# Unraveling the Yarn: Self-Reflection, Critical Incidents, and Missteps Leading to Continued Growth as a Culturally Sensitive Art Educator

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#### AUTHOR NOTE

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Teacher reflection has been shown to have a positive influence on educators' professional growth. This article features the author's autobiographical reflection on his eight years working at an elementary school within a predominantly migrant Mexican American community, with specific attention paid to his mistakes while implementing a lesson on the indigenous Huichol culture of Mexico. Through the author's critical self-reflection, a number of common missteps in multicultural instruction are discussed, including the selection of lessons that call for shallow reproductions of cultural artifacts, the error of false assumptions of cultural homogeneity, and the culturally-insensitive practice of assuming privileged roles of academic authority that treat indigenous people as exoticized subjects unable to describe themselves and their lived experiences. The article concludes with a synthesis of lessons learned from the author's errors, and encourages other educators to engage in similar teacher reflection to further their own growth as culturally sensitive educators.

Keywords: teacher reflection, critical incident, autobiographical narrative inquiry, culturally sensitive teaching practices, Huichol art, Mexico

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The willingness and ability of teachers to reflect on their own practices, decision-making, potential biases, and socially responsible actions has been shown to be a positive influence on educators' professional growth (Danielson, 2009). While such reflection can occur on a situational basis as teachers solve daily classroom problems, it can also occur in reflection of past events and as a way to make future changes based on recognized incongruities in philosophical orientations and practice (Farrell, 2004). In this process, it is important that teachers remain open-minded and willing to recognize their own errors, rather than placing blame on students, parents, or school conditions. Furthermore, they must be able to look critically at entrenched disciplinary practices, and willing to reposition their own long-held conceptual frameworks to evolve and adapt with circumstances in schools and in awareness of larger social contexts (Larrivee, 2006).

A number of strategies have been found to be effective in promoting teacher reflection, including the use of support groups, autobiographical inquiry, journal writing, and the analysis of recognized critical incidents in classroom situations (Larrivee, 2006). This article draws on two of those strategies, autobiography and the description of critical incidents, to share what I have learned from my own missteps in my ongoing evolution as a culturally sensitive art educator. In brief, autobiographical narrative inquiry focuses inwardly on a teacher-researcher's first-person reflections on selected life experiences, but outwardly on a particular social phenomenon involving the teacher-researcher (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). A critical incident can be similarly autobiographical, but relates to a specific classroom occurrence that has been self-analyzed for having significant impact in reinforcing or changing an educator's practices or perspectives (Farrell, 2004; Griffin, 2003). In combination, then, I use autobiographical inquiry in this article to share my past experiences as an art teacher who worked for eight years at an elementary school within a predominantly migrant Mexican American community, focusing specifically on my missteps and a critical incident involving efforts to implement a lesson on an

indigenous Mexican culture, the Huicholes of the Western Sierra Madre Mountains.

I hope that sharing my mistakes and resulting repositioning as an evolving culturally-aware educator provides a springboard for other teachers to consider their own conceptual orientations and decision-making when planning instruction for culturally diverse populations. I begin by providing a brief review of literature on teacher reflection before describing my teaching experiences at the school, with specific attention focused on a particular critical incident involving the unit on Huichol art and culture. Concluding sections analyze the critical incident and synthesize the lessons learned from my errors for others to consider. Throughout the article, all personal proper nouns, except for the names of my wife and myself, have been replaced with pseudonyms.

#### **Teacher Reflection**

Dewey (1933) recognized the importance of teacher reflection nearly a century ago by maintaining that experiences become educational only when participants reflect deeply on the purpose and efficiency of such transactions. He contrasted these meaningful experiences with situations where people are blindly guided by routine habits or the orders of others to complete tasks. Decades later, Donald Schön (1983; 1987) would bring greater attention to the need for continuous reflective decision-making in a variety of professions, including education, and popularized the term *reflective practitioner*.

