

# What's a Studio?

## Revisioning Creative Environments Through Open Studio Projects



“What’s a studio?”

These were the first words I heard in October 2006, when I entered Parkridge Community Centre and Sherbrooke Community Centre (SCC), long-term care facilities in Saskatchewan, Canada. That year I began a nine-month residency with the Saskatoon Health Region as part of the Artist in the Community program, which was implemented by the city of Saskatoon and funded by the Saskatchewan Arts Board. As the Artist-in-Residence, I was given a blank slate. There were no expectations, so I had the freedom to experiment. I was eager to unearth the artistic potential of the residents and immediately set out to engage this often marginalized community in a creative process that would challenge the participants, the staff, and the stereotypes surrounding individuals living in long-term care.

I went about creating a studio environment that focused on self-discovery and self-expression . . . a collaborative and supportive environment that was conducive to exploring



*A fiber art project conducted at a Canadian facility that was introduced to the Open Studio Projects concept by artist Jeff Nachtigall.*



creativity . . . a peer-group environment that challenged participants to push themselves beyond their comfort zones . . . and a studio that was truly accessible and inclusive.

*Individuals without the means to voice their concerns and hopes have been empowered to speak through art. The world has changed profoundly for these individuals: from one in which they cannot speak and never feel understood and heard, into one in which they have spoken loud and clear.*

*Ray Purdie, SCC Chaplain*

For more than two decades I have worked closely with a variety of communities, facilitating arts-based initiatives that utilize creativity as a vehicle to foster a sense of agency in individuals who feel powerless, while also initiating social change within marginalized communities. I developed a clear and specific methodology that informs a philosophy that

places creativity at the core of the human spirit. I believe that we are inherently creative beings and that art is our first language. Through art we are able to communicate in a manner that transcends the limitations and obstacles that surround us.

This was the birth of the Open Studio and Open Studio Projects. Open Studio Projects places emphasis on creativity, self-exploration, and self-expression. This is not art therapy or a craft room. Open Studio Projects promotes a peer-group environment, where all artists are treated as equals and there is no hierarchy of “teacher” and “student” or “patient” and “therapist.” It does not matter if you are a resident or a staff member, a practicum student or a client from the community.



*Elder resident steadies her hand while creating an original piece in the Open Studio.*

Once you enter the Open Studio, you are referred to as an artist. This may seem like a small or even unnecessary distinction, but it is actually the foundation for building a creative community, which will in turn help bring about a true culture change.

This is not to say that residents and staff will become the next Picasso or Matisse. It is not the intention of Open Studio Projects to turn out professional artists seeking a career in the field, although this does happen. It is about helping individuals to rediscover their creativity, which in many cases has been lying dormant for years, and to better express themselves. As a society, we have handed art over to a select few. This truly innate human quality that lies within all of us has been placed on a pedestal that many of us are

unable to reach. We are intimidated by what has become an academic pursuit and have forgotten the importance of the intuitive approach to creativity. Open Studio Projects nurtures this process and challenges the individuals' perceptions of art, tearing down the walls that many of us have built that separate each of us from our own inherent creativity. Once these barriers are overcome, the artist is free to explore a unique form of expression and develop an understanding that we are all personally invested in art. These new skills will benefit each community, as creative thinking becomes the norm.

The creative journey can be intimidating, and it is the beginning of this journey that can seem the most daunting. Art needs to be demystified and made accessible to everyone,



*Open Studio Projects connect individuals to their inherent creativity. Here a resident contemplates his creation in-progress.*



*Collaboration in the studio helps forge connections between residents, staff, and family.*

including residents, staff, family members, and volunteers.

The Open Studio will have a profound impact as each organization realizes the potential for the arts to become thoroughly integrated into its very fabric. The scope and scale of what can be achieved is limited only by the vision of the organization and the resources that are made available.

*The studio started small. Within months, dozens of residents were working in a variety of mediums and styles, filling the small space to the point of overflow. Most had never made art before. Reduced and restricted mobility (paraplegia and quadriplegia) and cognitive disorders (Alzheimer's, dementia, and acquired brain injuries) presented them with new challenges and limitations. With perseverance and dedication, and in some cases working through physical pain, these limitations grew into strengths. Through art, the participants in the studio have*

*found a new voice . . . and this new voice has empowered them.*

*The Insiders Exhibition Catalogue, 2007*

The community will come about however the residents' schedules allow. They will fit it into their day however they see fit. It becomes a part of their routine, a part of their lives. There are no scheduled classes or scheduled days. Instead, residents are encouraged to drop in whenever they feel creative.

The first curious participants through the door will help shape an environment where they are free to explore their creativity. They will dictate how and what the studio will look like. Art will be produced and hung on the walls of their rooms and throughout the building that is their home. As their confidence grows, they will become more vocal about their experiences. Residents who expressed little interest in the studio will begin to take note as they see the changes in their

friends and neighbors. Something is happening, and they will want to be a part of it.

