

Cultivating Hope:

Combating Loneliness and
Finding Community Through Design

Andru Poole



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By Andru Poole

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Approved by Master's Examination Committee:

James Chae

Lorena Howard-Sheridan

Ramon Tejada

Natalia Ilyin

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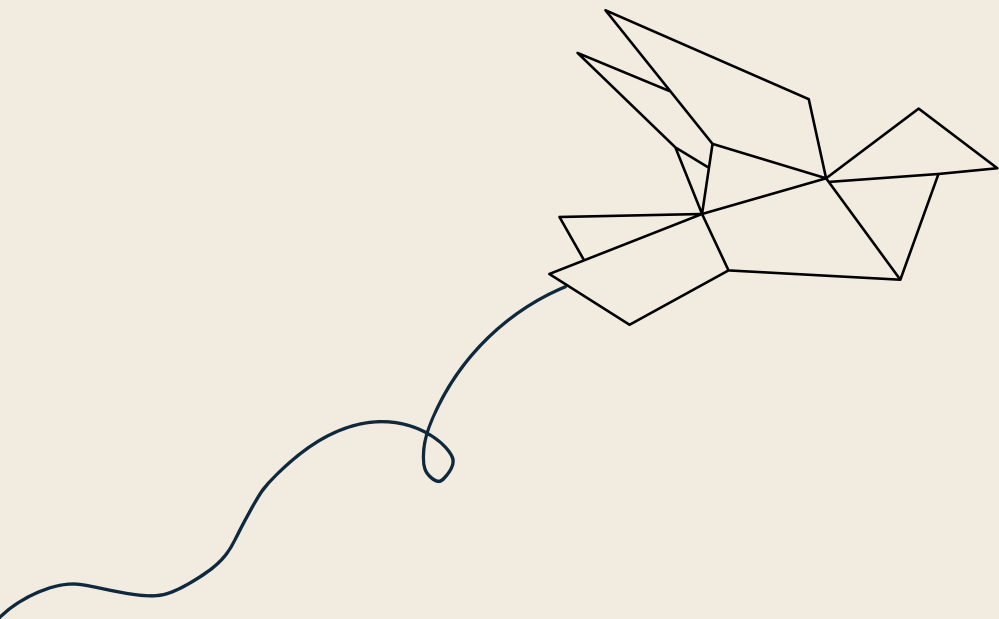


4th Semester
Collage of Stressed
Graphic Designer

Abstract

Through design research, experimentation, and the detailing of personal experience, I explore queer loneliness and finding community through design. Loneliness is not just a queer phenomenon; there is also an epidemic among graphic designers. However, the queer community is more susceptible to loneliness because LGBTQIA+ people are less likely to have relationships that come from the family they grew up with, school friends, or colleagues.

Loneliness negatively affects mental and physical health and can affect overall well-being. People can help their mental and physical health and spark creativity by seeking ways to combat loneliness and building new communities. Finding friends and community as an adult is difficult, but there are many opportunities to build community through design, both online and in-person.



Where to find help

If you or someone you know is struggling with mental health issues, please reach out for help. You can call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 988, or text HOME to 741741 to access the Crisis Text Line. In case of immediate danger, call 911.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) will help you locate mental health treatment facilities and programs. To find a facility in your state, search SAMHSA's online Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator. For additional resources, visit The National Institute of Mental Health NIMH's Help for Mental Illness web page.

This book provides general information. It should not be relied upon as recommending or promoting any specific diagnosis or method of treatment for a particular condition. It is not intended as a substitute for medical advice or for direct diagnosis and treatment of a medical or psychological condition by a qualified physician or therapist. Readers who have questions about a particular condition, possible treatments for that condition, or possible reactions from the condition or its treatment should consult a physician, therapist, or other qualified healthcare professional.



Introduction

As a forty seven year old queer graphic designer living in rural Virginia, **I find myself at a crossroads where my current communities no longer work for me, and I feel lonely.** I have been learning how to create new meaningful communities using creativity that, in the long run, will help people, myself included, mentally and physically and, in turn, help their creative practices. I have also been showing more of myself in my work, so much of my research has focused on the LGBTQIA+ community, one of the primary types of community I seek.

During the third semester of my Master of Fine Arts studies at Vermont College of Fine Arts, I explored typography and community. While the two may not appear to go together, I have learned to think about how designers utilize their knowledge to elevate, create, and support themselves and their communities.

I began seeking spaces where I may find community and am learning how this may help foster a looser, more fluid creative practice. I am interested in learning how I, as a designer, can use my knowledge to support the communities I am involved in or become involved in.

To better understand loneliness and community, I found through re-research that **many people use design to deal with loneliness**, and numerous studies have been done on the effectiveness of design in combating loneliness. While some creatives argue that art and design are distinctly different creative fields, they share some qualities and overlap. **Various art forms fall into the category of design. I loosely define design as any form of self-expression**, whether traditional design, drawing, painting, singing, theater, or any other form of self-expression, such as crocheting sweaters for chickens.

To further my research (and for a bit of fun), I went to my third year of adult LGBTQIA+ summer camp, which took place deep in the woods of Maine. The camp has been operating since 1997 and is similar to traditional sleep-away summer camps for kids. Camp offers a week of fun outdoor activities, arts and crafts, and evening social events. While there, I interviewed some other campers about loneliness and community. I continued the interviews after camp and **interviewed 27 participants in all.** The biggest question that needs to be answered, though, is: **What does loneliness even mean?**



**4th Semester
Collage of Lonely
Graphic Designer**

QUEER LONELINESS



“Loneliness —
like all grief
— is a queer
experience.”

- Richard Dowell

QUEER COMMUNITY

3rd Semester
Poster about
Queer Loneliness



**Loneliness
is a
Common
Emotion**

Many of us feel lonely from time to time. According to LGBTQ Hero, the British national health and wellbeing charity for LGBTQ+ people, “loneliness is a common human emotion that’s even more common amongst LGBTQ+ people.”¹ It is so prevalent in LGBTQIA+ communities because LGBTQIA+ people are less likely to have relationships that come from the family they grew up with, school friends, or colleagues.² LGBTQIA+ people are more likely to be disconnected from their families or have problems finding other people like us whom we can connect with.³

The epidemic of loneliness also carries over to being a graphic designer. The field can be isolating. In some work environments, there is often only one designer for a company. **The designer may feel they need someone to brainstorm with or look to for support.** In today’s work environment, many designers freelance or work remotely, which is often done alone. While there are digital networks, these often do not create real connections. Designers may feel lonely for several different reasons, including having overwhelming workloads, feeling undervalued, or are stressed out, especially when working on deadlines or with demanding clients.

