my sketchbook with a few vague written ideas remained blank.

### *Anxiety Over Not Making Art*

I didn't make much art for many reasons: I was busy and overwhelmed by everything I had to do. I didn't know how to be a teacher, a parent, and an artist at the same time. My students were stressing me out. My kids were too demanding. I couldn't focus. I didn't have space to create art. I needed a break, not more work. I didn't feel skilled enough. I didn't know what Jesus looked like.

I blamed it on lack of time because I was teaching so much. I decided to stop teaching middle school and return to graduate school in 2017 so I could focus on making art and work in higher education. And yet once I had time, I still didn't make art, which caused more anxiety. I experienced overwhelming anxiety about planning the perfect artwork and not making any mistakes.



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Perhaps it was my mindset. I was trained as an illustrator in a rigorous and highly selective program. My process for creating art included making sketches, photographing models, and laboring for hours over exact details in order to create a realistic depiction. I spent countless hours planning and agonizing over what to create and how to create it, all while dealing with my family, house projects, teaching, and homework.

### *Art-Based Research Strategies*

As described above, I am a religious person and have found hope throughout my life by looking to God as a source of strength. My method throughout the study was to work through personal questions about art and life through my own art making using self-imposed limitations. My process was to create a seemingly difficult or impossible constraint on my art practice and then, relying on my artistic intuition, resolve the work in some way. I then reflected on possible meaning in my art-work and how it might connect to my personal and spiritual life. I describe this process as; Finding Jesus in this mess. Finding his face in a messy painting brings me peace because I am learning how he is present in the ever-increasing messy situations in my life. These experiences affirm that my life is exactly as it should be. When I paint, I ask myself, “Where is Jesus in this mess?” Through these art “messes,” not only are my fears about art-making decreasing, but I am finding moments of peace in a messy world. I could embrace myself, my limitations, and my mess one day and one painting at a time. Creating art became liberating again.

### **Self-Imposed Limitations and Failing in Art-Making**

In 2018, in the midst of a cycle of apprehension, obsessive perfectionism, anxiety, mental inability to make a painting, being a full-time graduate student, and planning lessons for the undergraduate art class I taught, I was introduced to ideas about confronting creative block and

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embracing limitations in Phil Hansen's 2013 TED Talk, *Embrace the Shake*. He found liberation through embracing his limitations, such as limited supplies or his uncontrollable shaky hand. My limitation was my anxiety and fear. I was afraid to act because I don't want to mess up or make ugly art.

My students and I also discussed our anxieties and fears. Professor and biological researcher Mary Poffenroth (2017) has emphasized that fear is natural—we can never be fearless. But fear, although debilitating, can also be a motivator when we recognize and acknowledge it. As I discussed limitations and fear with my students, I began to wonder, What kind of limitations could I set for myself? What about my students? They expressed similar anxiety about failing and not being good enough. Could making art with limitations help my students and me overcome anxiety about making art? What if I couldn't use paint brushes? What if I painted without a plan? What if I purposely tried to destroy my art? Why are my students and I so afraid of failing in art? If it's safe to fail anywhere, it should be art. There are no life-impacting consequences for failing art. What if instead of trying to help students achieve perfection in art-making, as I was taught, I taught them how to embrace their fear of failing through self-imposed limitations? (See appendix for an example of this lesson).

Meanwhile in 2018, I felt like I was drowning in my roles as a student, teacher, artist, and parent. I struggled with writing and research. I felt lost and overwhelmed. I didn't know how to proceed with my thesis and methodology, and I needed to plan a painting project for a figure-painting class I was enrolled in. I still wanted to create a series of paintings of Jesus and pondered how to incorporate Phil Hansen's ideas of limitations and destruction in my artwork while also addressing my fears of failing and my feelings of lack of control. I wrote the following in my journal on September 21, 2018:

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Embrace change. Embrace not knowing. Embrace and rejoice about things that don't go as you planned. Embrace and love yourself. Embrace and accept [that] you like to be organized and see a path before you proceed. Embrace that you want there to be one way and one answer. There isn't one way and one answer, but embrace [that] you want that anyway. Life is less scary if we know it will work out. It does always *work out*, you know.

Despite this self-reassurance, I seriously considered dropping out of graduate school. I even contacted my university about it. On September 25, 2018, I tearfully explained to my painting professor, "I think I need to drop your class. I feel like I'm drowning in my graduate classes. I don't want to, but I don't know what else to do." My teacher replied, "What if you attend class only fifty percent of the time? Pick a day each week to attend. E-mail me your schedule of when you plan on coming to class. You can work on your thesis and incorporate your thesis in your art. You won't get an 'A,' but as long as you complete the assignments, you will pass." I responded, "Thanks, but honestly the thought of not getting an 'A' in a painting class is scarier to me than just giving up and dropping the class."

As I went home that day, I realized that my fear of getting a "bad" grade was worse for me than giving up, a feeling many of my students shared. I didn't drop the class. I challenged myself to embrace my limitations, my fears, and my inability to do everything perfectly. I had become so stuck in planning the perfect art that I wasn't even able to get started.

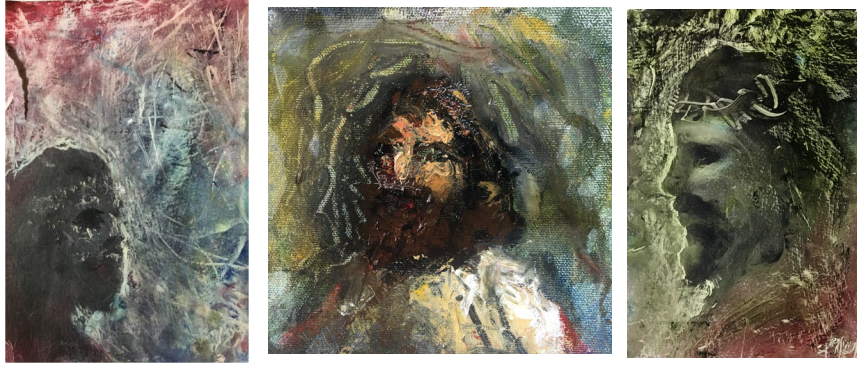
When the painting class met again, I had a vague idea for a final painting project that was due at the end of the semester. I wanted to experiment with limitations in failing to paint Jesus perfectly, my fears about breaking the rules of art I was trained in, and destruction. In the religious culture, I am a part of, much of the art comprises photographic and realistic depictions

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of an unseen God. The paintings are often peaceful and serene and perfect, which is contrary to my understanding of Jesus and the chaotic times in which he lived. In many paintings, Jesus's robes are pure white, and he looks well fed and groomed. He looks like a photoshopped model, not like the God who has endured hardships. To me, these types of depictions teach a false idea that a perfect God appeared to and helped only perfect people. Based on my experiences in addiction recovery, I believe people look for and find God when life is an imperfect mess because they need hope so badly. I wanted to paint and find Jesus in the mess because I was searching for hope in my own messy and chaotic life, which had turned out nothing like I had planned or expected. I theorized that God was present in every messy situation. I decided to experiment with messes to see if I could find God in messy art situations.

### ***Limitations: Left Hand, No Brushes, No Planning***

On September 26, 2018, I started my art-based self-study and experiment with self-imposed limitations and failing. I wondered if I could paint Jesus by trying not to paint Him at all. I planned to fail in the following ways: a) I would use my nondominant, useless left hand; b) I wouldn't use any paint brushes (which decreased time I needed to create art); c) I would begin with a mess instead of a sketch plan or photo reference; d) I would create art when I felt overwhelmed by anxiety in life, school, work, family, etc.; and e) I would spend 15–30 minutes painting during each paint session. Basically, I made a big mess with my left hand, then I removed paint using my hands and carving tools to reveal the face of God in the mess (Figure 1).

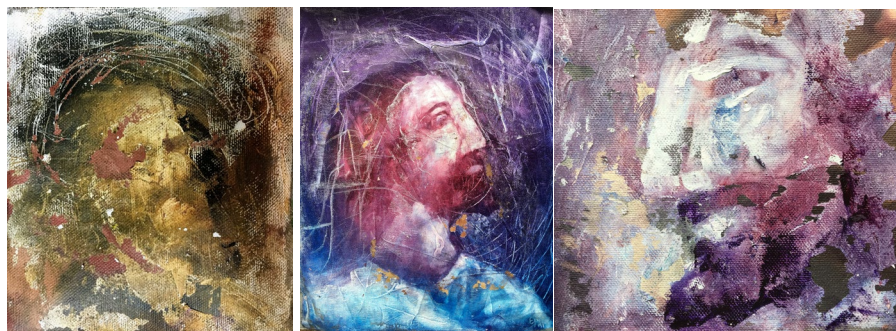


*Figure 1. My first limitations paintings (2018).*

Starting in December 2018, I decided to experiment changing my limitations because I felt my artwork was becoming stagnant. I enjoyed further exploring the following self-imposed limitations: paint only over existing paintings, make art out of weather destroyed paper, use only the paint on my fingers, paint over messy journal entries, paint in small unconventional spaces, work with children, paint with clay and mud, and use fire and ashes.

