

A Pedagogy of Making Do

by Danielle Henn

A woman with aching feet sees a five-gallon bucket, turns it upside down, and sits on it.

A man who needs quick cash goes into the woods, digs up a dogwood tree, and sells it on the side of the road.

A researcher wanders into an unfamiliar field of study, finds its approaches useful, and adopts them.

These vignettes are from Gadsden County, Florida, a rural pocket of North Florida where using resources in creative ways is an everyday practice. I am an art teacher and doctoral student in Tallahassee, but Gadsden County is where I grew up. In this article I examine how growing up in Gadsden County culture influenced my teaching philosophy with regard to what Gadsden County residents call *making do*. What does it mean to make do, and how might it inform the ways we teach? To answer these questions, I investigate the theoretical concept of making do and empirical literature examining its practice. I then approach research as bricolage (Kincheloe 2001) layering folklore, ethnographic methods, and local learning techniques to create a thorough picture of making do in Gadsden County. Finally, I share how my findings inform recommendations for a pedagogy of making do.



Map of Gadsden County, Florida

As an art educator I want to understand how to provide a learning environment for fostering manifestations of culture, and making do is one process that generates cultural expressions. Studying the art of making do may deepen our understanding of how and why customs and culture come into existence, change, and evolve. This work may simultaneously inform the formation, permutation, and evolution of a pedagogy of making do.

Making Do as a Theoretical Concept

Making do has various definitions and connotations, but for our purposes, to make do is to make something do what you want or need it to do. The use of the word *make* in this definition implies the subversion of a product's official purpose so it may be of service to one who wishes to use it in a new way. This theoretical concept was formally analyzed by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* where making do is defined as the "surreptitious and guileful 'movement'" (Certeau 1984, 34) of consumers, through their consumption, becoming producers. The introductory examples illuminate how this happens: how a woman consumes a bucket in such

a way that it produces a chair, how a man seizes and commodifies a tree to turn it into petty cash, and how an art educator employs folkloristic research methods, transforming their lessons to produce pedagogy.

In addition to discussing making do, Certeau (1984) explains the differences between strategies and tactics. Strategies are formal plans executed in plain sight by institutions in positions of power. Strategies found in a classroom may include official policies regarding behavior management and the scope and sequence of curriculum. Tactics, however, are informal and often covert actions carried out by individuals who are not in positions of power. Classic student tactics in the classroom include note passing and class clowning, yet the cleverest tacticians may invent new and endless ways of subverting the powers that be as an enactment of personal sovereignty. Students rarely have strategy on their side, yet they possess a plethora of tactics, one of which is the art of making do.

Making do is not to be confused with the do-it-yourself (DIY) movement. Making do and doing-it-yourself are both ways of producing something for oneself, yet making do has a more creative and immediate connotation. Making do is a creative practice born out of the constraints experienced by a producer. Alternatively, doing-it-yourself usually requires an absence of constraints to complete a project. A DIYer may need to purchase special materials and tools. They may also require spare time. For example, building a DIY chair may require lumber, saws, and a free weekend. In contrast, a make-do chair may be created immediately out of anything one can sit upon. To DIY is to exercise a privileged power over your resources, to bend resources to your will. To make do is to design creatively, to allow whatever resources are available to shape your creative output, and to do so in a way that serves your own needs and desires. Doing-it-yourself is composed. Making do is improvised.

Empirical Literature on Making Do

The art of making do is often used as a lens for researchers who are interested in folklore, culture, or entrepreneurial efforts that are illicit, underground, or difficult to detect. For example, to explore the creation and distribution of pirated music, ethnographer Jason Pine (2011) considers phenomena through an entrepreneurial lens of making do “positively [referring] to the alertness, adaptability, and celerity that are awakened by a challenge” (Pine 2011, 23). In a similar spirit, *The Amazing Crawfish Boat* by John Laudin (2016) investigates the resourcefulness of the Cajuns and Germans in Louisiana who use whatever is available to improve their fishing vessels. This ability to innovate creatively is key to their survival and to gaining advantages over their competitors.

The art of making do is also informative in pedagogical contexts. In “Pen Tapping: Forbidden Folklore” (2015) Anna Beresin discusses how students in a K–8 public elementary school entertain themselves, negotiate social status, and transition from one activity into another by tapping their ballpoint pens, turning the pens into percussion instruments. Pen tapping only happens on the sly because teachers find the tapping disruptive and have banned it. This make-do recreational activity is an example of what Michel de Certeau (1984) calls *la perruque*, a tactic for using time or resources officially allotted to working for someone else and using them to pursue one’s own desires instead. In “Steps Toward a Pedagogy of Tactics” Lankshear and Knobel (2002) argue that by becoming familiar with student tactics, instructors may also learn how to operate tactically and

use this practice to improve the quality of their students' learning. Using a lens of making do is a generative way to recognize and value creativity in everyday life (Laudun 2016, Pine 2012, Westin 1976), and developing an understanding of making do and tactics makes them easier to recognize and use in pedagogical contexts (Lankshear and Knobel 2002).