According to professor, researcher, and lecturer Brene Brown, it is common for people to describe the experience of loneliness without naming it directly. This can include the naming of exhaustion, emptiness, and a lack of connection. As a working definition, it can be best understood as an emotional state where desired qualities and quantities of social interaction are not meeting social needs.⁴

While a person’s social needs might not be met **it is also possible to have people around you and still feel lonely.** You don’t have to live alone to feel lonely. You can have many friends or family around you and feel lonely. You can have a lot of social contact and support and still feel lonely. It is easy to feel lonely if you don’t feel understood or cared for by the people around you.⁵

Like any form of stress, loneliness can impact our health.⁶ Being LGBTQIA+ and having no LGBTQIA+ friends can take a toll on your mental and physical health, just as being a designer and having no one who understands you and supports you can also take its toll on your mental and physical health.

“

Design contributes to “core determinants of health; playing a critical role in health promotion; helping to prevent the onset of mental illness and age-related physical decline; supporting the treatment or management of mental illness, noncommunicable diseases, and neurological disorders; and assisting in acute and end-of-life care.”⁷

Those who experience chronic loneliness are prone to worse mental and physical health than those who have community.⁸ Social support and close relationships are the most significant buffers against physical and mental health problems.⁹ Jeremy Nobel, Harvard Medical School faculty member and founder of the UnLonely Project, says, “The arts are scientifically proven to be powerful forces in aiding in belonging and connection.” Design can help our anxiety and decrease our worry. “Art literally rewires our brains and can reduce stress. It allows us to feel better about ourselves and about our behaviors.”¹⁰

Being accurately mirrored by the people around you – particularly the close people is essential for mental health. Meg-John (MJ) Barker is a writer, zine-maker, and collaborator. They are the author of several popular books on sex, gender, and relationships, and they say LGBTQIA+

friendships can enable LGBTQIA+ people to breathe easier and have a sense of being themselves.¹¹ **Close queer friends become chosen family and forms bonds essential to our wellness and growth.**¹²

As the places where we meet each other such as gay bars and bookstores close, lots of LGBTQIA+ folks will have a more challenging time finding community in person. Making friends gets harder and harder as we reach adulthood. **Researcher Jeffrey Hall estimated that it takes 40–60 hours spent together to make a casual friend and 200+ hours for a close friend.**¹³

How do LGBTQIA+ people find connections? **Many queer people hide their true identity and self-isolate. This makes it difficult to form relationships and friendships.** As awareness about the epidemic of loneliness among LGBTQIA+ individuals increases, safe spaces need to be created both online and in person, forming deeper social connections. **My journey in design has allowed me to see these communication challenges through a designer's eyes and approach solutions through design.** No matter if you are LGBTQIA+, a graphic designer, or just feel lonely, humans need to feel that they belong. When we feel lonely, we tend to be drawn towards whatever makes us feel we belong. **Design creates a social bond from the most basic of human traits: our creativity. Connection, community, and belonging are the three pillars that can help loneliness.**

LGBT Hero notes that “LGBTQ+ people are also more likely to face discrimination due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, which can lead to feelings of isolation and difficulties getting close to other people.”¹⁴ Whether you live in or outside a big city, **finding connections, communities, and places where you feel you belong is challenging.** For designers or LGBTQIA+ people who live outside of an urban environment, it is difficult to find other people with similar interests nearby. Loneliness, however, can still exist in big cities and places where there are higher numbers of designers and LGBTQIA+ people because so many events revolve around drinking, parties, and clubs, and that does not work for everyone.

It becomes essential, then, to find like-minded people or forge deeper relationships.¹⁵ **People are looking for and finding community through design by getting involved in local art organizations, design organizations,**

local LGBTQIA+ Centers, and by looking online for types of community they would like.

Design bonds people and stimulates our brains. This can be measured scientifically. We have mirror neurons, which are “brain cells that fire when a person performs an action and when they observe someone else performing the same action.”¹⁶ These help us to see the world from different perspectives. These **neurons are stimulated when we make art and observe art.** The experience bonds us with other people and helps curb loneliness.¹⁷



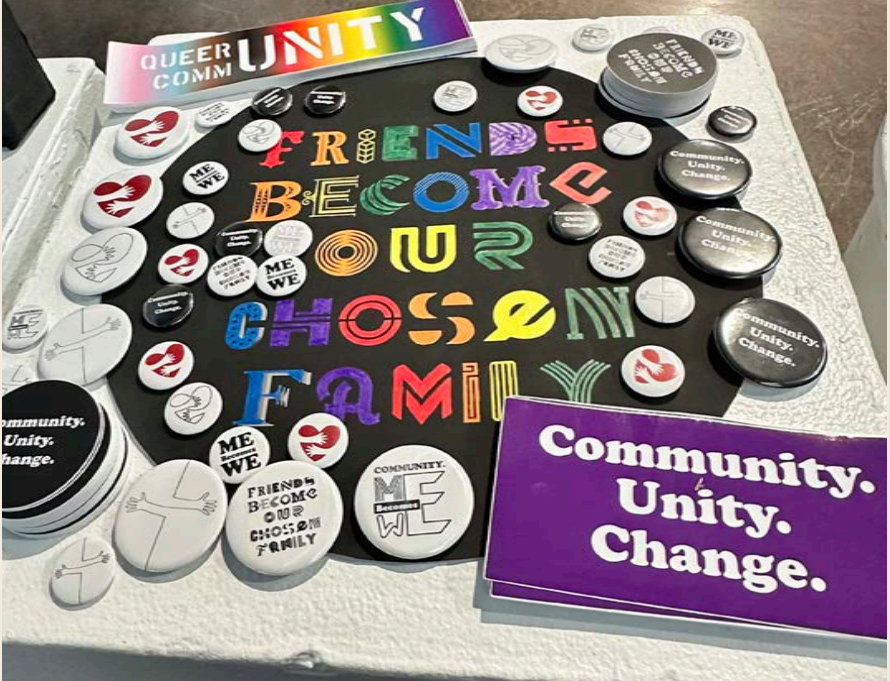
**4th Semester
Collage Showing
Neurons Being Stimulated
By Shared Music**

4A Arts Executive Director Gavin Lodge says, “Research shows that artistic experiences **(making or experiencing art) improves quality of life by creating social bonds.** For example, choral singing was shown to decrease cortisol levels (indicating lower stress levels) and to trigger the release of endorphins, oxytocin, dopamine and serotonin, which are all hormones associated with pleasure.”