### ***Limitation: Paint Only Over Existing Paintings***

From December 2018 to March 2019, I changed my limitation to painting only over other portraits I'd created previously. I purposely painted acrylic gesso over oil paintings and then tore the paintings into four smaller pieces that were approximately 4 inches x 6 inches, knowing that the new art I created would flake away and be destroyed. As I began painting with oil paint over the gesso, then scraping and removing paint to reveal a face, I was frustrated at times by how much of my new painting would flake off. The paint would continue to flake even after the painting dried. But through experimentation, I found a good sealant that halted the deterioration process. I learned to enjoy the uncontrollable nature of flaking paintings. It represented how I felt. I completed about 50 paintings using this limitation (Figure 2).

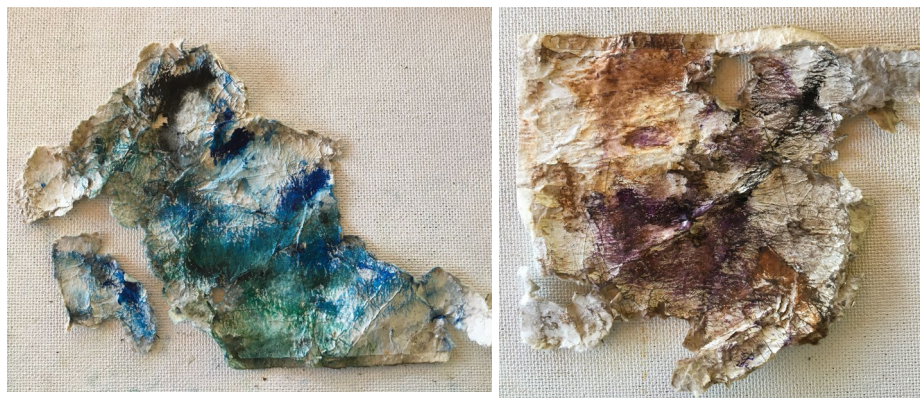


*Figure 2. Limitation: Paint over existing oil paintings using acrylic paint (2019).*

### ***Limitation: Weather Destroyed Paper***

In May 2019, I began experimenting with leaving paintings outside in the weather to be destroyed by nature. I found a bit of gessoed Reeves BFK paper in my yard after the winter snow had melted. When I rediscovered the partially deteriorated, wet, and torn paper, I was reminded of the face of Jesus. I reflected on how this destroyed piece of paper wasn't part of my plan but perhaps provided me with an even better opportunity for making art. On May 14, 2019, I wrote in my journal, "I painted this today after listening to my friend talk about her change of plans for working because of her injury. It reminded me of my own change of plans when I experienced an unexpected ruptured appendix in March. While I was injured, all my plans had to change. I physically couldn't go to class or work or do much of anything, and I needed a lot of help. My plans were destroyed. Or were they? My storm passed, and I can do something small to help someone else now" (Figure 3). This idea of embracing emotional and physical storms was echoed in a lesson "The Everlasting Storm" with my students in 2020 (see appendix).

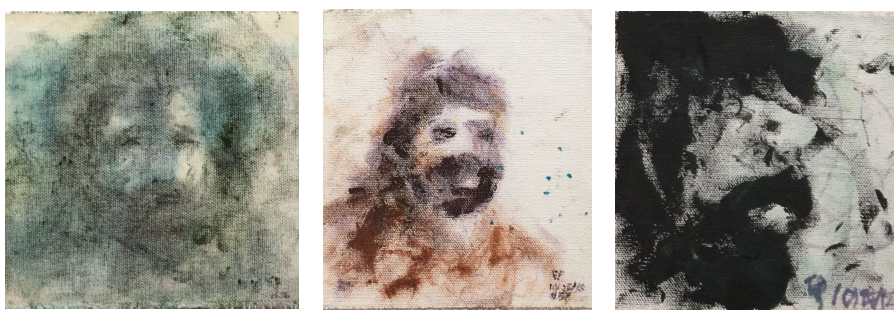
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*Figure 3. Limitation: Turn weather-damaged paper into something beautiful (2019).*

### ***Limitation: Use Only the Paint Already on my Fingers***

I call these paintings “the leftovers.” I usually work on several studies at a time. I completed the paintings in Figure 4 while I was creating other paintings with limitations. While painting one of these other paintings, I would “clean” my fingers on a blank canvas, then I would work with those leftover marks to find Jesus in the mess. I like this method because it is more uncontrollable and accidental. I find that I often try to control my results, so the more I eliminate my control, the more original and unique the paintings become. Everything I need for the new painting is on my fingertips.



*Figure 4. Limitation: Use only leftover paint on fingers to create a new painting (2019).*

### ***Limitation: Use Messy Journal Entries***

To cope with my worries, anxieties, and insomnia in the middle of the night, I recorded in my journal whatever was on my mind and whether or not I could control it. I wrote in the dark because I didn't want to disturb my husband. I can't and don't ever read what I wrote because it is too messy—it looks like a bunch of scribbles. I experimented with turning these writings into artwork (Figure 5). I worked on only about five studies because it was challenging to manipulate the paint on the writing surface, and the writing made it difficult to see a face. I typically remove paint to create lighter values, but because of the dark writing background, I would need to change my approach, which was not something I wanted to do at the time. I shared this method with a student who chose journaling as her limitations project.



*Figure 5. Limitation: Paint over journal entries written in the dark (2019).*

### ***Limitation: Paint in Small Unconventional Spaces***

Unexpected medical emergencies provided new opportunities for me to experiment further with limitations. After experiencing a ruptured appendix in March 2019, I was limited in my movement and spent a lot of time at the hospital. I decided to experiment with oil paints while sitting in the hospital waiting room. I created a small art kit in a thin wooden box with two oil-paint colors in a baby food jar, a few gessoed papers and small Masonite boards, a paper towel, and gloves. The resulting work (Figure 6) not only relieved my anxiety about being in the



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hospital and waiting for answers but also started interesting conversations with other patients.

We were together in our medical messes. I also successfully used this mini painting kit a number of times to oil paint while sitting in the car.



*Figure 6. Limitation: Paint in a small unconventional space (2019).*

### ***Limitation: Work with Children***

In September 2019, I found myself becoming increasingly frustrated with my artwork. My expectations for myself were growing, perhaps because of a discussion I had with my framer. In June 2019, my framer recommended that I spend more time on my art and work on increasing the quality. After that discussion, I noticed that I spent more time on my pieces but created a lot less, and I felt like my art wasn't turning out as well as it had in the past. I also noticed the lack of variety in my studies. As a result, I decided to involve my young children more in the painting process.

I prepped my nine-year old with gloves and an apron and allowed him free rein to use acrylic paints however he wanted. He enjoyed mixing blues, golds, and greens, then spilling lots of water and blotting with paper towels, imitating my approach to painting. On his own, he chose to use his right hand, because he is left-handed, and he knows I use my opposite hand to paint. This was not his first time using paints or trying to paint a "Jesus" painting. But I noticed he became frustrated with himself because he wanted his artwork to look like Jesus, and it just

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looked messy. I wanted him to make a mess and have fun, but he was stuck on the idea that his artwork needed to look like something. We turned his paintings different ways to try to find Jesus. He thought one image looked scary like a ghost, so I scrubbed out some of the paint, and the image became Jesus. Not all of the pieces we worked on look like something. Some are messes, but that is okay (Figure 7).

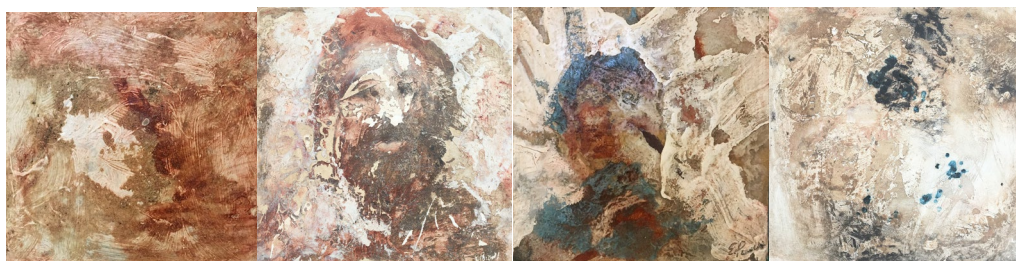
On September 24, 2019, I was working on a 48-inch half-circle painting I had been planning on painting since 2015. I had a very unique found-object gear frame and wanted to create a one-of-a-kind painting for it, but I avoided working on it because I worried that whatever I made wouldn't be good enough. I was sitting on my deck staring at my painting, frozen with indecision, when I threw my pencil down. My toddler picked up the pencil and began scribbling over my painting. I realized that that is exactly what I needed. I was trying to control too much and needed to relax. I set up a camera and filmed us working on my painting together using pencil, chalk, and charcoal from a campfire. The painting isn't finished yet, but for that moment it felt good to do something and make some sort of progress (Figure 7).



