The Power of Art in Multicultural Education: The International Stories Project

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Cultural differences resulting from immigration present many challenges to educators as schools and communities grow increasingly diverse. Teaching children to be tolerant and to understand and appreciate people from various backgrounds is particularly important in a world characterized by polarization, embittered cultural conflicts, and prejudice. Unfortunately, issues of diversity and social justice are rarely an integral part of the school curriculum that tends to isolate students from community life. Students often remain unaware of how negative stereotypes and discrimination can circumscribe the lives those who are different. But notions of diversity or culturally responsive teaching need to be contextualized; otherwise, they become vague abstractions (Gruenewald, 2008). The problem for teachers is how to provide opportunities for interaction with people from different backgrounds within their own community so that students can become active in transforming the character of social discourse about cultural differences in their own lives (Quezada & Romo, 2004). An effective response to this dilemma is to engage students in a purposeful investigation of the differences within their midst through the use of cultural journalism.

Cultural journalism describes an approach that sends students into the community to document the experiences and stories of the people who live there. It is fundamentally a way to orient students to the cultural realities of the places in which they live. Although cultural journalism traditionally uses written interviews, the students described in this article also used painting and photography as a way to understand issues of culture, difference, and social justice. Their artistic investigation and documentation of the cultures that surrounded them was augmented by the study of contemporary artists who make the stories of difference the central feature of their work. Art has tremendous potential to develop students’ intercultural competence and experience, and artists can reveal the assumptions, values, and beliefs of a culture in a way that makes them poignant and comprehensible (Johnson, 2002). The work of these students dramatically illustrates how cultural journalism that includes the study and making of art can be a powerful way to engender empathy, compassion, and intercultural dialogue, and engage students and teachers in critical thinking about cultural assumptions and diversity.

Art and Critical Pedagogy

It is important that students and teachers are encouraged to resist the limitations of their worldview by challenging the beliefs and assumptions that are embedded in their thinking. In many schools and communities, people who are different are invisible and voiceless. Their exclusion creates a sense of separateness and misunderstanding (Walker, 2001; Diaz, 2001). It is a difficult but important task for teachers to find ways for students to challenge the social stereotypes that surround their lives. But, multicultural education is often pushed out of the classroom and into the hallways where it serves a mild decorative function as themed bulletin boards (Korn, 2002). Transformational, critical pedagogy that challenges students and schools to become a force for equity in society is rarely attempted (Chalmers, 2002). A powerful antidote to this situation is a serious study of contemporary art and visual culture. Visual culture is a ubiquitous part of our students’ lives. Artful persuasions encourage students and teachers to buy things, to want things, and to understand the world in certain ways. A work of art can also help students view the world from new perspectives and to critically consider taken-for-granted assumptions; “the arts offer opportunities for perceiving alternative ways of transcending and being in the world . . . and to subvert our thoughtlessness and complacencies, our certainties” (Greene, 1995, p. 118). Learning about and making art allows students to become conversant in emerging and evermore prevalent forms of discourse. A critical study of art and visual culture can encourage students to critically consider the assumptions
and metaphors behind the images in the media that surround them (Freedman, 2003).

Contemporary art and photography can be an especially effective catalyst for developing a critical awareness of issues of race, immigration, difference, and privilege. Some contemporary artists recast stereotypes and images from visual culture in order to shake up our conventional view of things (Knight, 2006). For example, Shazia Sikander’s work uses traditional Hindu motifs and imagery to explore questions of feminism and Muslim identity. Her richly layered paintings suggest some of the complexities of personal identity in a world where the boundaries among cultures are blurred. In the graphic novel Persepolis, Marijane Satrapi (2000) describes the history of the Iranian revolution and her own personal experiences growing up surrounded by cultures that were foreign to her. The themes of identity, dislocation, and cultural confrontation found in the work of many contemporary artists resonate with many of our students. These artists remind us of our pedagogical responsibility to expand the learning experiences of our students beyond the familiar and expected (Korn, 2002). The study and making of art can be an effective catalyst for a critical pedagogy that has the potential to transform how students view the world and interact with others (Knight, 2006). Artistic expression can encourage dialogue and create profound understanding of the experiences of the others. By locating their local investigations of culture within the discourse of contemporary art, students were able to give their work visual as well as written dimensions.