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Design creates a sense of belonging and of pleasure.¹⁸
Belonging is a basic human need that is at the center of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and is the gateway to us reaching our full potential.¹⁹

People have used design as a community builder and haven for years.



3rd Semester
Pinup about Loneliness
and Community

what does community mean to me?

a community is a social unit (a group of living things) with a shared socially significant characteristic, such as place, set of norms, culture, religion, values, customs, or identity.

IDENTITY
AFFILIATION

types of community

1. identity-based
2. place-based
3. organizational
4. communities of action
5. communities of practice
6. interest-based
7. circumstantial communities

traditional definitions of community are outdated and are mostly based on place. place is no longer our key definer of identity or fellowship. we have shifted from being born into a community to choosing our own communities and expressing our identities through them.

PLACE CUSTOMS

the problem with the traditional definition is that for true community we need relationships and a feeling of fellowship, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests and goals.

NORMS GOALS
RELIGION

ETHNICITY CULTURE COMMONALITIES



3rd Semester
Poster about
Community



What Does Community Mean?

“

Community = Relationships²⁰

Communities are social units and are groups of living things with shared common attitudes, interests, and goals.

Traditional definitions of community are outdated and are traditionally based on place.²¹ Place is no longer our crucial identifier of identity or fellowship. Fabian Pfortmüller, Swiss community weaver in Amsterdam, co-founder of the Together Institute, and co-author of Community Canvas, says, **“We have shifted from being born into a community to choosing our communities and expressing our identities through them.”**²² People now select communities based on shared interests and identities rather than inheriting them based on where they live.

Essentially, we “choose” our communities rather than simply being born into them.²³ The problem with the traditional definition of community is that we need relationships based on shared common attitudes, interests, and goals to feel connected and form communities.

The thriving communities we build have three factors: Participation to help strengthen the bonds, relationships to make your community feel alive and active, and empathy, where members will go out of their way to think and consider the community and its members.²⁴ Eleanor Savage, queer, civic-minded, anti-racist artist and organizer, says, “I don’t separate art from community. Art is a practice. Community is a practice. Both are based in relationship... The practice of being in community, relationship-based face-to-face communication and engagement, respectful conversation, care for one another—this is what arts and culture practice provides.”²⁵ Modern-day technology plays its part in relationships and communities.

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Polling from Americans for the Arts found that 72% of people believe that the arts unify a community regardless of age, race, or ethnicity.²⁶



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BY THE
COMPASSIONATE
ACTIONS
OF ITS
MEMBERS."

CORETTA
SCOTT KING

"THE
GREATNESS
OF A
COMMUNITY
IS MOST
ACCURATELY
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FINDING QUEER COMMUNITY

3rd Semester
Poster about
Queer Loneliness



Exploring Community through Technology

Technology has changed people's lives. Over the years, the internet has grown immensely. As smartphones became more popular and dating apps became more prevalent and inclusive, we started using them to meet more people and communicate more openly. **We meet people online and use dating apps to not only seek out potential partners but for finding friends.**

However, there have been multiple studies about the effects of dating apps, and many of them show that singles report feeling lonely, socially anxious, and depressed after using them. Brad Brenner, Ph.D., co-Founder of the Therapy Group of NYC, says that **dating apps have a downside to mental health. They fuel social media addiction, leave the users susceptible to rejection 24/7, and make people question their self-worth.**²⁷

Nearly eighty percent of long-term dating app users said they had experienced emotional burnout or fatigue, as stated in a June 2022 article in The New York Times.²⁸ According to a report from the event management site Eventbrite, as people have left dating apps, there has been a rise in the number of in-person singles events in the last year. There were over one million five hundred thousand searches for singles events on the Eventbrite platform last year alone, with approximately three hundred and seventy six thousand people who attended these events.²⁹

Daters crave deeper connections, with sixty nine percent of Millennials preferring in-person dating because it feels more genuine. **Daters believe in-person interactions provide a more authentic environment for better emotional connection and understanding.** Eventbrite found that singles are moving away from bars and parties to hobby-based and interest-focused events.³⁰ **People are valuing more meaningful experiences now, leading to new community connections.**

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More than half of daters, including 54% of Gen Z and 53% of Millennials, say it's hard to start or continue meaningful conversations online.

Online graphic design communities are another way of finding new communities. There is a wealth of accessible communities for graphic designers. **These communities are essential and helpful** in keeping up with the ever-growing and changing design world and software. It is also valuable to see designs worldwide and connect with other designers.

One such community is the Queer Design Club, which was created to build a community for LGBTQIA+ designers to celebrate queer contributions to the design industry and visual culture, share their work, and connect.³¹ **Another community is the collective Bye Bye Binary**, formed in 2018, which aims to explore new graphic and typographic forms adapted to the French language.³² Their font library features inclusive, non-binary, and post-binary fonts under construction. When selecting typography, we know everything, such as proportions, curves, and color, has been considered. **Typography can hinder or enhance designs and carry strong semi-otic associations.**



**3rd Semester
Poster about
Chosen Family**



Semiotic Codes



Semiotics is the process of extracting meaning from something. Semiotic code studies how people interpret and use signs and symbols, which can be used to find others in your communities. Codes have been a large part of my life as someone who grew up in Appalachia, as a queer, and as a graphic designer.

Semiotics of Appalachian Language

People often stereotype Southerners as being uneducated, uncultured, and illiterate rednecks. Most people have probably seen one of the following movies or shows with stereotypical Southern portrayals. Films and TV shows such as Sweet Home Alabama, Deliverance, The Beverly Hillbillies, and The Dukes of Hazzard. These are harmful stereotypes.

Southerners speak with a distinctive accent. We know we have a similar regional community background when we hear someone with a Southern accent, and these semiotics can be broken down even further into distinct Southern regions, such as middle Appalachia.