*Figure 7. Limitation: Paint with my children (2019).*

### ***Limitation: Paint with no Paint***

After studying Danae Mattes's clay paintings in a museum, I decided to try experimenting with painting with no paint, using clay joint compound and mud as painting and texture mediums. I created different values and colors using types of mud from different locations nearby. While I was working on these paintings, I experienced a medical emergency, a ruptured ectopic pregnancy that left me in rough shape physically and emotionally. I had limited energy, movement, and activity. In these paintings, I tried to use the grossest and smelliest mud I could find, such as mud from my rain gutters, pond scum, or grog from the ceramics studio, because that is how I felt physically. Through repeatedly layering, sealing, and sanding, I found something beautiful about the messy layers of texture (Figure 8). I reflected on my medical issues and the surgeries that many healthy people, like me, have to experience. I learned how my experiences gave me new depth and empathy. When a neighbor experienced a similar but worse life-threatening, pregnancy-related health issue, I was able to cry and be there with her in her mess because I understood to a small extent.



*Figure 8. Limitation: Paint without paint, just mud and clay (2019).*

### ***Limitation: Paint with Fire and Ashes***

Inspired by Cai Guo-Qiang, I began using fire and ashes in my work to describe how destroyed I felt and to express my feelings of loss during and after my ruptured ectopic pregnancy from October to November 2019. I wondered how I could depict the unseen. As Guo-

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Qiang expressed in his Art21 interview, “It’s easy for us to depict things of this physical world but it’s very difficult to depict things that are not seen but have a profound effect on us. And it’s something I’m continuously exploring and trying to form. . . . Maybe everything does not have to be resolved, sometimes you can allow uncertainties to exist. The ever changing, never constant—these are the kinds of ideas to understand the world” (Art21, 2004, 13–15 min.). I wondered if God could be found in this mess. I didn’t have access to explosive materials, like Guo-Qiang did, but I could play with fire and ashes to achieve uncontrollable results. I experimented burning coils of twine with matches and a butane torch, holding my paintings over a camp fire, and building a fire on top of paintings. I didn’t try to paint Jesus at all, but I realized some sections looked like faces. It was amazing to me how the unseen was created by burning a coil of rope or putting a painting in a fire (Figure 9).



*Figure 9. Limitation: Paint with fire and ashes (2019–2020).*

### **Engaging Viewers in the Art Process**

During this time period, I experimented with the context for displaying my artwork. I wanted to convey the idea of touchable art and a God who is present in museums, galleries, and public spaces. I struggled to find a presentation that was functional, portable, and visually pleasing. I tried using just rope and clothespins on the wall at my house (Figure 10). It worked well for displaying a large quantity of artwork in a limited space. I also observed how much my children enjoyed interacting with the artwork by choosing which artwork to hang and how to

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display it. They also stuck stickers on their favorite paintings. I enjoyed breaking down the barriers of “do not touch art” with my children, especially with paintings of Jesus, and began envisioning a new type of interactive experience for everyone with touchable original paintings of Jesus. I began experimenting with a variety of presentation formats to encourage and communicate participation from viewers including the following: a pallet wood frame with clothespins and twine, loose artwork on a framed folding table, a mosaic on the wall, combination of folding table and clothespins with twine, as well as writing on the artwork, stacks of paintings and four walls for viewers to handle and hang artwork.



*Figure 10. Using a rope and clothespins for hanging artwork (2018).*

In November 2019, I found a public space in a bookstore and gallery that allowed me fill an entire room and have an interactive art exhibit. I combined all of my experiments in this show to try to create an ultimate immersive experience, including having participants write about their personal messes on the artwork and then hang it to display. In the center of the room was a large table display with a built-in clothespin hanger where people could engage with the artwork by physically writing about their messes on the art and then place it in what they felt was the appropriate location (Figure 11), either on the center table, where other visitors could read about their mess, or on one of the four themed walls (themes included courage to be honest, change of

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plans, letting go, and calming the storm). On the table and a large counter in the room I had about 200 paintings stacked and ready for participants. (Figure 12).



*Figure 11. Front and back of center interactive display (2019).*



*Figure 12. Change of Plans wall (2019).*

### **A Pedagogy of Limitations for Students**

As I was experimenting with limitations in my own art-making, I decided to implement the idea of overcoming fear in art-making with my undergraduate, non-art-major students in my class “Art for Elementary Educators,” which I taught for three semesters at BYU and UVU in 2018, 2019, and 2020. I created a final project and lesson, called “Limitations: Embrace the Shake,” that involved many steps and discussions throughout the semester, (see appendix). Fall 2018 semester, when I introduced the project to my students, was an experiment with the

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unknown. My students helped make decisions regarding our classwork. In some ways, I felt like it was my biggest failure as a teacher but also my most successful.

### *Fall Semester 2018*

I began the semester by having my students watch Phil Hansen's *Embrace the Shake* TED Talk (2013), Ken Robinson's TED Talks *Do Schools Kill Creativity?* (2006) and *How to Escape Education's Death Valley* (2013), and Mary Poffenroth's *The Myth of Fearlessness* (2017). In our discussions about identifying and embracing our fears and limitations, many students expressed their fear about not being good enough. As a class, we decided to experiment with eliminating grades on readings and class projects in order to decrease their fear of making art and participating in class. Together, we decided that the majority of each student's grade would be based on class participation, a few response papers, large assignments, a sketchbook, a final project, and a written final. I was terrified to let go of my control. I worried that if I wasn't grading assignments or readings daily my students wouldn't complete the work. I worried that they wouldn't learn anything and would become lazy.

After our second class, on September 13, 2018, I noted in my reflection journal that there was a significant increase in class discussion and student engagement. Students shared personal experiences about coping with depression and anxiety and their fear of not being good enough in art or life. For example, after class, a student talked with me for a few minutes about how much she was enjoying the class. She expressed that she had been insecure about her art-making skills and was hesitant to make art or share in class because she worried she wasn't good enough. Her perfectionism made art-making difficult for her. She said that after just two class periods, she already felt more confident in her ability to take risks and problem-solve. For someone who the

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week before entered the classroom with downcast eyes and hunched shoulders, her change in demeanor was amazing to me.

Throughout the semester, I was surprised that most of my students worked hard on their art projects and even reworked projects despite the fact that they weren't being graded on how their work looked. When I asked individual students what was motivating them to work, they replied that they didn't know—they just wanted to work. I also noticed that our classroom culture was becoming more relaxed.

Despite these improvements, I was anxious about letting go of control of my students' final project. In previous semesters, students completed a thirty-day project, in which they would spend 15 minutes per day on one art skill of their choice and document their progress. This semester I assigned a final project that would be due on the last day of class and included the following learning outcomes:

- Students will deepen artistic skills in one medium or theme of choice.
- Students will choose between creating a few high-quality artworks or a larger quantity with several pieces of art.
- Students will spend at least five hours total time on their project throughout the semester.
- Students will present their artwork(s) and process in class.
- Students will write an artist statement.
- Students will connect their art to current art practices by finding a contemporary artist whose art-making techniques or subject matter relate to their own.
- Students will create an integrated lesson plan using the key artist connected to their final project.



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As a class, we decided how we would measure and grade the final art project and what questions students would answer in the writing portion. The students chose the following questions to discuss:

1. How many hours did you work on your final project?
2. Why did you choose this for your project?
3. What do you feel you've learned? How have your skills improved?
4. Please describe your process for creating and working on your project.
5. Please write an artist statement.

I was anxious because I didn't know how the projects would turn out. There were no official mid-semester checks. I had a vague idea of some of their final projects would be, but for many students I had no idea what they would bring to class the last day, I was surprised how many students decided to incorporate limitations and challenge specific art-related fears in their projects, even though that wasn't part of the assignment. Throughout the semester, I shared my own progress and experiments with limitations. I was open about my weaknesses and mistakes, which I believe helped my students be more willing to make and admit their weaknesses and mistakes.

The day before the final project was due, I recorded my fears and anxieties about failing as a teacher. I reflected on the article *Pretending to Be an Art Teacher* by Francis et al. (2018), particularly the questions, "What does it mean to fail as a teacher or as a student? How might our teaching defeat students? What does that failure afford, and how does it limit us?" (p. 79).