A Methodology of Making Do

As an art teacher I find the ability to use limited time and resources tactically invaluable, yet it is a skill I was never formally taught and, until recently, had not given much thought. Every teacher I know is engaged in the art of making do, yet we rarely explicitly reflect on this practice. To understand the origins of my own practice and how it may inform the development of a pedagogy of making do, I turn to the folkloristic approach of local learning. I research how folks are making do where I grew up, Gadsden County, Florida, using Kincheloe's (2001) bricolage approach. This bricolage approach to research involves collecting various types of data from a wide array of sources. Then the researcher considers the relationships between these different types of data to generate nuanced, holistic understandings. I am practicing this approach by gathering data through a layering of autoethnography, oral history, observational fieldwork, and photography. This interdisciplinarity allows for "the synergy of multiple perspectives" (Kincheloe 2001, 686) and reflects my philosophy of making do as both a pragmatic and constructivist approach to learning.

The *Kids' Guide to Local Culture* (Wagler, Olson, and Pryor 2004) and the *Teachers' Guide to Local Culture* (Wagler 2004) produced by the Madison Children's Museum in Madison, Wisconsin, served as excellent resources for guiding bricolage research, prompting me to engage in ethnographic local learning by conducting observational fieldwork, collecting oral histories, and digging deeper into traditions present in my own culture. This research is also autoethnographic as I wrote narrative reflections about my past and present experiences with making do in Gadsden County and allowed themes to emerge.

A methodology of making do is especially useful when examining the culture and practices of everyday life, for everyday life is often a slippery concept resisting formal capture and study (Certeau 1984). To understand daily life it is necessary to consider both rhythms and idiosyncrasies, the shared culture of a community and individual practices as well. Using a layered, bricolage approach provides footholds for understanding that a single method could not offer.

To understand the art and work of making do better I gathered oral histories from Gadsden County residents and relied upon my observations of the county, as well as my own knowledge of the area as a resident. I focus on four oral histories from participants Aaron, Barbara, Bill, and Jim who each provide a unique glimpse into what it means to make do in Gadsden County. Aaron is creative in the ways he finds food and makes money. For Aaron, making do is about survival and not calling too much attention to himself. For Barbara making do is about making the most with what you have and an attitude of gratitude. Bill offers an evolving definition of making do. When Bill was growing up, making do was about survival, especially putting food on the table, yet now he thinks about making do as complacency, a way of "just getting by" or maintaining one's status quo. Jim's family invested in Coca-Cola in the early 1900s and profited greatly. Jim looks back on the eccentric ways rich residents of Gadsden County made do with fondness.

Findings

Acts of making do are motivated by one or more of Glasser's (1986) five basic needs that drive human behavior: to survive and reproduce, to belong and love, to gain power, to be free, and to have fun. My neighbors in Gadsden County meet these needs by making do in boundlessly creative ways. To survive, Gadsden County residents fry squirrels for supper, grow and preserve their own food so they do not go hungry, and recycle scrap metal for just enough money to make rent. To find belonging and love they relish spontaneous porch gatherings with one another, sneak into the woods with their sweethearts, exchange kind greetings over cash registers, linger in parking lots after church functions, and offer warm smiles to complete strangers. To satisfy their need for power, people in Gadsden County join committees, gossip to increase their social standing, and hunt wild game. To live freely they work for cash paid under the table as soon as the job is done, walk or bicycle so as not to have to fool with a car, and avoid any arrangement with too many strings attached. Gadsden County residents make their own fun at fish fries, swimming holes, lawnmower parades, cow tipplings, and hog killings. Making do is a practice that serves our most basic needs, and it is motivated by making a life worth living, one full of love, power, freedom, and fun. This illuminates a link between making do and creativity, a relationship captured by the old adage *necessity is the mother of invention*. We create what we need to create by using the resources available to us. This is an important connection for the field of art education because it implies that if art educators wish to nurture and elicit student creativity and inventiveness they must create curriculum designed to meet student needs.

Making do takes countless forms and thrives when it is unobserved and unregulated. As such, trying to understand making do by formally tracking, documenting, and analyzing it is difficult. It is like trying to shine a light on a shadow. In my research, I experienced this as the observer's paradox, for even when I succeeded in identifying a prime example of making do, catching and studying it always felt a bit like killing it. Even so, to give an idea of the breadth of this practice in Gadsden County, I offer the following examples and how they inform a working definition of making do.