Other scholars (Farrell, 2004; Jay & Johnson, 2002; Larrivee, 2006) have since expanded on the ideas of Dewey and Schön by identifying various levels of teacher reflection that lead to deeper stages of introspection with greater potential for acting on identified social, moral, and political issues. Larrivee's (2006) synthesis of the various levels of reflection proposed by others provides a suitable framework for the purposes of this article, and begins with surface reflection. At this lowest level, teachers' main concerns are with finding improved ways to efficiently manage their classroom and keep students on-

task to reach pre-established goals, rather than examining the value of such predetermined curricula. The second level, pedagogical reflection, involves deeper thinking related to teachers' beliefs about good instruction, and whether or not their selected practices are congruent with those beliefs, making the appropriate adjustments as necessary.

The third level, known as critical reflection, finds teachers becoming aware of inherent social, political, and cultural injustices embedded within established institutional systems (including schools), and making efforts to address these injustices in how they select and engage students in planning curricula (Larrivee, 2006). Self-reflection, the fourth and final level, has teachers thinking more deeply about social injustices, but this time inwardly about how their own assumptions may have been unconsciously shaped by unacknowledged cultural privileges and family imprinting. Seemingly, it is these final two levels of reflection that have the most relevance to working ethically and morally with diverse student populations, and to the personal stories and critical incident shared within this article.

# **Autobiographical Narrative**

Prior to my current work at the university level, I was employed for eight years as an elementary art educator in a predominantly migrant Mexican American community in rural Florida. McCarty Elementary was largely populated with students from families that came to the area to work in the local citrus groves before moving on to new locations. Depending on the season, approximately 60% to 70% of the school population was Hispanic, and about 80% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch programs (GreatSchools, 2013). At the time of my hire, I was 22 years old and embarking on my first teaching job in a context with which I was remarkably unfamiliar. I had grown up in a different state where the community demographics were almost entirely White and African American, and I didn't know a word of Spanish.

Furthermore I had just recently completed my undergraduate training during the early 1990s when discipline-based art education (DBAE) was still the dominant instructional model for K-12 art education. During the DBAE era, many art teachers were trained to write sequential lesson plans that featured objectives related to the disciplines of studio art production, art history, criticism, and aesthetics (Greer, 1984). Since that time, these methods have fallen out of favor for lack of attention to multicultural issues, overemphasis on Eurocentric views of art historical excellence, and for largely ignoring visual culture, technology, and creativity (Carpenter & Tavin, 2010). Over time and through reflection that I have documented elsewhere (Broome, in press), circumstances quickly led me to also realize that DBAE did not offer the most engaging curriculum for the Mexican American populations at McCarty Elementary. I found that many examples from Western art historical canons did not resonate with these students nor connect to their past experiences and interests in art, yet they had a vast knowledge of local cultural iconography and traditions that far exceeded my own, and they were fascinated by art in this context.

Convinced that I needed to shift my approaches to art education, I enlisted the aid of available resources, involved students, and the school's English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) resource teacher (who was also a native of Mexico) to introduce me to these locally relevant visual cultural icons so that I could incorporate such examples into the curriculum in place of purely Western sources. My learning curve was steep, but through situational analyses of the extended school community (Stuhr, Petrovich-Mwaniki, & Wasson, 1992) and throughout my first five years of instruction, I gained an understanding of local visual culture iconography and customs including the Virgin of Guadaulpe, *quinceañeras*, lowriders, and *cholos*, often dealing directly with these topics in my instruction (Broome, in press).

In spite of the apparent obstacles I faced during my first years of employment, including a purposeful distancing from the practices

espoused by my discipline-based training and my own inexperience as a professional and with diverse populations, my years at McCarty Elementary School were formative in my development as an art educator and in shaping my own culturally sensitive worldview (Broome, in press). I became convinced that it is a teacher's responsibility to proactively learn about diverse cultures within their class rosters, and to ensure that those cultures are somehow represented within curricular examples.