In my limitations curriculum, I hoped to help my students explore the idea that art is a safe place to fail. While I wanted to remove their anxiety, I had learned that anxiety is useful. As Shirky has stated, "It may be more important to try something new than to try to figure out how

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not to fail” (2010, as cited in Francis et al., 2018, p. 84). By implementing limitations, I was trying to remove the fear of failing so students could make more art by approaching it in a new way.

On the last day of class, my students completed the final exam and turned in their projects. The results were very interesting. I had been feeling like I had failed as a teacher because the curriculum wasn't laid out perfectly and because I had let my students help make decisions for the class. In thinking about the semester, though, I realized that my students had been more engaged this semester than they had been in previous semesters. Class participation had increased, and their sketchbooks and final projects were better than they had been in other semesters.

I was also struck by my students' reasons for choosing their particular projects. One student, who had high anxiety, especially about art-making, explained the idea behind her small-circle watercolor paintings. She explained that she knew she wanted to paint landscapes, but when she started painting, she felt overwhelmed by the idea of filling the paper. She grabbed a roll of masking tape, traced the shape of the tape roll on her paper, and said to herself, “I can fill that shape.” And so she did—one shape, one day at a time. Another student worked on a series of alphabet photographs using everyday objects she found in and around her apartment. Another student focused on recognizing her emotions and created an artistic-expression journal that explored one emotion each day.

The student who was withdrawn at the beginning of the semester chose to interview and draw portraits of students in another class, despite her very limited experience drawing portraits and reaching out to those she doesn't know well. She described the struggles that many people

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face regarding branching out and taking the time to listen to people we see on a regular basis but rarely get to know.

### *Spring Semester 2019*

I began this semester teaching the same undergraduate class at Utah Valley University (UVU). Based on the unanticipated success of the previous semester, I decided to focus my curriculum on limitations and try mixing the final project with a 30-day project so I could be more involved in my students' art-making processes. I also decided to grade every project so I would have art samples. I wanted to have deep conversations with my students like I did in the previous semester, but doing so was more awkward than it had been at BYU. BYU is a private religious school, where instructors are encouraged to talk about religion, a prevalent theme in my artwork. UVU, however, is a public university. I wasn't sure how to approach the religious nature of my artwork in a secular setting, which meant I didn't mention my own art-making or experiences in art with my students as often as I had at BYU. I think this had a negative effect on my class, in that my students appeared less willing to be vulnerable and honest in their final artworks because I had been less open about my personal artwork.

Here are some examples of student final projects from this semester. One student, a young single mom, chose to embrace the limitation of needing to leave her young daughter to attend work and school by illustrating the silly sayings she and her daughter exchange when they say goodbye. Another student used shredded paper to recreate a sunset she witnessed on campus. Another student chose to create artwork out of cake because she felt like she was terrible at cake decorating. She described her experience this way: "Starting this project I went in with the fear of failing, but at the end of this project, I realized that once I set my fear aside and just go for it, I can create whatever I want, and if I fail, I can try again. Not trying would be the biggest failure."

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Another student who particularly struggled with perfectionism and anxiety about having the right answer decided to challenge her perception of self through a self-portrait assignment by covering her face with honey and sprinkles.

### *Spring Semester 2020*

I started spring semester 2020 at UVU with a limited curriculum unit playing with weakness, limited materials, changing emotions and plans, fear of starting, inopportune moments, and lack of time (detailed descriptions and rubrics for these lessons appear in the appendix). I also adjusted the final project to include at least one self-imposed limitation.

**Fear and Confronting Creative Block.** One of my limitations lessons with my students was called the “Everlasting Storm” (see appendix). After watching Mary Poffenroth’s *The Myth of Fearlessness* (2017), my students and I discussed our fears and weaknesses and why we might be afraid of making art and failing. Together we created a mind map as we discussed the following questions: “Why do we procrastinate?” “Why is it so hard to start? Is it fear? Perfectionism?” “What prevents us from moving forward?”

I shared my own experiences with fear and my approach to embracing my fear through art-making. I have noticed that the more I share, the more comfortable my students are sharing. One student, who at the beginning of the semester would rarely make eye contact or volunteer in class, began making comments during class. While she didn’t feel particularly confident in her art-making abilities, she had learned that it is okay not to be imperfect and that she is accepted as she is. My students were learning to laugh at their mistakes when their paintings turned out terrible and to experiment with finding art-making processes that worked for them. I believe they were learning to let go.

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**Creative Constraints and Playing with Failure.** On March 2, 2020, I failed repeatedly while demonstrating a marbling paper demo because I forgot to bring a key ingredient. Instead of giving up on the exercise, I challenged students to use the watercolor, printmaking, and painting skills we had learned in class to create at least five interesting texture papers for a bookmaking assignment. I opened the cleaning and watercolor cupboards and found a bottle of bubbles. I added ink to it and tried making bubble-ink textures because I'd seen someone do that online. Students looked through the cupboards and found more cleaning materials. Like a collage, good ideas are “built out of whatever is available” (Graham, 2015, p. 5). They used vinegar, baking soda, bleach, rubbing alcohol, water-based and permanent markers, water, monotype, watercolor wash techniques, salt, gesso, acrylic paint, squishy balls, and sponges. They crumpled paper and then printed monotype on it. They played with the materials, experimenting with different ideas instead of trying to find one best solution (see Graham 2015). If their ideas didn't work, they tried something else. Energy and engagement was high; everyone was smiling. There were messes everywhere. It felt great. “Playing involves rules, but it also includes freedom, imagination, risk, unanticipated outcomes, and the possibility for participants to become deeply immersed in the activity” (as cited in Graham, 2015, p. 7). This amazing experience happened because my original idea had failed. Perhaps it was my example of failing and my personal challenge to see how many times I could fail that inspired and enabled my students to feel free enough to take risks. They also observed what other students were trying and copied and improved others' techniques. Maybe planning to fail is a plan?

Graham (2015) has stated, “The playfulness of artistry can be absorbing, exuberant, intense, and transcendent. . . . It allows for the possibility of surprise that comes from improvisation” (p. 7). The Surrealists also improvised and played to create art. Gude (2010)

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discovered that using Surrealist methods “to catch the unconscious mind unawares and capture the images of the unfettered imagination” was an effective way to teach students (p. 35). In using similar techniques in my artwork and with my students, I have found that unconsciously making a mess is an excellent way to face the creative block that may come with a blank canvas.

**Student Self-Imposed Limitations.** My students experimented with self-imposed limitations in a semester long “Limitations: Embrace the Shake” project (see appendix). A student who loved Japanese culture used chopsticks and ink to create Japanese landscapes and was impressed by the amount of detail and line work she was able to achieve with such a limited tool. Another student chose to create functional art for her home from materials on hand in her home. One student chose to confront her dislike of being in the kitchen by creating paintings from food items (such as soy sauce or crushed berries) in her kitchen. One student seeking to embrace the challenges of motherhood decided to paint important moments from her life while holding her toddler. She reflected:

This project and class got me out of my comfort zone, but also helped me feel free enough to try things even if I might fail. If it wasn't for that, I wouldn't have ever tried to paint, because I never thought of myself as an actual artist. Now I know that I have that talent, but also that it's okay to try new things, even if there's a possibility of failure.

Another student described her experience:

My limitations were using a ballpoint pen as a medium and having a time limit of 10 minutes to draw some of the ideas I had from my art journaling. Both of these limitations relate to the fact that I'm a perfectionist. Especially toward the beginning of the semester, this art class gave me so much anxiety. I knew that there was no way I

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could study hard enough to be perfect at creating art. Because of this anxiety, I decided to use this project to help me realize that art is not about perfection. Having a time limit was hard because I like to take my time on things and perfect them. Using a ballpoint pen was hard because once I made a mistake, there was no going back.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

This study explores how self-imposed limitations affected my anxieties about art-making and my art-making process. It also examined how a strategy of self-imposed limitations affected student art-making. At a deeper level, this is a self-study that engages an arts-based research methodology to explore spiritual and personal quandaries in my own life through the process of art-making. Throughout this study, I asked, “What is the relationship between anxiety, fear, limitations, and art-making? Can failing be a good thing? What types of knowledge are gained through limitations in the art-making process? What is the effect of limitations on my student’s art making?”

### **Anxiety, Fear, Limitations, and Art-Making...**

What is the relationship between anxiety, fear, limitations, and art-making? In my self-study, from September 26, 2018 to December 31, 2019, I created over 360 paintings studies and several large paintings, despite, or possibly because, I felt completely overwhelmed as a graduate student, a teacher, a wife whose spouse had contradictory religious beliefs, and a parent to children with special needs and a young baby. In my previous art-making practice, I created only one to two paintings per year. When I felt overwhelmed, I created a big mess of paint using my left hand. I enjoyed creating a significant number of paintings in very limited time with limited materials.