When I first met Aaron, he was strolling away from downtown Quincy with a bundle of bamboo shoots on his shoulder, many over 15 feet long. He said folks were clearing out cane behind the local Dollar General, and he was taking advantage of the opportunity to make some cane fishing poles. He took the poles home, dried them out, varnished them, strung them with fishing line, and has since used them to catch many a catfish dinner. **Making do is being flexible enough to recognize and seize opportunities when they present themselves.**

When I was a girl in Havana, I shot squirrels to keep them out of my grandmother's garden. A few



Photo by Danielle Henn.



Photo by Danielle Henn.



Photo courtesy Chaires United Methodist Church.

blocks away there lived a woman who knew how to clean and cook squirrel, so we disposed of the dead rodents by giving them to her for her supper. **Making do is forming and maintaining symbiotic relationships.**

A little further into town there is a make-do sign advertising La Formula, a small grocery specializing in Mexican and Central American goods. The sign once had interchangeable letters; however, instead of replacing the letters, the owners decided to paint their message directly on the sign. **Making do is using what you have to be a producer instead of a consumer.**

The curb in front of a local gas station and convenience store serves as a makeshift place of business for all kinds of illicit transactions. **Making do is learning how to use public space for personal purposes.**

In rural Concord, colloquially known as Coonbottom, there used to be a massive chicken pilau dinner, pronounced *perlow* in North Florida, and it served as an annual fundraiser for the local cemetery. Volunteers boiled chicken and rice in cast iron wash pots over open fires, stirring them with wooden boat oars. Folks sat on upturned bean hampers at plywood tables. The whole event was the epitome of making do. However, it grew in popularity, attracting over 5,000 attendees and the attention of the Florida Department of Health. In 2007 the state attempted to regulate the pilau dinner, and that shut down the whole affair. **Making do means operating on the sly, for with detection you risk the limitations of regulations.**

Aaron complains that young folks do not know how to cook with what they have in the kitchen. When I asked him why he thinks this is the case he says, "They ain't learnin'. They got so much to do in their lives where they ain't got time for it. . . . You got a lot of young people that eat out nowadays. They don't have time to sit down and cook a good country meal." In Gadsden County, those who do not have money to spend figure out how to make their time profitable instead. They keep gardens, go fishing, and learn to fix their belongings or scavenge for new ones. Sometimes they wait patiently to see whether they can do without before making a purchase. Canning and preserving food is very time consuming, but the practice is still alive and well in Gadsden County

as evidenced by all the shelves devoted to Mason jars and pectin in the local grocery stores. **Making do is spending time instead of money.**



In the art education classroom my students and I also make do in these ways. I am flexible in my lesson plans when more exciting opportunities present themselves. Once after teaching paper sculpture to a group of first graders they were inspired by a cityscape mural another class was working on and wanted to create their own city. Instead of adhering to my plans for the rest of class we moved the tables aside and created a paper city in the middle of the classroom. My students often choose to be producers before consumers by creating the things they need and decorating their belongings with supplies from my classroom. For example, one student found her hair was getting in the way of her work, so she created a hair tie.

Photos by Danielle Henn.



Another student struggling to get a clean print of her linocut found she had more control over the stamping pressure when use her body as a printing press.



We use public places for personal purposes by creating works of art on sidewalks, playgrounds, and in hallways. Once after a unit on weaving I found pine straw designs and messages woven into chain link fences during recess. We often take to the playground and use natural materials to leave patterns for passersby to discover.

I form and maintain symbiotic relationships with thrift stores to secure supplies for my classroom. For example, whenever a large painting on canvas comes through The Lucky Duck Thrift Store they call me,

and I trade donated goods for the canvases. I apply gesso to these canvases and most end up as substrates for large-scale collaborative projects. My students and I often operate on the sly when creating especially messy or controversial works of art, and I whisper that we will ask the principal's forgiveness instead of permission. My students also operate on the sly by hiding messages in their artwork, stealing glue to make slime at home, or slipping chalk pastels into their pockets to color their hair after class. Like many other art teachers I am notorious for spending time making, fixing, or reusing what my class needs instead of spending money to purchase something new. This makes the art room a magnet for piles of strange donated materials and students with broken belongings. This practice of making do is foundational to the way my classroom operates.

Steps Toward a Pedagogy of Making Do

Through studying local culture I have broadened and deepened the resources available to me as a pedagogue. My findings about making do in my community encourage an informal, tactical approach to applying the art of making do in the classroom. By developing a deeper understanding of making do as well as student and teacher tactics, an educator may more readily recognize and build upon a pedagogy rooted in this practice. Pedagogues may also bear in mind the spirit of the song "Mama Don't Allow":

Mama don't allow no washboard playing round here.

Mama don't allow no washboard playing round here.

Well we don't care what Mama don't allow,

Gonna play that washboard anyhow.

Mama don't allow no washboard playing round here.

