

# Worry Project



Jason Blair

**W**hen we talk about educating the whole child in our schools today, we must make sure we are creating the conditions for them to bring their whole self into our schools in the first place. Too often, students leave their identities outside on the front steps. They quickly adopt a school identity that is devoid of personal context, human emotion, and meaningful connection. **How do we make space for students to make connections, exercise their empathic curiosity for others and cultivate their civic capacities?** We learn with and through others. We learn by feeling the stories of those around us. What if content was framed in relation to our interactions with others? Artists weave stories that create the fabric that embraces humanity. How might we begin to illuminate those stories?

**One way I have found is through the Worry Project.** I created this project to help students develop their empathic curiosity for others. I wanted to create a brave space in our art studio for students to bring their whole self into, a place where they embraced who they are and what they are about. The goal is to help students make connections with one another and realize we are all human. Worry is something we all experience for many different reasons. Allowing time for students to share their worries promotes empathy and provides an opportunity for perspective taking as well. When we take the time to listen to a story from someone else, it impacts our own identity in the process. That person becomes part of us in many ways. Creating deep connections through meaningful learning experiences like this creates a sense of belonging among students. They feel heard, seen and valued.

## Project Purpose

The purpose of this project is not to solve our worries, but to make them visible, give them a name, and let others know they are not alone. **The class has the power to help a classmate through a challenging time by having an open mind, heart, and hands.** While it may be difficult to reveal worries to the class, it is important to stress that students can share as much as they feel comfortable. The goal is not to judge the worries, but to exercise empathy and perspective taking, and to honor the many different paths students have taken in life.

This project can be adapted to meet the needs of the learners in your space and can be revisited as the year goes on as a way to check in with students. Once they are more comfortable, sharing may become easier as well. The most important project parts are the **Set Up** and **Reflection**. The introductory discussion and the **Celebration** at the end of the project will help frame the purpose and intent.

## Project Setup

Talk with students about family, relationships, and how the class is on this journey together. Conversation can center around picture books about family, friends, and meaningful relationships, as well as contemporary art and artists. Set the expectation that the conversation is designed to create space for others to take risks, be brave, make mistakes, and grow. It is a space where everyone should feel supported, heard, seen, valued, and celebrated for their individual identity.

## Selected Resources

**Artwork** — *Civil Tapestry* by Theaster Gates can spark a conversation about the worry of identity, being judged or discriminated against, feeling ignored, and equality.

**Contemporary Artists** — Laurie Frick creates art based on data. This data comes from worries she has about stress, time, friendship and more.

**Books** — The picture book *What Do You Do with a Problem* by Kobi Yamada can help start a conversation about how problems are a source of worry for all of us.

## Using the Human-Centered Design Process

The Human-Centered Design Process from IDEO, is one way to frame the Worry Project. It is simple and can be used in a variety of contexts for many different reasons. Make sure students understand this process prior to beginning the project. I have found it to be helpful and a great tool to use to frame all learning experiences. Of course, whether or not you use this process is entirely up to you.

IDEO's process is broken into 3-stages. The **Inspiration** stage, when information is gathered through research, investigation, and empathy interviews; the **Ideation** stage, when the inspiration gathered is used to begin developing ideas to act upon; and the **Implementation** stage, when students turn the research and revision into something actionable. In the art room, this stage becomes the art product.

### Inspiration

The Inspiration stage for this project is the class itself. **Students in the class will provide inspiration through the worry that each of them chooses to share.** Worries that are shared can be anonymous or not, that is up to the class to decide. To begin, have students spend some quiet time thinking about what is worrying them or causing stress in their lives. Once they have thought about it, students can write and/or sketch their worries on a Post-it note, add to Google Jamboard, or privately send them to the teacher if

the class chooses to do this anonymously. Some students will find this challenging. I help students by asking them to think about their worries in categories such as school, friends, home, the community, and so on. I also share my own worries, modeling the risk-taking and vulnerability I am asking of students.