I believe that part of my success resulted from my obsessive need to express my thoughts, emotions, and feelings on a daily basis. For almost 25 years, I had found peace and felt the presence of God through writing in my journal almost every day. When I created my Jesus paintings, I replaced my obsessive journal writing with painting and making a mess.



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Over the course of this study, I noticed that the number of paintings I created correlated with how high my anxiety was and how busy I felt. I found that instead of creating daily, I often binge-created art—I would create 20 pieces in one week and then do nothing for a couple of weeks. My output seemed to depend on how stressed and overwhelmed I felt. If I was dealing with a lot of worry and anxiety, I'd create more. For example, in January 2019, I was overwhelmed by researching and writing a forty-page comprehensive exam for graduate school that was due in two weeks. I coped by creating 37 messy painting studies in about 10–30 minutes per day using my left hand, a paper towel, and a window scraper (Figure 13). My anxiety became a catapult for making art instead of a limitation. It was hard for me to switch gears and begin making art in moments of stress instead of resorting to my phone and social media. But once I began making art, as messy and terrible as it was, I was able to let go of whatever I was obsessing and worried about.



*Figure 13. Paintings during my comprehensive exam (2019).*

One of my primary self-imposed limitations was using my non-dominant hand to create paint and create my artwork. I would physically use my actual hand because I didn't use paint brushes either. As described previously, I chose this as a limitation because it lowered my expectations of myself, which reduced my anxiety about starting, and gave me courage to simply begin painting. Based on the number of paintings I created in a short time and how the process helped me, I believe that limitation was highly successful and the most

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important limitation I used. When I tried to paint using my right hand, I noticed my mind would continually degrade my process and product, versus with my left hand my mind automatically praise the failing efforts of that hand because I had low expectations. Before this project I had labeled my left hand as a “useless” limb, but throughout this project I grew to appreciate and embrace it as a hidden strength. As I was researching literature, I became acquainted with the work of art therapist Capacchione (2015), who initiated her work and research on using the non-dominant hand in creative journaling in the 1970s. She claimed that using the non-dominant hand helps a person access the unconscious mind, which frees up the creation process and allows the inner child or inner self to be involved in processing emotions and feelings. I found that to be true in my art making process. Interestingly, I had started using my non-dominant hand to create art before I learned about Capacchione’s work, but I have seen similarities between her claims and my experiences. I have found that my useless left hand can be useful in freeing up the unconscious mind to make art because I was already expecting to fail and didn’t have high expectations for my left hand. I simply played and enjoyed the process.

As I researched background literature for my thesis, I later realized my process was similar to the methodology of Surrealist painters who tried to engage the subconscious in their work through play. As Power (2011) stated, “Play often involves an integrative, holistically oriented mindset that includes connections to deep sources of inspiration or intuition” (as cited in Graham, 2015, p. 8). By using an arts-based approach I noticed, as I was in the midst of creation, new ideas and words, thoughts, and images would form naturally from the paint and variety of methods I used for applying it. I began to see the messes, even completely

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unaltered, as beautiful and pondered on the idea of messy emotions, even fear or anger becoming a beautiful experience.

My work became about the process and methods of creation rather than the end result. I learned that anxiety, worry, changing emotions, and fear will always change from moment to moment and be present in my life, my students' lives, and the lives of my family. This realization grew as I taught "The Everlasting Storm" lesson to my students and as I created artwork from bad weather and storms (see appendix). There is something intriguing about the destruction of nature, and I began to "fix" my messes and artwork less to look like an image of God and instead enjoy the presence of the mess itself. I began using mud to highlight imperfections in surfaces created by deteriorated paper or bubbles from burning of my paintings using mud and dry brushing with paint. I noticed the meaning could be changed depending on how I framed and presented my artwork.

I began creating less representational artwork after my appendix ruptured in March 2019. I painted while feeling frustrating about my inability to feel well enough to complete simple tasks and instead hiring others to work on my house or tend my children. In these moments I used red, black, and purple colors and scraped the paint surface with my fingernails. I wasn't trying to paint God, I was trying to paint my pain. Later, when I painted in the hospital amid the fears of how insurance would process my medical emergency and what the results of my CATSCAN would be, using an arts-based inquiry helped me to find calm, reassurance, or meaning. From a discussion I had with another patient, it seemed the process of art making in the hospital was calming to those who were also waiting for testing and results.

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In October 2019, I visited a friend who was recently homebound after spending six months in the hospital because of brain surgery. I brought her stacks of my messy artwork and challenged her to find her mess. She chose one of the paintings I created while I was recovering from ruptured appendix because it represented how she felt physically and emotional in the midst of her medical mess. She later contacted me to learn how to create her own messy artwork to find meaning in.

Through this project, and my experiences I learned we were together in the mess. This was an idea that intrigued me and I felt could only be shared through the process of uncontrollable artwork. I sought to bring that concept to light in my solo art show in November 2019.

### **Forms of Knowing**

What forms of knowing could my artwork create for others who interacted with it? This project was originally created only for me and my purposes, it did not relate to my other artwork. I didn't plan on selling it. I didn't even share any of it online besides with a few classmates until I'd created about 100 because I didn't want other's opinions to influence my creation process or end results. I did notice I found creating artwork less relaxing when I shared it on Instagram because I became obsessed with how many likes or comments I received. But at the same time, I saw how sharing my process positively impacted others. Neighbors and friends shared how they began to search for deeper meaning in their limitations and messes.

After my appendix situation, in April 2019, I decided to begin sharing my artwork with a wider audience. I originally an idea of sharing this particular series of art and giving away every piece I created instead of selling it, but I also had medical bills and financial obligations. Whether a person was religious or not, I felt like the idea of finding something in the mess was

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vital because it had the potential to create hope and purpose. This project was part creating the artwork with limitations, fear, and anxieties, part using art-based inquiry to create meaning, and part sharing the art to encourage others to find meaning in their own messes. My process of using an arts-based research methodology was about gaining new knowledge through art itself.

For my solo show in November 2019, I hung a few paintings on the walls and then placed approximately 200 paintings in the gallery with instructions for visitors to write about their own limitations on the back the artwork and then arrange the work according to the following themes posted on the walls: courage, change of plans, letting go, and calming the storm. I originally envisioned the approximately 200 paintings hung by visitors filling the entire room in tile-like fashion by the end of the exhibit. I imagined viewers writing, arranging, touching, and interacting with the artwork. But instead, I discovered many unorganized stacks of paintings, some artwork hung in a variety of ways and directions, and some artwork had fallen on the ground because the paintings on white wooden panels were too heavy for the clothespins on the table and the tape on the walls. It felt cluttered and not beautiful. I was frustrated my presentation of my artwork fell short of my expectations. But as I was uninstalling the exhibit I was touched by the messes and limitations participants wrote on the back of some artwork, including words such as “pornography, perfectionism, school, and family.” Perhaps those whose took time to participate in the exhibit found new expression and a voice for their experiences? Perhaps they learned they shared limitations with others? Perhaps the messy display with limited materials for writing and interacting with the artwork allowed more space for the viewer to ponder their own order in the undefined chaos or mess? Different individuals were intuitively drawn to different artwork.

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A challenge I faced was encouraging visitors to actually touch the artwork. Some people seemed to be afraid that they would get in trouble for touching the art. Others just seemed confused. I had posted simple written instructions for interacting with the art, but I found that my physical presence and verbal instructions still inspired more people to participate than the written instructions did. Few people read or touched unless they observed someone else interacting. Many viewers were uncomfortable writing on the actual artwork and wrote on tape to stick their ideas to the artwork. In the future, a short instructional video about the process of creation and viewers interacting with the artwork might be more effective.

### **Limitations as a Teaching Strategy**

How do limitations work as a teaching strategy for students? I believe limitations can work as an effective teaching strategy for students, as long as it is integrated with the standard curriculum for the class. When I tried teaching all my limitation lessons together, I found my students were intimidated by the idea of trying something new and being more limited than they already felt by their perceived lack of traditional artistic skills. It also felt like I was beating a dead horse, when we focused on limitations in every lesson. Instead, when I let limitations and mistakes come about more naturally my students appeared to be more engaged. For example, in the failed marbling paper demo described in my results chapter, my students observed me completely fail because I forgot one of my key art supplies. I believe my failure and literally opening the cupboards of the classroom caused my students to feel free enough themselves to take risks and make mistakes. They, in turn, shared their mistakes and successes with each other in the art making process. Does that mean failing is a good thing?

### **Unforeseeable Learning**

Learning and teaching remind me of Eliot Eisner's statement about objectives that "having fixed objectives and clear-cut methods for achieving them are not always the most rational ways of dealing with the world" (1992, p. 594). I had a plan and objective for my class, but like life, it did not go according to plan. Perhaps perfection is not a rational idea. I wonder if perhaps instead of becoming increasingly frustrated by the impossibility of reaching the level of perfection I desire as an artist and teacher, if limitations and failing in art making, which cause me to become vulnerable in the art process, I am able to reach new levels of learning with me students as we experience this mess of life together.