(Pierce and Pierce 1971)

In this song, whether or not Mama allows washboard playing, the players will find a way to continue making music. Making do is many things as my interviews and personal experiences have taught me, from forming new, symbiotic relationships to producing instead of consuming to doing so on the sly. In the classroom, I make do myself, by using what I call a pedagogy of making do. Turning making do into a pedagogical practice requires teachers to be on the lookout for similarly unregulatable, uncontrollable passions so we may work with or around them rather than against them. In doing so, I have identified four crucial steps to creating a classroom reliant on a pedagogy of making do. They require the teacher to:

1. Value enabling constraints
2. Recognize and value the countless ways of making do
3. Make time and space for making do
4. Investigate and respect student motivation

Value Enabling Constraints

Although we should watch carefully for and encourage student behavior that strives to meet any of Glasser's (1986) needs, that is not to say that the classroom should be an unregulated environment. The creative practice of making do thrives on structure, and a pedagogy of making do affirms the need for constraints, limitations, boundaries, and order in the classroom. Rather than wondering only how to create more choice for students, a pedagogy of making do considers how to limit

choice in a way that frees the student to work intensely toward desired learning outcomes. In the art room this sometimes means limiting choices of colors or materials so students are not overwhelmed by endless options. Then, once a student's needs and desires have an opportunity to crystalize, the instructor may encourage the student to pursue those desires. These enabling constraints help students work creatively toward their learning objectives by requiring them to use limited resources in new, inventive ways (Fendler and Hamrock 2018).

Of course, not all constraints that students and teachers face in their classrooms are constructive. A lack of administrative support, insufficient funding, and excessive school duties beyond teaching do not enable students and teachers to do their best work. We must not confuse a pedagogy of making do with asking teachers and students to figure out how to teach and learn no matter their lack of resources or the excessive responsibilities heaped upon them. Sufficient resources are essential for a classroom to thrive, and we must advocate for the removal of harmful constraints in the classroom.

Recognize and Value the Countless Ways of Making Do

Recognizing the ways that students make do may help teachers view student behavior from the perspective of the student rather than of the teacher or educational institution. Behavior management may take new shape for teachers who are able to negotiate relationships with students as accomplices rather than as looming enforcers of institutional policies. To notice a student finding ways to grow in the cracks of a concrete policy and be able to say to that student "I see what you are doing! How can I help you?" may prove to be a powerful tool for building rapport and strengthening student agency. Returning to the example of a bucket-turned-chair, if students were to use a bucket as a chair, we would do better to acknowledge their resourcefulness than to admonish them for improper use of a bucket. When students use their educational environment to satisfy their own desires, we would do better to recognize and encourage their cleverness than to punish them. More often than not this behavior is not impertinence. It is survival.

Make Time and Space for Making Do

In a pedagogy of making do, educators must allow time and space for students to approach learning resourcefully and independently. This means encouraging student input on the design of certain projects and assessments as well as allowing class time for students to work toward academic goals as they choose. Encouraging the practice of *la perruque*, the reclaiming of class time as time to pursue personal interests, bolsters motivation. Many educators already make space for this by allowing students to choose books and topics for reports and projects, yet I argue educators should explicitly encourage their students to practice *la perruque* in educational settings whenever possible.

Making time for making do also means building in time for students to approach a problem in a variety of ways and to struggle and experiment toward success. Students who know they have time to go about their learning may take more creative risks than those pressured to get the correct answer right away.

Investigate and Respect Student Motivation

To encourage the development of student agency and personal sovereignty, educators must take care not to focus so intensely on their own goals for students that it drives student goals

underground. Educators must bear in mind that students are constantly held accountable for outcomes and goals chosen by others. This is disheartening when a student is unable to find a way to work simultaneously toward achieving their own goals, to work for themselves while working for others. As such, we must be careful not to assume that we understand the motivations for student behavior before doing the work of investigating those behaviors and the motivations behind them. Students operate within educational systems they often seek to subvert, sometimes in the pursuit of personal sovereignty. This is why a lens of making do is valuable for understanding what students do, how they do it, and why they do it.

In addition to investigating student motivation, educators must bear in mind that students do not always understand why they do what they do. Students need opportunities to think about how they decide what they need and want and to reflect on how they go about achieving these aims. Explicitly discussing the art of making do with students may provide a window for students and teachers to practice metacognition, an opportunity to think about their own thought processes and to better understand their own desires and needs.

The art of making do is both something that informs my fieldwork and a pedagogical practice I employ in the art classroom. Although making do comes in many forms, as teachers we all learn how to make do in countless ways. Investigating my personal culture of making do in Gadsden County enriched how I think about making do as an approach to education. Using making do as a specific pedagogical practice has the potential to create a more inclusive, understanding, and beneficial environment for our students.

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