Appalachians, often code-switch between dialects depending on who we talk to and what kind of community we are in. We talk to most non-Appalachian people one way; when we speak to our families or other Appalachians, we talk another way. We switch our southern accents on and off to fit better in certain situations. **Sometimes, our southern draws will be more charming and helpful, so we turn on the twang. There are other times when our southern accent and dialect would be frowned upon.**

As part of my research, I interviewed two people I grew up with in Appalachia, Anna and Heather. Anna recalled that when she was working in the northeastern United States, someone asked where she was from, and she said “West Virginia.” The person replied, “You don’t look like you are from West Virginia.” What exactly is someone from West Virginia supposed to look like? Are we supposed to be missing teeth or not wearing shoes? A standard stereotype that is not true of most Appalachians. Heather had similar experiences to Anna and explained that she often has to explain what some terms mean when she takes her spouse and children back to West Virginia.

Queer Semiotics: Hanky Code and Keys

For many queer people, the semiotic code that they are likely familiar with is hanky code which some gay men used in the '70s and '80s to signal their sexual interests and desires to other men. Gay men wanted to know who to cruise for sex, so a semiotic code was created. A way of flagging sexual preferences is by wearing different colored handkerchiefs that signal certain sexual acts and placing the handkerchiefs in different places to signify if the wearer is passive or active. A handkerchief placed in the right hip pocket means that the wearer desires to play the passive role, while a handkerchief placed in the left hip pocket indicates that the wearer will assume the active role.³³ Gay men have primarily used the hanky code. Many people on the LGBTQIA+ spectrum use the hanky code still.

This semiotic code is essential in the queer cruising world because sexual roles are not as clearly defined. It is impossible most of the time to determine a queer's sexual preference either in terms of activity or passive/aggressive nature. Queers have more sexual possibilities than straight people and, therefore, need a communication system.

Keys are another semiotic, like hanky code. A key chain worn on the right side of the body indicates that the wearer desires to play a passive role during a sexual encounter. Keys placed on the left side of the body signify that the wearer expects to assume a dominant position.³⁴ Keys are not indicative of sexual preference.

Semiotics: Graphic Design

Semiotics are a vital tool for designers to convey messages through visual communication. Looking at how people form communities by reading the semiotics of their messaging can help us understand the role of race, language, and sexual orientation in creating communities. Cultural symbols represent cultural importance recognized by a specific society or community member. **Designers use semiotics to convey messages more clearly, break down language barriers, suggest emotions, create associations, and communicate brand identity.** Designers should be mindful of cultural diversity, psychological behavior, and design ethics. They should consider

how their design elements might trigger emotions and associations in their intended audience.

“

“Symbols serve as a reminder of who we are and what we believe.” - Simon Sinek³⁵

In studying the semiotics of the world around us, we see how design shapes our understanding of the world by decoding the meaning behind symbols. One such shape and sign that is dominant worldwide is the stop sign. Stop signs use semiotics to convey a message to drivers and pedestrians. The octagonal shape of the stop sign is a universally recognized symbol for “stop.” The color red represents urgency and danger. The stop sign is a symbol because we have widely agreed upon its meaning.

On the website Credly, they state, **“We were created for community, and symbols, graphics, and icons allow us to create that community for ourselves. Recognizing something that you relate to, in another person, allows people who may not come from the same background to connect with each other. That need for community transcends physical boundaries.”**³⁶



Do People Find Community Through Design?



Design can be used as a tool to elevate others' voices. The stories people tell can spark empathy, and the connection between design and emotion strengthens this power. I conducted 27 interviews and recorded over 35 hours of stories of loneliness and finding community through design.

People don't generally talk about loneliness, but the stories recorded show how common it is. For many people, social media and our online world is isolating and does not create real connections. **By talking about loneliness, we can combat isolation and build community.**

According to the Baring Foundation, **participants in design projects often mention how the activity "has brought them into contact with new people, that they have formed new friendships, and that they feel less isolated."**³⁷

Creating these communities takes effort, and you must put yourself out there and push yourself to go out and try new things.

Those whom I interviewed were asked the following questions: **Do they feel lonely at times? How do they combat loneliness when it sets in? What does community mean to them? How has community changed for them? Have they found community through art and design? How does community foster creativity in their lives? How does community create growth? How do specific spaces (such as camp) foster community?**

Roughly sixty percent of the participants seek community through design, whether traditional art forms like painting or stained glass, crocheting, music, or dance. The results ranged from one participant who does not experience loneliness and does not have community to one who is very lonely and has several communities. One participant initially responded that she does not have community and is not lonely. She contacted me two months later to say she has been thinking a lot about the questions that I asked. She said she realized that she has only experienced loneliness and said, "How are we supposed to know we are lonely when we know no other feeling?"

Many participants in my research have lost community over the years and seek ways to rebuild community. Through the interviews, we see that seeking community through design has alleviated loneliness for many of the participants, and in a few instances, the participants said that design has saved their lives. While some participants do not currently seek

community through design, two contacted me after their interviews to say they took a design class after our interview and met new friends they intend to get to know. **Interview participants ranged in age from 18-71 and were a mix of cis-gendered males and females, transmen, transwomen, and non-binary people. Most participants are queer. I have selected 7 of the 27 interviews to highlight.**

Portia

*38 years old, Cape Town, South Africa, a person of color,
cis-woman, she/her pronouns, straight*

Portia said she has “lived a million different lives in cities, islands, and jungles across continents - each move inspired by a calling to relish the gift of freedom.” When I met Portia, we lived in New York City in the mid-2010’s. For a brief time, we both worked at a flea market called Brooklyn Flea. I was the manager of the Flea, and she worked for one of the vendors selling jewelry. We both enjoyed our time working at the Flea and agree that **enjoying work makes a massive difference in loneliness.**

Portia experienced some of her loneliest times while living in New York. She recalled a time when she cried every day. **She started a project writing about her loneliness, and she just stopped crying one day.** We both dealt with loneliness by forming friendships through shared interests and using technology to maintain relationships.

Portia created an Instagram art project that stemmed from loneliness but fostered community through design, and she also opened an art gallery. She built communities for herself through design, and her loneliness improved during her gallery’s existence. Portia shared her experiences with the design community and how it became a business for her, which affected her enjoyment and ultimately burnt her out. She expressed gratitude for the positive life changes she experienced through design and the communities from the projects. **Both the Instagram art project and art gallery created new friendships and communities** for Portia and helped with her feelings of loneliness.