Experiencing success with these reflective shifts in my teaching approach, and having become more knowledgeable of Mexican customs through my deepening relationship with the ESOL resource teacher (we were married several years after meeting at the school), I was compelled to seek out deeper investigations into Mexican art in hopes of introducing unfamiliar aspects of native culture as a way to broaden students' intra-cultural understandings. It was partially for this purpose that my wife, Monica, and I arranged a visit to an indigenous Huichol ranchería during one of our trips to Mexico, where many members of Monica's family still resided. I had intended to gather resources and first-hand knowledge about Huichol culture for use in creating an instructional unit to share with my students. I was certain that this unit would represent, at that point, the pinnacle of my efforts in making connections with Mexican American populations at McCarty Elementary School. Unfortunately, I couldn't have been more wrong. Instead, the unit itself was underwhelming for students, dissatisfying for me, and represents a critical incident that became a catalyst in my own evolution and critical self-reflection as a culturally aware art educator.

### The Critical Incident

**Visiting the Huicholes**. Monica and I had traveled far to remote regions of the Sierra Madre Mountains in Mexico, traveling by plane, bus, and boat before finally hiking on foot to reach a Huichol ranchería. At the turn of the century, the Native American Huicholes numbered around 43,000, about half of whom at the time of our visit

still lived spread out in pockets throughout the Western Sierra Madres (Furst 2006; MacLean, 2012). This mountainous climate helped to protect the Huicholes from invaders during colonial periods (Lazare, 1990), and left their customs relatively unaltered in comparison to other indigenous Mexican cultures (Primosch & David, 2001; Weston, 2010). Monica and I had arranged for the services of a Huichol guide during our trip, and were able to converse with Huichol artists and purchase their work both at the ranchería and later at a Huicholowned artisans' store.

I was particularly interested in Huichol yarn paintings (see Figure 1), which are made by pressing yarn into thin wooden boards covered with beeswax (Primosh & David, 2001). Over time, yarn paintings have evolved from a medium used strictly as votive offerings for nature-related deities, to a way to depict traditional mythology and new shamanistic visions, and, finally, for commercial purposes, providing a source of income for Huichol communities (MacLean, 2010; 2012). Armed with several purchased yarn paintings, my new knowledge about Huichol art, and photographs of our trip, I left the ranchería excited about my plans for incorporating these experiences into art lessons at McCarty Elementary. However, as we descended the Sierra Madres, my spirits fell too and I caught myself pausing to question the commercialization of indigenous arts and other aspects of our trip that troubled me in its brevity and overtones of cultural tourism. I tried to put my worries at ease by remembering that the main motivation for our visit was to learn more about indigenous Mexican arts to incorporate into my future instructional plans. Little did I know that my troublesome thoughts foreshadowed events that would spur on further critical and self-reflection on my own teaching practices and unacknowledged biases.



*Figure 1.* Huichol yarn painting, Collection of the author. Photo: Jeffrey Broome. Used with permission of photographer.

The resulting lesson. The next year, I implemented a lesson plan inspired by Huichol yarn paintings. I began the unit with a slideshow of our experiences in traveling to Mexico and at the ranchería, while emphasizing contextual information and discussing how Huichol culture has remained relatively intact during periods of colonization. The initial introduction to the slideshow stimulated animated conversation with students, and they asked many questions about my trip and made personal connections to their own experiences living or visiting relatives in Mexico and seeing similar textile works of art and imagery on those visits. However, as the content of my presentation became more specifically related to Huichol art and culture, I noticed that students were making fewer contributions to discussion and their use of personal connections ceased altogether.

In designing an accompanying studio project, I consulted several commercially popular teacher-resource books that suggested art activities, and students and I set about making modified yarn paintings, substituting wood and beeswax with tagboard and glue. I instructed students to sketch an image from nature in the center

of the tagboard and to first glue yarn around the contours of this image and the perimeter of the piece before filling in these borders with solid colors (see Figure 2). Although we worked in relatively small dimensions (7" X 6"), and the process did not take long to complete, enthusiasm for the project continued to decrease, especially in comparison to the initial excitement I had noted during the introductory portions of the slideshow.