I wonder if, instead of becoming increasingly frustrated by the impossibility of reaching the level of perfection I desire as an artist and teacher, if limitations and failing in art making, which cause me to become vulnerable in the art process, I am able to reach new levels of learning with my students as we experience this mess of life together. As much as I wished to find the perfect answer (the perfect limitation) and be the perfect teacher, doing so simply wasn't possible. As seen by the variety of self-imposed limitations I tried in my personal art making, I found that I naturally incorporated new limitations whenever I felt stuck or stagnant. The same process happened when I was teaching and working with my students in our naturally limiting circumstances. My students and I learned to rely on intuition, or new ideas, that revealed themselves while we were in the process of creating.

Another challenge was that my students needed to gain confidence in basic art-making skills before experimenting with unconventional methods. Many of my students were intimidated by the abstract nature of art and were anxious about creating something wrong or getting the wrong answer. For example, students learned about basic clay and hand-building techniques,

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then explored new ways to mold and shape the clay without tools. A few students who already felt limited by their lack of basic ability in clay were overwhelmed and anxious about failing further by working without tools. As a result, one student purposely gave up and skipped class on the days we worked on this project. That was disheartening to me, especially considering that students were graded primarily on effort and completion.

Dewey, as summarized by Ruitenberg (2009), “condemns educators and curriculum designers who believe that they can predetermine, without knowing the student, what interactions a curriculum will produce, and what learning will be the most valuable outcome of such interaction: the unforeseen” (p. 267). I found that creating multiple projects based on just limitations was not as engaging or effective as was emphasizing limitations within the projects and assignments I already used in my classes. My students were simply trying to gain basic artistic skills, and some struggled with limitations because they had a challenging time narrowing down their interests.

### **Limitations of This Study**

This study does not prove anything; it is a set of ideas and lessons that have been helpful in my own art-making and in my students’ art-making. For the most part, I found that my students enjoyed creating their own projects with self-imposed limitations. While the idea of being limited was at first intimidating and even overwhelming to them, in the end, they became more comfortable with themselves and seemed to enjoy the process. Assigning the students to work with limitations I had enjoyed was not as successful as letting them choose their own limitations. I also discovered that when I created lessons based on my own art-making processes, students would compare their art to mine or to each other’s, which wasn’t my intent at all.



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By nature, arts-based research and self-study are qualitative and do not quantifiably measure what works in all situations. My research is biased and the effectiveness of limitations as a teaching strategy is skewed by my observations and by what my students chose to share in their reflections. I also realize my mood and perspective at the time of writing this thesis changes the results, meaning if I look for ways my limitations lessons failed I will find them, but if I look for examples of how my limitations lessons succeeded I can find examples of that as well. Emotions, like weather, can change quickly, and in this study on embracing limitations in art-making, students' artwork and reflections, as well as my own, can vary greatly depending on their mood at the time.

### **Ideas for Further Study**

To further study the effect of self-imposed limitations as a teaching strategy, it would be helpful to create a focus group with participants who already had a passion for the arts. Perhaps, working with limitations could be more effective strategy for art educators' personal practice or artists who are struggling in their artistic practice. In my opinion, three key components are necessary for successfully working with limitations: a) having an obsession or fixated interest, b) having basic knowledge of art and artistic mediums, and c) having a passion and emotional need to create art. These components made this practice more effective for me than it was for my students. I discovered that I was much more invested in the process than they were.

### **Conclusion**

This study explored how self-imposed limitations affected my anxieties about art-making and my art-making process. As a teacher, I was also interested in how limitations affected student art-making. I also used arts-based research methodology to explore spiritual and personal quandaries in my own life through the process of art-making. A consistent thread

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throughout this investigation was using the process of making art as a way to gain understanding about my own life and teaching. I am learning that letting go of control makes teaching and life more enjoyable. I am discovering that things are never as bad as they seem. By letting go, I am creating more, and I am seeing my emotional limitations in new ways. At first, I wanted to “fix” my anxiety, my family, and my religious situation. Now I am learning how to love myself and others along with that anxiety, which will never completely go away.

I have created a lot of really bad paintings and some that I really like. Even now, over one year later, I have a lot of anxiety regarding art-making. It is still hard for me to get started. Sometimes my artwork looks terrible, and I end up feeling very unsatisfied. But when I think about making art as an experiment in failing instead of as a quest to make the perfect painting, I am able to avoid some of the fear and anxiety. My experiences with limited art-making, and honestly confronting my fear and anxiety, were key to my study. For my personal art-making, the result of self-imposed limitations was astounding and significant. I had physical and emotional need to create because of my anxiety and creating self-imposed limitations was an effective personal strategy and catalyst for my own artistry. I painted hundreds of paintings, shared my work in exhibitions, and explored important personal, spiritual, and artistic questions. I was able to successfully apply my own personal experiences with art-based inquiry and limitations to my teaching practice.

Art was also a way for me to represent knowledge and strengthen my own faith. I gained insight into my own limitations and the way art might be a form of knowledge and spiritual insight. I was using a particular, counter-intuitive approach to art-making as a way to explore important personal and spiritual questions through an unusual approach to art-making. It was counter-intuitive because I was deliberately making the process more difficult, and

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asking my students to do the same thing. As a teacher, artist, and researcher I learned to embrace my own anxiety, perfectionism, and lack of time by making art with self-imposed limitations. I was also able to create a culture of vulnerability and honesty in my classroom and help my students embrace themselves and their physical, emotional, and situational limitations through the art-making process. Creating with limitations has shown me, however, that there isn't just one way to cope with challenges. When things don't work out, new solutions can be found. As my students and I have worked together to learn how to embrace limitations, we have come to understand that we are together in this mess. Perhaps through the mess we can learn to embrace ourselves and others.

**Appendix: A Pedagogy of Limitations Curriculum**

My limitations lessons are outlines; what exactly I share in class varies based on the teacher and students in the class. My method of teaching includes asking a number of questions to guide discussions. I am also an advocate of teaching art techniques and then assigning students to use those techniques in a creative way of their choice. In other words, I feel that it is important for students to learn the rule before they can break it. Personally, I like to follow the rules and have the right answers, which makes experimentation in art-making challenging for me. I noticed this tendency in many of my students as well, especially my undergraduate students who have little confidence in their art-making abilities.

These lessons are loosely aligned with National Art Standards and can be adjusted for any grade level. In addition to building community and fostering self-compassion, the lessons are intended to help students embrace limitations, work through disorder, and, above all, stop making excuses and start making art. Similar to Graham (2015), I like to consider possibilities rather than precise learning outcomes. I want my students to have space to choose what they need to learn and have opportunities to repurpose materials and ideas (Graham, 2015, p. 11). I also try to encourage unique thought and differing opinions in my classroom. I often play the devil's advocate in discussions.

**Project: Superhero Selfie**

Remembering names is a weakness for me. Although I can tell you facts about my students, it often takes me most of a semester to remember their names. The Superhero Selfie exercise functions as an ice breaker and helps me get to know my students better and remember their names.

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On the first day of class, I post the following challenge on the board: “You are now a super hero. Choose two super powers and one weakness. Be prepared to share your reasons for your choices. You have one hour and one room to create a super hero prop or costume for yourself using only packing materials.” After students finish their projects, we discuss their strengths and weaknesses as a group. I record their responses, ask questions about their choices, and often give the students nicknames. At the end of the class, students label their selfies with their names and super powers and submit them online.

I first used a similar exercise successful when I taught middle-school students. When I switched to teaching undergraduate students, I was surprised by the depths of their responses, considering neither the students nor I knew each other. One student shared that her super powers were healing and teleportation and her weakness was sleep. She explained, “I chose teleportation and the power to heal every sickness because then I could help my family with their incurable sicknesses.” She shared that falling asleep and often feeling tired was a real weakness.

Having the students share their superhero strengths and weaknesses offers a unique glimpse into their personalities and what is important to them. I let students choose to be as deep and vulnerable or as lighthearted and silly as they want. Students often share real weaknesses—for the student mentioned previously, sleep was an actual weakness for her—or they share wishes and dreams.

Students are often intimidated by the idea of drawing a self-portrait, but I have noticed a significant increase in energy and engagement on the first day of class when I simplify the project, in this case, limiting students to using packing supplies.

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**Name:**

**Superhero Selfie**

## 1. CREATING:

You are now a superhero. Choose two super powers and one weakness, either real or imaginary. You have one hour and one room to make at least one prop for your superhero costume using packing materials. When you are finished, submit a photo of you superhero labeled with your name, your two super powers, and your weakness. Be prepared to share the reasons for your choices with the class.

REFLECT <i>(What did you like, or what went well?)</i>	REFINE <i>(What would you change?)</i>

**2. PRESENTING:** Submit a photo of yourself with your prop, labeled with your superhero name, two powers, and weakness.