Jan

*56 years old, Arizona, USA, white, cis-woman,
she/her pronouns, queer*

Jan is a fellow camper and one of the stained-glass instructors at the adult summer camp we go to. We spoke about the concept of community and its impact on creativity and personal growth.

Jan, a GIS analyst and wildlife biologist, discussed her journey from being science-oriented to discovering design, mainly stained glass. Jan moved to a new part of the country for graduate school, and she struggled to find a queer community. She began attending the LGBTQIA+ Summer Camp for adults to have a queer community in her life. She said she felt a sense of belonging and freedom of expression at camp. Despite initial discomfort, Camp provided a safe space where Jan felt accepted and inspired to pursue art. Jan appreciated the intermixing of different communities at Camp and the sense of safety it provided.

Jan said community is significant in her life, particularly in how it fosters creativity and growth. She found a love for design through camp. Jan was surprised during her first experience at Camp when she was drawn to design rather than the outdoor activities. **She found her love of stained glass** at camp despite a harsh instructor.

Jan now has a community that started with her new love of stained glass. She takes stained glass classes in her town, has become increasingly obsessed with the craft, and has acquired her own equipment. **She said the stained-glass community has saved her life, and she feels less lonely now. Jan reflected on the loneliness she has experienced in various places and the comfort of finding a community through design. She said that she gained confidence and self-esteem through artistic expression.**

Jan has also attended meetup groups and said they can lead to meaningful connections. She said there are challenges to finding community, but there are rewards for connecting with others who share similar experiences. She

Jan *(Continued)*

recommended volunteering and engaging with local arts and LGBTQIA+ organizations.

She emphasized the importance of non-romantic relationships for building lasting community and shared experiences of overcoming loneliness through her creative endeavors and community engagement. **She also stressed the importance of community in fostering creativity and personal growth. She said design and community are essential to maintain her mental health and well-being.**

Jaime

*42 years old, New Hampshire, USA, white, cis-woman,
she/her pronouns, queer.*

I met Jaime 10 years ago at the LGBTQIA+ adult summer camp we both attend. Jaime has gone most years since and is now a Rainbow Group Leader at camp. She said she goes annually to soak up the queer community. Jaime said she has found a solid queer community at camp, which became her primary source of queer connection and support. She expressed gratitude for the friendships and sense of belonging at camp but also said there are challenges in maintaining friendships.

Jaime made her first queer friends in college and found it challenging to come back out again in a less queer-friendly area like New Hampshire, where she lives. **She felt the importance of finding community**, particularly at camp, where she felt accepted. Jaime said **the transition from college to returning home to New Hampshire left her feeling a sense of loneliness and isolation**. She says that New Hampshire lacks queer spaces and that queer-owned businesses like the Teatotaler, a queer coffee house in Concord, NH, are essential. She says that **there is a loss of queer spaces and that queer-friendly companies are critical to provide recognition and support to those in the queer community.**

Jaime *(continued)*

Jaime said there is difficulty in making deep connections, and that has an impact on anxiety and depression in her life. She said self-expression, community, and design are vital to healing.

Jaime said that she hit an emotional low point of being depressed when she was jobless and living with her parents, which led to her looking to design and joining a chorus for community and support. The chorus, while not specifically queer, provided a sense of sisterhood and acceptance, which helped Jaime cope with loneliness.

Jaime said that there is difficulty in making friends as an adult, and it is important to have deeper conversations to form meaningful relationships. She said **societal expectations and benchmarks contribute to feelings of inadequacy and loneliness.** She said that living alone takes an emotional toll on her, and she has insecurities that arise at night, exacerbating feelings of loneliness. Jaime said that she has a history of anxiety and depression, which she manages by keeping busy and recognizing her feelings.

Jaime shared her anxiety about public expression of queer identity, even in relatively accepting places like Boston, Massachusetts. She fears being targeted for wearing LGBTQIA+ clothing and mentioned the safety concerns for transgender individuals in public spaces. Jaime recounted a past incident at Walmart where her partner was almost arrested for using the women's bathroom, which highlights the challenges transgender people face. She mentioned the importance of acceptance, especially for transgender individuals, and the ongoing struggle for safety and recognition.

Jaime said that activities and workshops help facilitate connections and build community. Although she has had difficulty permitting herself to create, she loves crafts and desires to improve her skills despite the frustration of not being immediately good at something.

Jaime said self-care and connecting with herself through creative activities are crucial. She also stresses personal growth and self-acceptance in overcoming loneliness and finding community.

Luna

*55 years old, Puerto Rico, USA, person of color, transwoman,
she/her pronouns, queer.*

Luna is another camper from the LGBTQIA+ adult summer camp. Our conversation explored the concept of community, its evolution, and its impact on personal growth. She said she has faced challenges as a transwoman of color with learning disabilities and ADHD and emphasized the need for self-care and medication. **She said the role of the community is to provide support and encouragement during difficult times.**

Luna said that addressing loneliness by communicating directly with people is essential. She suggested asking others directly if they are okay and shares an example of resolving a misunderstanding. She said there are patterns of loneliness, and we need to break them by making things clear and not internalizing negative feelings. She stressed the importance of not staying in the same place or with the same people, encouraging new experiences to avoid loneliness patterns.

Luna defined community as “common unity,” highlighting the importance of shared experiences and creating a culture around her. She said that community provides moments of self-expression and belonging, especially during times of need like protests and vigils. Luna said that the role of rituals and traditions also creates a sense of community and belonging. She emphasized the need for self-care and the **role of community in fostering creativity and personal growth. Luna shared her experience as an artist, highlighting the role of creativity in problem-solving and survival.** She reflected on the loss of a family member due to alcoholism and said that it impacts her creative expression and community involvement. **Luna is looking for artistic ways to build community.**

Luna said that community evolved with personal growth and compared it to the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly. She noted that people often move on from one community to another as they grow, like transitioning from school communities. She explained that community fosters

personal growth through shared experiences and common interests. Luna says specific spaces foster community by promoting fun activities that benefit others. **She explained that stepping out of one's comfort zone and trying new activities fosters growth and challenges oneself.**

Luna said it is crucial to adapt to new forms of communication within the community, such as using social media and new technologies. The Internet has impacted community and dating, and Luna compared the Internet to the pre-internet era of meeting people through pamphlets and pen-pals. She spoke about her experience with dating apps and the challenges of maintaining boundaries and comfort levels. The overall takeaway from Luna was to communicate openly, practice self-care, and **find ways to involve yourself in design to help with loneliness.**

AI

*18 years old, Indiana, USA, White, transman,
he/him pronouns, queer.*

AI is the son of another camper from the LGBTQIA+ adult summer camp. He recently began college in Chicago, Illinois, and has been finding his place. We started the conversation by defining community, and AI said he **thinks of community as a “blanket of understanding” and the importance of shared interests and values.** AI describes the lack of community where he is from in suburban Indiana and the challenges of building it.