Cultural Journalism

Cultural journalism describes an approach that uses interviewing as a process that links learning to student experiences and creates opportunities for students to have direct and intensive interaction with people in their community (Walker, 2001). It can be an effective component of critical pedagogy by giving students a means to critically consider their unexamined assumptions about the lives of other people, in this case the lives of immigrants (Gruenewald, 2003). The challenge for teachers is how to create learning experiences that will empower students to question the social stereotypes that surround and limit their lives. By linking art-making to student experiences that are personally meaningful, learning becomes a process that is active, purposeful, and critical (Stout, 1997). Although cultural journaling is usually thought of as written documentation resulting from interviews, this project expanded that concept to include a substantial reconstruction and expansion of interviews to include drawing, painting, and photography. The potential for art and cultural journalism to engage students with important questions about culture and diversity within their community led three teachers in Long Island to embark on two ambitious projects designed to give students and teachers immediate experiences with the diverse cultures in their community. These photography, drawing, and painting projects set out to create a visual documentation of the richness of the cultural heritage of the people of Port Washington by involving students in uncovering the stories of immigrants.

One Port, Many Faces: A Project in Documentary Photography

Port Washington is a diverse suburban community east of New York City on the edge of Long Island Sound. Its history of immigration mirrors many places in the country. Immigrants from northern Europe in the 18th century were followed by immigrants from Italy in the 19th and 20th century, who were followed by settlers from Latin America, Asia, and many other countries throughout the world. These immigrants have stories and experiences that often remain hidden from both students and other members of the community. One Port, Many Faces was a project that set out to create a rich photographic record of these stories.

Artistry and Cultural Exploration

The project required each student in the class to interview and photograph someone who had immigrated to the United States. The students were required to use a medium format camera to photograph their subjects in a studio environment. They developed the film, scanned the negative into the computer, and used digital darkroom software to perfect the image. The finished photographs were printed on an inkjet printer using archival paper at 18 × 24 inches. Part of the power of the final images comes from their large size. The artistry, technical mastery, and size of the finished prints made an insistent appeal to the viewer to pay attention and value these visual stories. The prints were framed and exhibited in the school and then in the community library. Each photograph was accompanied by a quotation that was excerpted from the student interviews.

An important ingredient of this project was a curriculum designed to cultivate a greater sensitivity and awareness among the students, while at the same time developing their technical and artistic abilities. Before taking the photographs or doing the interviews, the students viewed artwork and discussed films that dealt with issues of tolerance and liberation. These films included El Norte, Hotel Rwanda, Born into Brothels, and Turtles can Fly. Issues about discrimination, protest, symbolism, activism, and artistic responsibility were explored in...
these films and in the discussions that followed. For this project, the teachers designed an innovative curriculum that introduced students to important issues of culture, social justice, and diversity, and then asked the students to get directly involved in significant dialogue with members of their community. Along the way, each student was expected to develop a high level of technical artistry combined with conceptual acuity. They had to master photographic techniques, digital photo editing, the use of light, and skills in interviewing.

It was essential that the students gained confidence and proficiency in the photographic medium. They studied the portraits of master photographers to learn the technical aspects of medium format cameras. They learned how to use light in a studio situation and strategies for working with their subjects. They also learned how to conduct the interviews, summarize their narratives, and prepare their work for exhibition. It was complex learning involving thinking, artistry, and creativity. Their work was so technically proficient and emotionally compelling that the initial reaction of spectators was that it is the work of a professional photojournalist. Although each photograph tells a unique story about immigration, it also represents the journey each student took toward multicultural literacy, understanding, and relationships. When the project was finished, students reflected on their experiences, revealing the rich learning that happened in the process.

**Student Responses**

A key part of this story is what happened to the students in the process of creating their photographs. Many students expressed a reluctance to engage in this assignment because of the difficulty and awkwardness in beginning a conversation with someone they did not know. However, once they started, amazing things began to happen. Their words tell it best: “Photographing immigrants and interviewing them opened our eyes, and took away a little of our ignorance.” “I really enjoyed shooting my own dad and interviewing him. I was able to learn things about him that I otherwise might never have learned.” “It opened people’s minds to the fact that there are other people in the school besides their friends.” “Their stories are truly amazing, and now they are recognized for their courage.” “This project helped me recognize that differences in people are what make them special.” “It was very brave of them to share their experiences with us. It seems as though everyone gained a great deal of knowledge and life lessons from the immigrants that we photographed.”

Immigrant experiences ranged from those of fellow students who have been in the United States for only a few years, to parents or established members of the community who have been here much longer. “Not only did I make a friend, but I learned about a life I couldn’t imagine.” “Luckily, I found Julio . . . he let me photograph him the second I asked, without hesitation. It made me smile to see him laughing and smiling the entire time” (Figure 1). “In the beginning I was hesitant because I feared it would be awkward. I am so grateful for Rahad for being so open to me and inviting me into her life. Her story of immigration is truly inspiring” (Figure 2).