**3. RESPONDING and CONNECTING:** Please answer the following questions:

- What is your first super power? Why?
- What is your second super power? Why?
- What is your weakness? Why?

### **Project: Limitations- Embrace the Shake**

My response to my own limitations and problems was to embrace the shake. The term “embrace the shake” comes from the art-making practices of artist Phil Hansen (2013), who incorporated his own physical limitation into his art practice. To me, “embrace the shake” means embracing the limitations in myself and in situations that might be beyond my control. To begin the Embrace the Shake project, I discussed the following questions and with students: “Do you like making art?” “What is your experience with art?” “What do you consider art?” “Is being creative the same as making art?” “Do you personally think art is important? Why or why not?” “Do you make art or create on a regular basis? Why or why not?”

After the discussion, I introduced artist Phil Hansen by watching his *Embrace the Shake* TED Talk (Hansen, 2013). We dissected and analyzed his talk by listing his approaches to art-making, the types of limitations he experimented with physically, emotionally, limited art mediums, time limitations, and location limitations using a mind map. (I wrote on the board and used a mind map to organize student ideas. Another option is to have students respond on sticky notes and work together as a class to organize the sticky notes into a mind map on the board to find patterns and themes.) Our discussion included the following questions: “What types of limitations did Phil use in his artwork?” “What themes can you find in his work?” “What is his subject matter?” “What are some of his limitations?” “What is a “shake” in your life that you can embrace?”

The Limitations project included making a series of artwork with one or two self-imposed limitations. I let students choose how to apply their time, but they need to spend 7–8 hours creating a series of 4–5 artworks. I ask students to choose a theme and art medium they were passionate about and wanted to learn more about. Having a theme appeared to lessen their

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anxiety and help them get started on the project. Students were required to submit their final-project idea within the first four weeks of the semester. I checked on students' progress halfway through the semester.



**Name:**

**Limitations: Embrace the Shake**

**TED Talk—*Phil Hansen: Embrace the Shake***

[https://www.ted.com/talks/phil\\_hansen\\_embrace\\_the\\_shake?utm\\_campaign=tedsread&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_source=tedcomshare](https://www.ted.com/talks/phil_hansen_embrace_the_shake?utm_campaign=tedsread&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare)



### 1. CREATING:

Embrace the Shake in your life by spending 3–4 hours making a series of three or more artwork(s) with one or more self-imposed limitations. Pick a subject theme and medium, and choose at least one limitation.

- **Limitations:** You can choose a material or medium limitation, a physical limitation, a location limitation, or other limitation. Select a limitation that will make it difficult or impossible for you to succeed. Remember, this is about quantity, not quality. You are limited to 3–4 total hours on this project.
- **Theme:** Themes can include people, animals, coping techniques, emotions and feelings, art journaling, social justice, religion, landmarks, etc. Choose anything you are passionate about or interested in.
- **Medium:** You can choose a traditional medium, such as paint, watercolor, crayons, clay, drawing, collage, or digital painting, or something unique, such as nature, found objects, trash, Amazon packaging, etc.

### 2. RESPONDING and CONNECTING: Answer the following questions:

- What did you choose for your project? Why?
- What is your subject theme? Why?
- What is your medium? Why?
- What were your limitations? Why?
- How many artworks did you create?
- Approximately how much time did you spend on this project?

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REFLECT <i>(What did you like, or what went well?)</i>	REFINE <i>(What would you change?)</i>

**3. PRESENTING:** Submit a copy of this completed worksheet and a photo/video or PowerPoint of your project, and bring your projects to class if possible. Write an artist statement about your artwork that includes your name, title, size, medium, and a written statement. Sample artist statements are available at <https://renee-phillips.com/art-and-artists-statements-by-famous-artists/>.

### **Project: The Everlasting Storm**

For this project, students observe their changing emotions and thoughts for 24 hours and then record them through journaling, writing, poetry, art, film, audio, or an app. In class students make a textured surface using gesso. Once it has dried students make a mess on it using paint or other mediums, such as mud. Finally, the students try to transform it into an artwork about storms or emotions. The idea behind this project is that while embracing emotions as a limitation and catalyst can be difficult, it can yield beautiful results.

After students prepared their textured gesso surface, we watch a video about photographer Jonas Pointek called *Shooting the Everlasting Storm: That's Amazing* (2016). The video depicts Pointek photographing beautiful but dangerous storms, such as the continuous storm over Lake Maracaibo, called the "Everlasting Storm."

After watching the video, I asked the students to compare changing emotions to weather and storms and discuss the following questions: "How can emotions be a type of everlasting storm?" "Is it important to accept the changing storm of emotions? Why or why not?" "How can the ideas of weather and storms relate to coping with big emotions?" I also shared examples of my own and my children's changing emotions.

Regarding her artwork and experience a student wrote:

I observed that it's possible to feel such happiness and such sadness at the same time. With events happening in my life lately, I have felt this very strongly. It's not something I've ever felt before, and it felt good to be able to put it down on paper. I think the connection to weather is relating the clashing of night and day. They are both opposite times of the day, but there is that slight five minutes in the morning and night where you can see

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the night touch the day. This reflects perfectly how I have been feeling.

Another student painted a bright yellow background because she associated it with happiness. Then she painted a big red X over the yellow, and hid smiley faces with white paint. She observed, “I found out I hide my emotions often (bad ones) so others won’t be affected by me. It’s like a sun hiding behind the clouds.”

Another student chose to paint a squall with her fingers to help lower her expectations and focus on her emotional weather. She wrote, “I specifically made a squall because they are sudden. This how I feel a lot of my emotions are. They just bottle up, and then suddenly they are there and I have to deal with the mess they make. It’s not always a bad thing for me though.”

In general, most students enjoy the ideas and challenges in this lesson. Based on what students shared at the end of the semester, this was one of the most impactful lessons. As most of my students are not artists, this project was also a great introduction to painting techniques using acrylic and gesso.

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**Name:**

**The Everlasting Storm**

Presentation link: <https://youtu.be/4DH8LAa-caA>

## 1. CREATING:

**Experiment with limitations:** Create a textured paper using gesso. Make a mess on it using paint or other mediums. Then transform it into an artwork about storms or emotions.

REFLECT ( <i>What did you like, or what went well?</i> )	REFINE ( <i>What would you change?</i> )

**Continue:** Work on it again as needed.

**2. PRESENTING:** Prepare your artwork for presentation and submit a photo.

**3. RESPONDING and CONNECTING:** Analyze and Interpret your artwork. What methods or materials did you use to communicate the idea of a storm?

Jonas Pointek puts himself in the midst of dangerous but beautiful weather when he photographs and films storms, such as the continuous storm at Lake Maracaibo, called the “Everlasting Storm.” Weather is constantly changing, similar to emotions. Compare changing emotions to weather and storms.

Is it important to accept the changing storm of emotions? Why or why not?

How can the ideas of weather and storms relate to coping with big emotions?

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### **Project: Limitations and Inopportune Moments**

For this project students chose a subject or theme to depict in their artwork. Then chose a self-imposed limitation to make art impossible, such as using their non-dominant hand or fingers. Then also use a type of destruction to create the artwork. As part of this project, I share the art of Cai Guo-Qiang (2005), Mariah Robertson (Art21, 2014) and Phil Hansen (Philinthecircle, 2008).

In his series *Goodbye Art* series, Phil Hansen destroys his artwork after he creates it. In class and on their rubric, we discussed the idea of controlling versus letting go in art and answer the following questions: “What purpose or meaning is there in destroying something carefully made?” “How did you feel when you were working on it? What were your thoughts?” “How did you ruin the art?” “Why did you do/use what you did?” “Why do you think Cai Guo-Qiang and Mariah Robertson use the uncontrollable or inopportune in their artwork?” “Considering the context and culture in Cai Guo-Qiang’s artwork, what are your thoughts about making art in inopportune moments or environments?”

As the students work, we discuss some of the chaos we have personally encountered. After the students finish their projects, they spend five minutes destroying it using a variety of mediums that reflect their experience. Next, I ask them to turn their destroyed project into something interesting or beautiful and look for their theme. (Optional: Students can free-write about whatever is on their mind, filling the entire paper, then highlight a few words to make a poem). Students can also combine their ideas together to make a larger piece. My students emphasized the themes of destruction, heartbreak, and inopportunity. In general, my students reflected they did not enjoy destroying their artwork and had a difficult time with that concept.

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Name:

## LIMITATIONS AND INOPPORTUNE MOMENTS

View this [Presentation link](#) on **Phil Hansen, Cai Guo-Qiang, and Mariah Robertson**, then complete the following.