AI shared his **current experience attending art school and finding community among peers with diverse backgrounds. He highlighted the importance of not having to explain oneself to others in an art school setting.**

AI shared his experience of social isolation during the pandemic and said he relied on online interactions, which did not fill the void of an in-person community. **He described a pivotal summer experience of visiting his art school before enrollment, which led to significant personal growth and reconnection with community.**

AI *(Continued)*

I asked AI what sort of communities he has made so far at his new school. He mentioned his interest in jazz and that he is immersing himself in the jazz community. He appreciates the shared values and interests he has explored through jazz and expressed the importance of being around people who care about the same things.

AI also expressed interest in the tattoo community and its unique characteristics. He says the tattoo community has a tight-knit nature in Chicago and is very word-of-mouth. AI noted that there is supportive and queer nature to the tattoo community, including bartering and mutual support.

AI also shared his experience of finding community in a tech support area at school. AI has met people with diverse backgrounds and formed close connections through shared experiences. AI recounted a specific instance of receiving support from a tech worker who helped him graduate high school. AI emphasized the importance of knowing and caring for each other in these community spaces and expressed that art has been a source of security through the years and that self-expression is essential for his mental health.

Tolai

*54 years old, Utah, USA, a person of color, cis-male,
he/him pronouns, queer.*

Tolai is another camper from the LGBTQIA+ adult summer camp. He is **currently lonely and needs more community** in the rural Utah area where he lives. We started the conversation with Tolai, sharing his upbringing in a religious Mormon family and how he was pressured to conform to traditional relationship norms.

Tolai went on to talk about places he has had community in the past, like the Upward Bound program and when he attended the University of Utah. He went on to talk about the challenges of being gay in the 1980s and how

Tolai *(Continued)*

isolated he felt. He remembered the days of attending gender-bender parties and the secretive nature of the LGBTQIA+ community at the time.

Tolai talked about his time in the army and said he found a sense of community there but faced challenges with the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy. He described the camaraderie and support from other LGBTQIA+ soldiers despite the secrecy and fear of being outed. Tolai reflected on the safety he felt in the military and the support from his medical background. He also faced emotional struggles and anger issues during this period. After his time in the army, Tolai began working for the state government, where he was involved in an LGBTQIA+ committee.

Tolai **expressed frustration with Utah's lack of LGBTQIA+ community spaces and spoke of his efforts to find connections.** We talked about our experiences with dating apps, and he explained the challenges of finding compatible partners.

Tolai said he **focuses on staying busy and being involved in expressing himself through design, such as the men's chorus and playing cello, to find joy and cope with loneliness.** He said that **finding ways to express himself is vital to his happiness.** He says he misses learning from others' experiences and the pleasure of being part of a supportive community. He stressed the importance of setting boundaries and being selective about whom he associates with and said he faces challenges in maintaining friendships. He expressed his desire to balance being open and protecting himself with his hopes of finding more community.

B

*32 years old, Montana, USA, white, non-binary,
they/them pronouns, queer.*

B is another camper from the LGBTQIA+ adult summer camp. B spoke about the challenges of being queer in a rural area, mentioning the small queer community and the risks involved. B is **concerned about coming out in their community** because they are afraid of losing their job, and they worry about financial stability and safety in a small, conservative town. B said there is a **lack of local queer community, and there is difficulty integrating into an existing small queer community.**

B said that their first exposure to queer community was at camp. However, **maintaining long-distance relationships is complex, and regular communication is essential.** B's strategy is to schedule phone calls every four to six weeks to stay in touch with friends. B has a phone call with a different friend every week.

We discussed the impact of the Internet on community, and B noted the **shift from physical to online interactions and the difficulties in forming genuine relationships.** B emphasized the importance of regular communication in maintaining long-distance friendships and the challenges of distinguishing between genuine friends and acquaintances. B talked about how the internet has changed community dynamics, especially regarding dating and personal connections. They expressed difficulty in knowing the actual status of online friends and the need for genuine connections. B said there are challenges in online communities, such as a lack of authentic connections and the transient nature of online friendships. **They discussed the importance of investing time in real friendships and the difficulty of distinguishing between friends and acquaintances.** They also mentioned the role of platforms like Lex in forming queer communities and the struggles with finding local support.



4th Semester
Collage about
Community
Togetherness



Creating Community through Design

A Few Tips

Design can help people feel more connected to the world and encourage community togetherness while it also helps people become more open-minded and see things differently. Creativity emerges from the spontaneous collision of new ideas, thoughts, and practices. **Finding community can feel challenging, especially when you are in the depths of loneliness** and feeling like you don't fit in. You can't just go to events. You must also participate and speak to people to get to know them. Here is a list of some ways to put yourself out there and start looking for the communities you may want.



**4th Semester
Collage about
Finding
Community**

Ways to Find Community Through Design

1. Join a local arts organization
2. Join a chorus or musical group
3. Take a class and meet new people
4. Learn a new form of art or design and join associated groups
5. Attend arts events/performances
6. Go to artist talks or lectures
7. Join online arts communities
8. Go to/or teach workshops
9. Go to gallery shows or art walks and talk to people
10. Post your work on social media using hashtags. Interact with people who are creating similar work to yours
11. Take online connections and turn them into offline relationships by seeing if other artists you like live nearby and ask them if they would like to meet up
12. Rent an art studio in a location that has multiple studios and artists and holds events where you can meet other artists
13. Visit online chat rooms of artists who create similar work
14. Work with other artists and collaborate
15. Go to networking events and conferences
16. Volunteer at arts-related events
17. Put yourself out there, people will notice
18. Work on a community art project



Workshops

Workshops

As part of my graduate studies, I have designed three workshops to teach. I have spoken with the director of my local LGBTQIA+ Center about teaching the workshops at the center, and she thinks that it is a great idea. By designing and teaching a few workshops, I hope to meet new people in my community and build community for myself and others. I like to explore creativity, teach people, and chat with other creative people, so creative workshops are a great way to do that. The first workshop I developed is about pinback buttons.