**Immigrant Stories**

Excerpts from the interviews were displayed alongside the photographs, making a poignant commentary about culture, diversity, struggle, and courage. “I don’t mind being different. I just mind that some people don’t like me because I’m different” (Meri Silva from El Salvador). “Every day was surprising for me when I first came here” (Maki Okamara, Japan). “My eyes were finally opened when I went back to El Salvador for a visit. This time I saw the poverty, pain, and dysfunction that I was headed for. I also realized that people saw me as a kid with a future, and I decided that I was not going to throw it away” (Erez Barlevy from El Salvador). “I came here with my brother as a young boy, leaving everything I knew to fulfill a new life” (Phil Matinale from Italy). “We didn’t think we were leaving our homes forever. We took only the bare essentials because we thought we would be able to return” (Aldona Marijosius from Lithuania). “My experience of America is so great; it cannot be described.

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*Figure 1. Julio, from Guatemala, by Sabrina Cutaia. “I used to get into fights, but now I’ve learned to think before I act, it’s much calmer here, not as much violence.”*
Figure 2. Rahad Rahman, from Bangladesh, by Erin Johns. “It was hard to leave all my friends and family, but they were understanding. It was hard to meet up with my father after five years away from him.”

with words” (Kalsom Kamk from Malaysia). “When you want to achieve something, sometimes you must leave behind something that you don’t really want to leave behind” (Merlyn Portillo, El Salvador). “I feel somewhat proud because I feel like I accomplished on my goals. I feel confident but somewhat sad because I still miss my friends” (James Lee from Korea).

International Story Portraits: Immigrant Stories in Paint

The success of the photography project led one of the photography teachers to team up with another art teacher to extend the idea of cultural journalism into drawing and painting. Once again, students interviewed an immigrant to the community, but this time their interviews included photographs and drawings that would be used to construct a painting. The aim was for the finished painting to tell a story using color, images, and symbols. Like the photography project, the international story portraits followed a trajectory from student reluctance through increasing levels of engagement with multicultural issues. Again, many technical and artistic issues had to be confronted. The small steps leading to the final paintings included encounters with contemporary artists, such as Shadia Sikander from Pakistan and Pepón Osorio from Puerto Rico. On the first day of the project, the students were confronted with a wall of portrait reproductions from contemporary artists. The class studied the wall and discussed the storytelling possibilities and artistic styles of the images. Students made preliminary drawings based on these reproductions while they completed their interviews. The project was designed to cultivate the disposition to look for stories in pictures in order to create meaningful visual narratives about intercultural relationships.

Intercultural Portrait Experiences

The students immediately discovered enormous diversity within their community. People from the continents of Asia, Africa, the Indian sub-continent, Europe, and South America were included in the project. Some students interviewed their peers while others interviewed older people in the community, including parents. Allison interviewed Rahad from Bangladesh and learned some of the rituals of Islam, including the reasons for and cultural complications associated with the head covering. Andrew interviewed his tennis teacher from Zambia and learned about his enormous struggle and sacrifice to move from Africa to Kansas and from Kansas to New York. Andrew discovered a common problem for many people who immigrate; a father or mother leaves to provide for their children, but then barely knows these children because of the gulf of geography. Lester, from Guatemala, told Willa, “Hispanic immigrants come here to make money for their family. It’s what they have to do. But they lose their family, too.” When asked if he thought the sacrifice was worth it, he answered, “Uh, it’s just really hard. That’s the story of Guatemala” (Figure 3).

Melanie found a young woman from Zimbabwe who described the difficulties of politics and governments that prevented her from being able to visit her family. Liz interviewed her grandmother who grew up in Nazi Germany (Figure 4). She told the story of her father being taken to a concentration camp and her family losing all of their belongings. Her grandparents’ tragic and dramatic experiences illuminated the persecution and desire for freedom that is behind many immigrant stories. The interviews of parents often included tales of enormous work and sacrifice, including leaving friends and family in order to provide a better life for their children. Lianna’s father described how difficult it was to have two parents who did not speak English and how much responsibility this placed on the children to explain things. “My mother bought groceries by the looks of the packaging, not by reading the product’s name, which led to some very interesting results.”

Their summary remarks included: “I learned a lot about my dad,” “my mother,” “my grandparents,” “the person who has sat next to me for years.” “I learned how amazing he is, and how much he has accomplished, I
tried to capture his feelings.” “Most people see my dad as the doctor, but I discovered this means little to my dad compared to other things in life.” “I learned a lot about the culture and how different her culture is,” “about the religion,” “how many opportunities exist here.” “I learned the hardships one faces in coming here from another country. I learned not to be afraid of new things.” Mary painted a beautiful portrait of Vicki from China and remarked, “I always thought she was nice, but I learned much deeper things about her through this process.”