**The Inspiration stage is about naming the worry and getting it out into the world.** This is a powerful step, and it is about quantity over quality. Instead of giving students a number of worries to submit, explain to them they will have an agreed-upon amount of time, and you will let them know how much time is left. As they document their worries, make sure students spread out around the room. This helps them feel more comfortable and reduces the inclination to see what someone else has written. Once the time is up, have students place the notes on a table (or by whatever digital media you are using) and have a seat.

Next, invite students, one at a time, to select a worry that is not their own. Provide time for them to read and think about the worries. This could be time to do a **Read (See), Think, Wonder Routine.** This is Harvard's Project Zero thinking routine, (instead of "See" insert "Read") that can help students slow down. Provide time to **read** the worry, **think** about the worry, and reflect on what it makes the student **wonder** about the worry. After this they can move into the Ideation phase.



## Selected Resources

**IDEO Design Process** — Learn about this process at [DesignThinking.ideo.com](https://www.designthinking.ideo.com).

**See Think Wonder** — Learn about this thinking routine at [pz.harvard.edu/resources/see-think-wonder](https://pz.harvard.edu/resources/see-think-wonder).

## Ideation

The Ideation stage is about empathy and imagination. Ask students to generate as many imaginative (or real) ways they could help address the selected worry. They need to make this thinking visible by creating sketches, ideation lists, or any way they choose to picture the selected worry. The goal in the beginning of this stage is to think of as many ideas as possible (quantity, not quality). A larger pool of potential ideas makes the chances of finding an original, thoughtful final idea greater. These ideas can be more symbolic and metaphorical.

There is power in feeling heard and valued. As mentioned earlier, this project is not about solving the worry, it is about acknowledging it and exercising empathy for each other. Once students have gone through the Ideation phase, they can narrow their ideas down to the one they think is the most powerful, helpful and sincere.

## Example

**Worry:** Maintaining friendships during a pandemic

### Ideation:

- Make a stuffed animal that takes us to a magical land where there is no pandemic.
- Create a new outdoor board game that requires 6 feet of social distancing to play it.
- Create a pair of glasses to wear that make friends appear closer than they are.

## Implementation

The final stage is Implementation. During this stage, students create the ideas. This can be done in a variety of ways depending on setting, materials, and time. This stage will take time to iterate ideas, adjust, and build. For example, an idea could be implemented with a detailed drawing that is labeled, or a student could choose to create a collage using magazine images if they don't feel confident drawing. A design statement should always accompany the final product. It could be a card stating why students created what they did including words of encouragement and understanding.

## Reflection Ideas

- Have students lead the reflection process.
- Teachers should participate since they also have worries.
- Ask students to make connections to other worries.
- Ask students how this project changed the way they see and understand their class.
- Ask students how this might impact how the classroom feels.
- Ask students how this project might impact their relationships.
- Ask how it felt to share a worry.
- Ask how it felt to create for someone else's worry.

## Project Celebration and Reflection

It helps to make some of the many things we all struggle with everyday visible. Once students are finished with their artwork, create a worry museum. If you are in a virtual environment, students can show the finished pieces through their cameras and talk about what they created and how the worry inspired them. If you are teaching in-person, students can place their work around the art room or school accompanied by the design statement. The idea here is for students to see that everyone has a unique perspective and one worry is essentially everyone's worry. This is not to give students more things to worry about, but to send the message that each of us has the power to help, encourage, and celebrate one another.

If students signed their worry note at the beginning of the project, a ceremony can be held in which students exchange worry artifacts in person. You can set this up however works best for your context.

To close the project, have students sit in a circle and process the entire journey of this project. See the box on the left for suggestions to facilitate reflection. This celebration helps students see and feel the impact of empathic curiosity for others.

If we want to truly educate the whole child, we need to design learning experiences that require the whole child to be present. Students and staff can embrace this journey together by slowing down to listen with their heads, hearts, and hands. **The Worry Project is about cultivating students' creative and civic capacities towards a more just and sustainable world.** 🐼

Jason Blaire is an art teacher at Abraham Depp Elementary School in Dublin, Ohio. [schoolteachers@mac.com](mailto:schoolteachers@mac.com). Twitter: [@\\_jasonblair](https://twitter.com/_jasonblair). [GrowCreativeThinkers.com](http://GrowCreativeThinkers.com).

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