Workshop 1: “Conversation Starter” Pinback Buttons

In this workshop begin by providing simple supplies, discuss how to use them, give students guidelines, show them a few fun things to do, and then let them play. Hand each student an instruction sheet about making buttons to reference with the steps numbered and described. Have the button supplies in bins with each step numbered so everything is clear. Place a poster under each button maker showing the steps to make a button. Create ambiance, have music playing, and provide snacks to create a relaxed atmosphere.

Time: 1hr 30mins - 2hrs

Attendees: 10 adults with varying craft skill levels

Location: Instructors choice

Supplies: Provided by instructor. Markers, colored pencils, crayons, magazines, stickers, glue sticks, pre-cut paper, various colors and designs of paper, scissors, trash cans, and button supplies

Goal: For students to learn the basic history of pinback buttons and how to make buttons. Each student will go home with a few buttons.

Lesson Plan:

1. Introduction yourself and give a short talk about why you chose button design (5 mins)
2. Have students introduce themselves (5 mins)
3. Basic button history (10 mins)
4. Discuss supplies and techniques. Show examples (10 mins)
5. Demonstrate how to use button making machine (5 mins)
6. Questions and Answers (5 mins)
7. Pick out supplies(5 mins)
8. Design buttons (60 mins)

9. Assist students using the button maker machines

10. Ask students to volunteer to show buttons and discuss

Brief Intro to Pinback Button History

Pinback buttons come in many shapes and sizes and are an inexpensive form of self-expression through words or visuals to display and share messages. Buttons represent issues people care about, events they went to, people they celebrate, and products they believe in.³⁸ Buttons show design history in a small format: advertising, causes, entertainment, events, and politics. Buttons have helped Grassroots movements move issues forward.

Buttons can be traced back to George Washington's 1789 inauguration when metal buttons with an eagle motif were created. Buttons are a convenient way to declare support for political candidates. In 1896, Whitehead & Hoag, a company in Newark, New Jersey, created the modern pinback button that we are familiar with today. The button was made by printing a design on paper, pressing it onto a metal backing, and covering it with a transparent cellulose film.³⁹

Buttons help people identify and find their communities and push for social justice and equality. They helped spread awareness of issues such as equal rights, war, and other issues when they were made. While self-expression has taken online forms, and social media is now the most popular form, the button preceded it to spread ideas and tell people what was on your mind. The next closest thing to spreading self-expression would be t-shirts with designs. Buttons serve one common purpose: they share a message. You may not agree or understand what the button is trying to say, but it is there speaking out on the wearers' behalf.⁴⁰

“

From dog catcher to the highest office in the land, buttons allow a type of word of mouth that facilitates conversation in a grassroots way.⁴¹

PINBACK BUTTON WORKSHOP

Join Us
Saturday,
January 25, 2025
1:00-3:00 PM

Join us for this **FREE** workshop where you will learn the basic history of pinback buttons, button design, and how to make buttons. Create your own button or use a premade template. Each participant will go home with a few buttons. Supplies, snacks, and drinks will be provided.

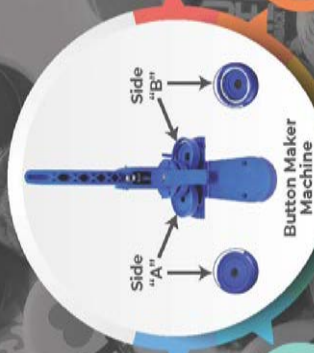
ARE
LGBTQ+
Center

1104 Amherst St.
Suite 200 (2nd floor)
Winchester, VA 22601

Space is
limited!
Registration
required.

For more details visit:
<https://aidsresponseeffort.org/lgbtq-center>

INSTRUCTIONS: HOW TO MAKE A PINBACK BUTTON



01

METAL CIRCLE

Place metal piece on side "A" of button maker with concave side facing down.

02

PAPER CIRCLE

Place paper circle (your artwork) face up on top of metal piece on side "A".

03

CLEAR PLASTIC CIRCLE

Place a clear plastic circle on top of paper circle on side "A". Make sure you are using only 1 piece of clear plastic.

04

SLIDE SIDE "A" & PUSH DOWN

Slide side "A" so it is underneath the center pusher and push handle down gently but firmly.

05

PLACE PIN BACK

Place a pin back on side "B" of button maker --the metal pin part should face downward.

06

SLIDE SIDE "B" & PUSH DOWN

Slide side "B" so it is underneath the center pusher and push handle down gently but firmly.

07

GRAB YOUR FINISHED PIN

Slide side "B" over so you can grab your button.

Workshop 2: Vision Board Collage

Help students to create a vision board, also known as a dream board. A vision board is a collage of images and words that represent your goals, dreams, and desires. It's a visual representation of how you want your life to be, and is meant to inspire and motivate you to achieve your goals. Explain the basics of vision boards and go over basic design principles such as composition, emphasis, balance, unity, variety, contrast, and proportions, and give each student a handout explaining the principles.

Like the button-making workshop, give a basic history of collage and discuss various techniques. Supply simple supplies, discuss using them, give students guidelines, show them a few collage techniques, and then let them create. Show examples to students and discuss what the project means to you. Have music playing and provide snacks to create a relaxed atmosphere. Help students learn and encourage their creativity and self-expression.

Time: 2hrs

Attendees: 10 adults with varying craft skill levels

Location: Instructors choice

Supplies: Provided by instructor. Markers, colored pencils, crayons, paint and brushes, magazines, stickers, glue sticks, paper of various colors and designs, scissors, trash cans

Goal: For students to learn the basic history of collage, learn a little about design, gain some insight about themselves, and help students to accept the inner parts of themselves that they do not usually express.

Lesson Plan:

1. Introduction to instructor (2 mins)
2. Have students introduce themselves (5 mins)
3. Introduction to project (5 mins)
4. Basic collage history and design principles (20 mins)



Collage

Workshop

Join Us
Saturday,
February 8, 2025
1:00-3:00 PM

Join us for this **FREE** workshop where you will learn the basic history of collage, basic design principles, and various collage techniques to create your own collages. Supplies, snacks, and drinks will be provided.