This project encompassed interviews, drawings, and visual storytelling. Visual symbols became a powerful device to convey meaning. Rachel drew her father from Bosnia with a pair of pajamas on his head to convey his unusual and absurd sense of humor. When asked about his move to New York, he said, “I fell from my horse into the gutters.” Jackie painted her friend Kate (Figure 5) on cardboard to convey the sense of impermanence in her life. “The cardboard symbolized the many moves she has made. Boxes are the only factor that remains constant in her life” (Figure 6). Hea Jin used strands of yarn streaming from her portrait of Jaewon, from Korea, to symbolize “her chaotic mind, which no one knows.” Hea Jin lives with relatives in New York, while her parents remain in Korea. Perhaps the yarn is also a reflection of her own chaotic mind that no one knows. Liz’s portrait of her grandmother who moved from Germany during World War II is filled with contrasting symbols of hate, devotion, and peace.

One particularly remarkable story emerged from Hae Inn’s interview of Emiko, an elderly Japanese woman her father had befriended (Figure 7). She learned about Emiko’s sacrifices in coming to the United States, which included leaving behind a child. She learned the dynamics of her interracial marriage and about her inability to have children because of abortions she had in Japan. During the weeks of the interview, Emiko became ill, and was admitted to the hospital. Hae Inn spent hours with her there, talking and doing sketches. Emiko’s interview and
Figure 6. Kate, from Canada, by Jackie Zdrojeskie, used cardboard to convey the sense of impermanence in her life. “The materials that I use are inspired by the feeling of impermanence. The cardboard symbolized the many moves I have made. Boxes are the only factor that remains constant in my life.”

Hae Inn’s portrait turned out to be her final testament. Hae Inn worked on the painting for hours, trying to convey her emotions and the richness of the person she had come to know so well. “She gave me the story of her life, and I felt that she had given me an inheritance more valuable than any of her material possessions... On Wednesday evening, we got the phone call from the hospital. The first thing my mother told me was, ‘she died waiting for your painting.’ I had kept putting off finishing the portrait. I just could not dare to express her amazing life on a mere 12 × 18 canvas.”

Exhibition

The final paintings, along with excerpts from the interviews, were exhibited in the school gallery. Parents and those who had been interviewed were invited to attend. Thus, we all met Liz’s grandmother from Germany, Rachael’s father, and many other members of the school and larger community. Some of the paintings and their commentaries included other languages. Each painting was accompanied and surrounded by the myriad preliminary sketches and studies that led to the final piece, creating a complicated collage of faces, symbols, images, and stories. The finished paintings conveyed a sense of the richness of the community and the unique experiences the students had in creating their story portraits.

Conclusion

Immigration is making our country and schools increasingly diverse. An unfortunate consequence of this condition is prejudice, discrimination, and lack of understanding. The challenge for educators is to create learning opportunities that will allow students to gain understanding and appreciation of the differences among the people who are in their midst. These two projects created opportunities for students to examine topics of culture, diversity, and social justice in a traditional classroom and within the local context of their community. Cultural journalism became a potent way for them to understand and appreciate differences among people. The creation of a work of art allowed students to develop their own vision and personal voice in a visual language that allowed for enormous divergence and imaginative responses. These examples also demonstrated how the study and making of art could be a powerful way to engender empathy, compassion, and intercultural dialogue, and engage students and teachers in critical
thinking about cultural assumptions, immigration, and diversity. These projects generated spaces for people with different backgrounds to tell their stories and a context for students to hear their stories.

Their summary remarks included: “I learned a lot about my dad,” “my mother,” “my grandparents,” “the person who has sat next to me for years.” “I learned how amazing he is, and how much he has accomplished, I tried to capture his feelings.”

The art teachers used cultural journalism and art-making as a means to give meaning and local context to vital issues of cultural diversity. Teachers in other disciplines can also effectively employ the strategies of cultural journalism. For example, the practice of written interviews was featured prominently in the Foxfire movement as a method to develop language and literacy skills (Wigginton, 1991). Likewise, teachers in any discipline can use contemporary art and popular visual culture to explore issues of diversity and cultural journalism. Contemporary is a particularly rich area of inquiry across the curriculum since many artists use multidisciplinary approaches in their work. In an educational landscape that includes technologies for many kinds of image making, there are myriad possibilities to employ cultural journalism in ways that can be used by non-art teachers.

By expanding traditional models of cultural journalism to include the creative construction of storied portraits, students gained intercultural competence at multiple levels. Their learning was also informed, contextualized, and deepened by their experience with contemporary artists whose work deals with issues of identity and difference. The careful cultivation of artistic media and languages gave students the means to tell these stories in ways that were poignant and revealing. Their beautifully crafted work honored the experiences of people within their community and allowed them to share them. In the process, both the students and the teachers were changed, becoming more knowledgeable about the complexities of culture and hybrid culture, more culturally competent and sensitive, more willing to consider another person’s viewpoint, and more appreciative of the richness of their community.

References