### 1. CREATING

**Experiment with limitations:** Choose a subject or theme to try to depict in your artwork. Then choose a self-imposed limitation to make art impossible, such as using your nondominant hand or using a medium the wrong way. After you complete the artwork, you will destroy it.

**Continue:** Can you find your chosen theme in the destruction? (Optional: Free-write about whatever is on your mind and fill your entire paper. Then highlight a few words to make a poem).

REFLECT ( <i>What did you like, or what went well?</i> )	REFINE ( <i>What you would change?</i> )

**2. PRESENTING:** Share what you were trying to create, the limitation you used to make it impossible, how you destroyed it, and share your resulting artwork.

### 3. RESPONDING and CONNECTING:

- In his *Goodbye* series, Phil Hansen destroys his artwork after he creates it. What purpose or meaning is there in destroying something carefully made?
- How did you feel when you were working on your art piece? What were your thoughts?
- How did you ruin the art? Why did you do/use what you did?
- Why do you think Cai Guo-Qiang and Mariah Robertson use the uncontrollable or inopportune in their artwork?
- Considering the context and culture in Cai Guo-Qiang's artwork, what are your thoughts about making art in inopportune moments or environments?

## HOW SELF-IMPOSED LIMITATIONS AFFECT ART-MAKING AND TEACHING

### **Project: No-Tools Clay Pot**

This no-tools clay project helps students embrace the limits of a typical elementary classroom in creating an ancient-culture-inspired clay pot using nontraditional clay tools. To begin, I teach students the basics of scoring clay and share three basic hand-building techniques: pinch pot, coil, and slab. Students then research an ancient culture, sketch a couple of ideas in their sketchbooks, then used their hands (no traditional clay tools) to create a pot using air-dry clay (or mud).

I assign this project to my students because they will likely face budget concerns as elementary teachers, especially in art. In class, we discuss what materials are available to the average elementary teacher. Students then look for items typically found in the classroom and ways to use them: markers as slab rollers, pens or pencils for details, plastic forks or pencils to score, and plastic cups for water because they couldn't use spray bottles. We use construction paper and butcher paper to cover the desks for fast and easy cleanup, which is helpful in an elementary classroom.

Once the projects are dry students use rulers or spoons to smooth the clay and then paint their projects using acrylic paint. Students then use basic hand-building techniques such as pinch pot and coil to make their pots. In the past, I chose the ancient cultures for my students, limited the amount of clay they could use, and required students to have their sketches checked off before they received their clay. I also required their final project to closely resemble their sketches. After recognizing that I was anxious and stressed about limiting materials and how well the projects would turn out, I decided to let go of control and increase students' opportunity to explore, make mistakes, and problem-solve. For example, I have 25 pounds of clay for twenty students. Each student must choose how much clay they will use, but the students need to work



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together to ensure that everyone has enough clay for the project. I also emphasize that it is okay if their project doesn't turn out like their plan.

In my experience, some students became frustrated when their pots collapsed or when their pots weren't meeting their expectations. Some students chose to make more than one pot so they could experiment with different ideas. While some students already felt too limited by their experiences in clay and were frustrated that they couldn't use tools, other students enjoyed the challenge.

# HOW SELF-IMPOSED LIMITATIONS AFFECT ART-MAKING AND TEACHING

Name:

## NO-TOOLS CLAY PROJECT

### 1. CREATING

**Experiment with limitations:** Using the techniques we learned in class, make a clay pot without using “traditional” clay tools. Look for tools that can be found in a school, such as pencils, rulers, markers, glue sticks, popsicle sticks, plastic forks, and plastic spoons.

**Craftsmanship:** The pot should be scored well so it doesn’t fall apart. No cracks. No lumps in the coil. Even thickness in walls. Looks nice.

**Continue:** Emphasize at least one section of the form using one or more of the following methods: additive (scoring), subtractive (carving), or paint (this would have to happen after it dries).

REFLECT ( <i>What did you like, or what went well?</i> )	REFINE ( <i>What you would change?</i> )

**2. PRESENTING:** When finished (dried and painted), submit a photo of your project on a black background as demonstrated in class.

### 3. RESPONDING and CONNECTING:

- Which ancient culture influenced your art? Please describe how.
- What is one challenge/problem you faced with this project, and how did you overcome it? Or did you?
- What suggestions do you have for working with clay with students?

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### **Project: What If You Already Have Everything You Need?**

The purpose of this project is to use the limitations of what is available in nature to create artwork. It is meant to help students trust themselves, enjoy the creation process, and try new ideas. To help open their minds to the idea they have everything they need. I like to share the following from self-help author and twelve-step advocate Melody Beattie (1990),

Do not trust fear. Do not trust panic. We can trust ourselves, stand in our own truth, stand in our own light. We have it now. Already. We have all the light we need for today. And tomorrow's light shall be given to us then. Trust ourselves, and we will know whom to trust. Trust ourselves, and we will know what to do. When we feel we absolutely cannot trust ourselves, trust that God will guide us into truth. (p. 71)

There is constant demand in the world for more. Many times, I have used not having the right materials or tools as an excuse for not making art—for not doing a lot of things, actually. I wanted to create a religious series of artwork but didn't feel I had what I needed. This limitation helped me find abundance and beauty in what I already had and what I couldn't control.

Limitations are about learning to let go of control. I like sharing the following from Melody Beattie's book *The Language of Letting Go* (1990) with my students:

Picture yourself walking through a meadow. There is a path opening before you. As you walk, you feel hungry. Look to your left. There's a fruit tree in full bloom. Pick what you need. Steps later, you notice you're thirsty. On your right, there's a fresh water spring. When you are tired, a resting place emerges. When you are lonely, a friend appears to walk with you. When you get lost, a teacher with a map appears. Before long, you notice the flow: need and supply, desire and fulfillment. Maybe, you wonder, someone gave me the need because Someone planned to fulfill it. Maybe I had to feel the need, so I would

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notice and accept the gift. Maybe closing my eyes to the desire closes my arms to its fulfillment. Demand and supply, desire and fulfillment—a continuous cycle, unless we break it. All the necessary supplies have already been planned and provided for this journey. Today, everything I need shall be supplied to me. (pp. 84–85)

The artist Andy Goldsworthy finds everything he needs when he needs it. In class, I share Andy Goldsworthy’s art and play a video clip of his art-making process. We discuss the following questions: “How does Andy Goldsworthy trust the process?” “Where does he find his art supplies?”

After the discussion, I ask students to choose a location and make a sculpture using only what they find in that location. Students photograph or film what they create and then write about their art-making process, answering the questions, “Did your art turn out as planned?” “What challenges did you face, and how did you overcome those challenges?”

Students have one week to complete the assignment, after which they will present their art to the class. For their presentation, they can bring the project to class or bring a photo or video of the project.

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Name:

## EVERYTHING YOU NEED

[Presentation link](#)

### 1. CREATING:

**Experiment with limitations:** Choose one location and create an interesting sculpture using what you find there. Film your creation process. (Optional: Film the destruction of your art.) Your final video must be under one minute.

REFLECT ( <i>What did you like, or what went well?</i> )	REFINE ( <i>What would you change?</i> )

**Continue:** Add a title, edit your video as needed before submitting, and write an artist statement for your artwork.

**2. PRESENTING:** Submit your video and artist statement (include title, name, location, medium, and whatever you would like to share about your art).

**3. RESPONDING and CONNECTING:** Describe and interpret one of Andy Goldsworthy's or Mark Dion's artworks.

- Why or why not is location important in place-based artwork?
- What is the purpose of filming your creation and/or destruction of your art?

## HOW SELF-IMPOSED LIMITATIONS AFFECT ART-MAKING AND TEACHING

### **Additional Ideas for Using Self-Imposed Limitations in Art-Making**

The following is a list of ideas for self-imposed limitations to experiment with or integrate into existing lessons.

- Limited time and physical ability: For 30 days, 15 minutes per day, make a series of art with a self-imposed physical limitation.
- Limited ability: Choose a self-imposed limitation for creating artwork that will make it impossible for you to succeed.
- Limited existence: Make an artwork with the intent of destroying it when you are done.
- Limited materials: Create a painting using crayons.
- Limited mentally: Make an artwork that reflects how you feel mentally.
- Limited colors: Create the ugliest painting you can using two of your least favorite colors. Now, can you find something in it?
- Limited space: Find an object. Trace it. Now make art within that space.
- Limited art supplies: Create functional pottery using only items you can find in a school cafeteria: a knife, fork, and spoon.
- Limited environment: Create art while waiting in a public space, such as a doctor's office, hospital, airport, or grocery-store line. You only have until it's your turn to make it.
- Limited space: Make art while sitting as a passenger in a car.
- Limited supplies: Recreate a painting from art history using supplies you can find in a bathroom (or choose one other room or cupboard).
- Limited control: Explore uncontrollable nature. Leave paper outside during a storm, then turn it into something beautiful.

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