



LIFE'S DEAL: DECK OF CARDS

Lisa Wax, art teacher, at Whitney Young High School, developed this project with the University of Illinois at Chicago Contemporary Community Curriculum Initiative 2000.



We are often drawn to cardplaying because of the element of risk and its metaphorical associations to real life. Many of the decisions we make in life involve risks and chances. What risks have you taken to create new pathways? What obstacles do you face on those paths? How do you feel about the card you have been dealt in life?

This project uses playing cards as the basis for visual, emotional, and spiritual exploration. Using mixed media, the students use familiar 20th- (and 21st-) century art techniques such as layering, juxtaposition, and chance. (Fluxus, Dada, and Surrealist techniques)

Oil pastels drawn on shiny magazine images may seem like an odd combination, but oil pastels are one of few media that have the intensity to interact effectively with vibrant, color-saturated magazine collage images. The oil pastel drawing overlaps, surrounds, and partially exposes the magazine images and text. The results are often strong and surprising juxtapositions.



In the Deck of Cards project, layering and chance act as metaphors for the numerous influences and factors that determine our lives--our family, gender, religion, society, geography, etc. The project encourages students to critically examine the kitschy school career day slogan that "students can be anything they want to be." The Deck of Cards project doesn't diminish the role of goal setting and personal agency, but it does contextualize ideas of choice and possibility within personal, social, and political givens. Does the message "You can be anything" have different meanings in a working class urban school than in a wealthy suburban public school or an exclusive private school?

The work of Chicago artist, Hollis Sigler, was the inspiration for this project. Since 1992 much of Sigler's work dealt with the reoccurrence of her breast cancer. One political project she organized as a fundraiser for breast cancer research invited fifty-two other artists to each design one playing card in a fifty-two-card deck. This project not only highlights the therapeutic significance of art, but also the educational, social, and political importance of the role of artists.

To begin the project, students collectively create collage backgrounds to provide the underlayer for the mixed media project. Each student begins a collage and then passes it on to another student after 10 minutes. The passing and collaging continues until all the surfaces are covered with images or found text.

Each student is then dealt one of the collectively created grounds. That becomes the individual background or bottom layer. Students are also dealt one card from a traditional deck (eight of hearts, king of spades, etc.). The assignment is to then create their own unique cards, incorporating images representing facets of their own lives with the chance-derived grounds, suits, and numbers.



Lesson Plan

(See final page for materials list.)

DISCUSSION

Discuss the role of artists in a society. Why do artists sometimes choose to assume social, political, and educational responsibilities?

**There is an Artist Questionnaire for downloading in the Process Chapter.*

INTRODUCTION TO HOLLIS SIGLER'S WORK

Show images of Sigler's artwork from the Breast Cancer Journal series.

Show Y-me deck of cards that she produced with other artists.

Discuss how Sigler's life effected her art and how her role as an artist effected how she responded to her cancer.

ARTIST QUESTIONNAIRE

Students complete a worksheet with such questions as "What things in your life create obstacles to success?" and "What are some risks you have taken in your life that you felt have paid off?" The worksheet (see below) is designed to inspire thoughtful consideration about how the card can be seen as a metaphor for much of our lives. While we have a great deal of autonomy concerning how we respond to life's real difficulties and challenges, there are many things over which we have little or no control

Questionnaires make a good homework assignment that can then be followed up with a class discussion.

COLLECTIVE COLLAGE (TIMED BY MUSIC)

Each student has scissors, acrylic medium, and magazines. While listening to music, students cut out images they like for their color, content, texture, text, or whatever. Pictures may be cut out closely to the edges of images or may take whatever shape the student desires. Encourage students to vary the cutouts--for example, small and large, geometric or organic shapes.

Adhere cutouts to the tagboard using the acrylic medium. Eventually the entire surface will be covered with medium so it isn't a problem if some medium gets on the surface of the images at this time. The images should touch and may overlap. Starting at the corners and edges works the best. Each student should spend approximately 10 minutes adhering magazine cutouts to a piece.

After 10 minutes the teacher stops the music mid-song and switches the style of music. At this time students will switch to working on a different background collage, each passing their card to the right. This switching will continue until each background is completed. This will take 1 to 2 days of class time.



If anyone is absent, make sure extras are made. If some students work quickly and some cards are finished early, ask the students to start the extras for those who are absent.

After completing the collage backgrounds, coat the entire piece with acrylic medium. Try to create a texture with the brushstrokes on the surface. Allow the cards to dry overnight. Make sure brushes are rinsed well or they will become hard and worthless.

Note to the instructor: Make the size of the backgrounds 13 by 22 inches, 4 inches longer than the final project will be. After the boards are dry, cut off the extra 4 inches so that the final cards are 13 by 18 inches. The 4 by 13-inch cut off pieces can be used for practicing layering oil pastels onto the collage.

DEAL THE CARDS

Deal each student a card from a full deck. The card that is dealt to the student will be his or her assigned number and suit. Also, for inspiration distribute xeroxes of examples of unusual artistic cards such as Sigler's Y-me Deck that Sigler or cards depicted in *The Playful Eye* by Julian Rothenstein and Mel Gooding.

Encourage the students to use feelings and ideas from their Artist Questionnaire to create their images and symbols for the card. Hints: remember the emotional effectiveness of Sigler's naive style. Keep the imagery fairly simple because of the difficulty of manipulating oil pastels in intricate shapes and because the background/under layer is so busy with the collaged images.

DISTRIBUTE THE BACKGROUNDS RANDOMLY

Distribute one background to each student for his or her card and one practice strip. In order to affirm the conceptual meaning of the project—that life is not a tabula rasa, but rather an interaction between givens and choices—it is important that the distribution of backgrounds be done randomly. If the background is too busy to ignore, students might find it useful to draw their design on newsprint, tracing paper, or other scratch paper and then transfer the contours of their image onto the background with homemade graphite or oil pastel "carbon paper."

Students should figure out where they want areas of exposed collage, where the oil pastels partially expose the underlayer of the collage, or where areas will be completely masked by the pastels in thick layers. Demonstrate that areas covered with pastel can be exposed by scraping and scratching away the pastels. Strive for unity in color scheme, contrast, and strong composition. Be open to unexpected layering and juxtapositions.

ROUND OFF CORNERS

When the drawing is finished, use a template to trace rounded corners onto the cardboards and cut off the corners of the cardboards to make them look more like real playing cards.

ARTIST STATEMENTS

Each student should write an artist statement to accompany the card. Ask students to reflect on the relationships between chance and personal agency in their lives.

**There is an Artist Statement Worksheet for downloading in the Process Chapter*

Lisa Wax, the art teacher who designed the Life's Deal project, has agreed to correspond with other teachers who are teaching versions of Life's Deal. Send pics or comments to lwax@boxmedia.com



MATERIALS

For Life's Deal –Deck of Cards

- 1.** Tagboard or railroad board or cardboard
- 2.** Acrylic medium—matte or glossy
- 3.** Brushes
- 4.** Cups for medium
- 5.** Scissors
- 6.** Magazines (one or two per student)
- 7.** Oil pastels
- 8.** Deck of cards
- 9.** Handouts with example cards
- 10.** Xeroxed worksheets
- 11.** Y-me Deck of Cards*

*Available from the Y-Me National Breast Cancer Organization for \$20.00 plus shipping, 312-986-8338