This peer-group environment offers participants the chance to assume leadership roles by taking ownership of the successes of the Open Studio. Every artist in the Open Studio becomes an integral component of something that is larger than the individual. They are actively engaged in the process, exploring and expressing their own creativity and helping others to do the same in a safe and nurturing environment. *The studio is more popular than ever and continues to be a*

*vibrant hub of activity and exchange. The breakthroughs have been substantial and the benefits profound. Residents who once contemplated suicide are now mentors and role models. Individuals who were previously inactive have found a new energy, enthusiastically expressing themselves through art. The level of productivity has grown exponentially as the residents' dexterity and confidence have increased. Fine motor skills have improved; those who once shook as they tried to grip a brush are now expressing themselves through fluid motions. The positive impact on the residents and their families is astounding, and we continue to push the boundaries of self-expression and challenge the stereotypes of individuals with special needs.*

*The Insiders Exhibition Catalogue, 2007*

This is an opportunity for individuals to grow; to give back to their families, their community, and their caregivers.

The staff plays an equally important role in the development and implementation of a successful studio program. Residents share their experiences with their caregivers and clinicians, including them in the creative conversation and instilling the possibilities and virtues of a life with art. This informal introduction will help prepare the staff for their more formal role as participants in the Open Studio through workshops, information sessions, and presentations. They will be encouraged to explore their personal creative potential as they work alongside the residents and their colleagues.



*Collaboration in the studio helps forge connections between residents, staff, and family.*

Open Studio Projects helps organizations realize a more vibrant workplace, where the staff is able to contribute to a community that is larger than themselves and their respective departments. This helps remove the barriers created by internal hierarchies and provides an opportunity where staff can work alongside one another as peers. Open Studio Projects helps foster a truly collaborative environment and



*Artist Jeff Nachtigall sparks interest while working on an Open Studio Projects activity.*

encourages crossover projects that can involve any number of departments.

The Open Studio quickly becomes the hub of each organization. It is a natural gathering place, where ideas are shared, discussed, and critiqued. It is a crossroads where clients, clinicians, volunteers, family, residents, and staff can

meet and engage one another on neutral ground. The Open Studio is a forum for a dialogue that breaks down silos and promotes communication. This process will open doors and create endless possibilities for the participants as they begin to understand their potential and utilize their creative voice. I believe that some of the most profound and groundbreaking work will come from the artists' ability to work alongside and in concert with clinicians, doctors, specialists, and researchers from a multitude of disciplines.

The Open Studio embraces and utilizes all forms of creativity, as it is important to acknowledge that the creative process is not limited to any one medium and should include and encompass all forms of creative expression.

“But I can’t draw a straight line!”



*Pieces large and small all have a place in the studio.*

Well, I understood from the outset that my role was that of facilitator, and that it was essential to make art accessible to the community that I was working with. I am not interested in teaching an art class or demonstrating techniques. It is my intention to bring the artist out of the community, instead of bringing the artist to the community. This is different than facilitating the mark-making process. This is about breaking down the walls that have been built to separate us from our creativity. We need to challenge the preconception that art is for a select few. We need to address the sense of detachment people have from their own creativity and help them to reconnect. This is where the real work begins.

Open Studio Projects has helped the arts and creativity flourish in communities across North America. Hospitals, care homes, rehabilitation centers, and long-term care facilities have adopted this philosophy and utilize the Open Studio as a tool to help access the creative spirit of older adults, residents, patients, and healthcare providers. Open Studio Projects has grown to include a multitude of mediums, providing a rich and diverse environment for self-expression and self-exploration. Other initiatives have grown out of Open Studio Projects, including the Mobile Painting Device, the Museum of Temporary Art, and The Insiders.

This experience has enhanced and informed my studio practice, which continues to thrive and is forever changed. And this is only the beginning.



*Elder care resident dons a well-worn art smock as she begins to commit paint to canvas. Participation in the studio allows individuals to express their creativity and builds community.*

### **AUTHOR • JEFF NACHTIGALL**

Jeff is an established artist whose work has been exhibited in North America, Europe, and China. He also is a facilitator, speaker, and social entrepreneur who has led dozens of residencies and workshops, lectured in communities across Canada and the United States, and given keynote addresses at national conferences on the arts and aging.

In 2007, Jeff developed Open Studio Projects ([www.openstudioprojects.com](http://www.openstudioprojects.com)), a model that he has successfully replicated throughout Canada and the United States. This inclusive, non-hierarchical, community-centered strategy challenges traditional clinical approaches and pushes the boundaries of the arts in healthcare. This model has evolved and grown into a community-based practice, which engages marginalized groups across North America in art interventions that act as a catalyst for social change. Jeff is also the designer and inventor of the Mobile Painting Device

(MPD). The MPD transforms the wheelchair into a giant paintbrush, giving people who live with neurological deficits the opportunity to express themselves on a very large scale.

Twice shortlisted for the Lieutenant Governor's Award in Arts and Learning, Jeff consults with communities and organizations across Canada, Australia, and the United States.

*(All images provided courtesy of Jeff Nachtigall.)*