ARE LGBTQ+ Center

1104 Amherst St.
Suite 200 (2nd floor)
Winchester, VA 22601

For more details visit:
<https://aidsresponseeffort.org/lgbtq-center>

Space is
limited!
Registration
required.

Workshop 3: Collaborative Mural

The collaborative mural project allows participants to create a mural together while communicating and bouncing ideas off each other. The mural will be made on oversized paper using various art techniques. As with the collage workshop go over basic design principles such as composition, emphasis, balance, unity, variety, contrast, and proportions. Give each student a handout explaining the principles.

Give a basic history of murals and discuss various design techniques. Supply simple supplies, discuss how to use them, give students guidelines, and then let them create. Show examples to students and discuss the project. Have music playing and provide snacks to create a relaxed atmosphere. Remind students that we are here to have fun and learn.

Time: 2hrs

Attendees: 10 adults with varying craft skill levels

Location: Instructors choice

Supplies: Provided by instructor. Markers, colored pencils, crayons, paint and brushes, magazines, stickers, glue sticks, paper of various colors and designs, scissors, trash cans, and oversized paper for the mural's base.

Goal: For students to learn about mural and graphic design and work together for a common goal.

Lesson Plan:

1. Introduction to instructor (2 mins)
2. Have students introduce themselves (5 mins)
3. Introduction to project and design principles (10 mins)
4. Basic mural history and examples (5 mins)
5. Discuss supplies and techniques (5 mins)
6. Ask students to come up with a theme for the mural

7. Pick out supplies and design the mural


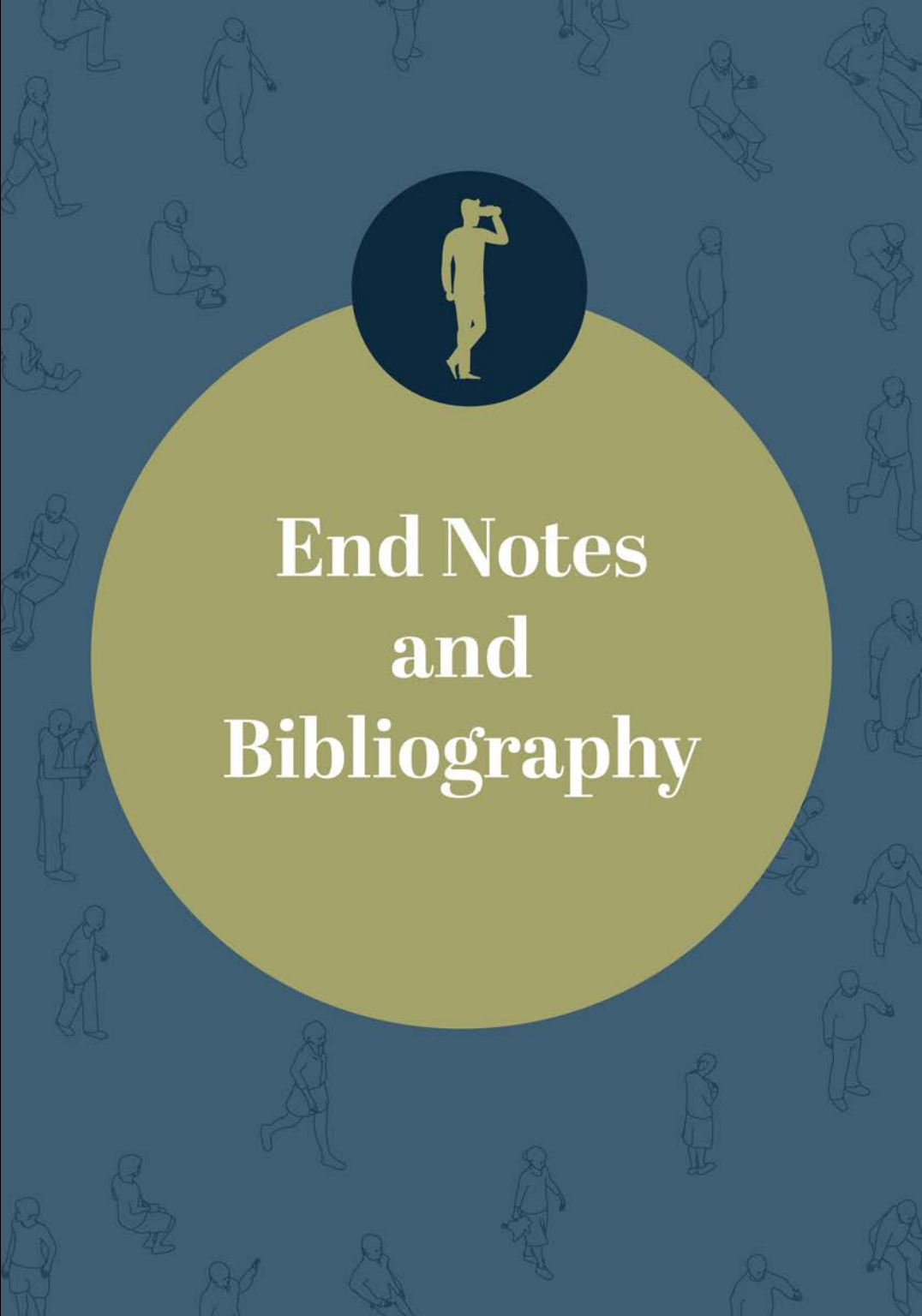
8. Assist students as needed

Basic Mural History

“A mural is any piece of graphic artwork that is painted or applied directly to a wall, ceiling or other permanent substrate.” Murals are among the oldest forms of visual art and communication known to humans. Murals are effective at communicating messages and attracting attention because of their size. During Upper Paleolithic times, more than 30,000 years ago, humans painted images on the walls of caves in the Chauvet cave, France. The most significant numbers of paintings are from Egyptian tombs in 3150BC, Pompeii in 100BC-AD79, and Minoan places 1700-1600BC.⁴⁴

In the Middle Ages, dry plaster was used. Wall painting grew in the 1300s in Italy when they began painting murals on wet plaster. That is when mural painting began to take shape and become modern. There are many different styles and techniques. The most well-known is fresco, which uses pigments dispersed in water with a damp lime wash. Murals today are painted in various ways, using oil or water-based paints. The mural movement has become a global one. Murals are also a communication tool. You can use a wall painting to communicate the message you wish the public to know. Writing on the walls is one of humankind’s earliest forms of communication and shows no signs of stopping.⁴⁵





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