Figure 2. Student work from the Huichol yarn painting lesson.

Afterward, I arranged a display of students' work and was surprised to find myself experiencing a sense of dissatisfaction with the studio portions of the lesson. A collective view of the work revealed little variety from one piece to another, indicating that the assignment was close-ended and allowed few opportunities for individual creativity. This realization opened internal floodgates in questioning other aspects of what I had assumed were sound multicultural teaching practices. Although the introduction to the slideshow was stimulating for some, why did overall student interest dissipate shortly after the focus turned specifically to Huichol art and culture, and even more so after beginning art production that typically provided the pinnacle of enthusiasm for most lessons? In essentially recreating modified versions of Huichol yarn paintings, what had students really learned?

What types of critical thinking were involved in the subsequent studio project, and what topics related to social justice were left unaddressed in our classroom discussions? I had traveled far and put significant well-intentioned efforts into creating a culturally relevant project for the students at McCarty Elementary. Where had I gone wrong?

### Discussion

In the stories above, there are several instances worthy of further discussion that illustrate teacher reflection and represent my own ongoing evolution as a cross-culturally sensitive educator. Although none of the stories directly relate to the first level of reflection, surface reflection (Larrivee, 2006), I most certainly dealt with classroom management and other surface issues during my first years as a teacher, but these issues simply lie beyond the scope of this particular article. In terms of pedagogical reflection (Larrivee, 2006), I eventually recognized DBAE and its over-emphasis on Western examples of art history as lacking resonance with the interests and experiences of the diverse populations at McCarty Elementary, as students tend to seek familiar cultural representation within instructional content (Sadker & Zittleman, 2007). Since I have thoroughly described how this level of reflection spurred me to learn about and utilize examples of local visual cultural iconography at McCarty Elementary in other writing (Broome, in press), I will not dwell further on the topic here, and will instead advance the discussion to the third and fourth levels of reflection involved with the critical incident featured above.

#### **Critical Reflection**

My missteps in instructional decision-making begin to reveal themselves at the level of critical reflection (Larrivee, 2006), involving my unawareness of shallow cultural representations in established educational resources, as well as my inability to select appropriate curricular content or to engage my students in this selection process. My intentions in planning the unit were guided by an attempt to engage in authentic *border studies* (Garber, 1995) that moved

beyond the review of multicultural literature (Nieto, 2009; Wasson, Stuhr, & Petrovich-Mwaniki, 1990) and instead involved in-depth engagement with an intracontinental culture for the purpose of sharing information with students and broadening their value and understanding of the selected culture. My execution of such border studies, however, was flawed from the outset in choosing the Huicholes as the focus of my investigations without first asking students if this selection was relevant to their lived experiences. I had no evidence that any of my students were of Huichol descent, and while many had been born and lived in Mexico, I did not check in advance for familiarity with Huichol art and customs. Indeed, those who have played seminal roles in developing (Freire, 1970/2002) and synthesizing suggestions for critical pedagogy (Forbes & Kaufman, 2008), continuously note the importance of involving students in the selection of generative themes that stem from their own local concerns.

Rather than seeking my students' input, I turned instead to my own interest in Huichol art and implemented a project suggested by teacher resource books that called for the introduction of cultural artifacts, such as yarn paintings, and the subsequent reproduction of shallow facsimiles of these items. In discussing the fallacy of this approach, Stuhr, Petrovich-Mwaniki, and Wasson (1992) warn the following:

Such tokenism not only trivializes the aesthetic production of all sociocultural groups, but, what is worse, it avoids confronting the real challenge of [authentic critical inquiry into] . . . the meaning of the object, artist, [and] process, in [a] . . . sociocultural context. Further it fails to make . . . contributions to the students' lives in ways that are morally, ethically and cognitively sound. (p. 21)

Additionally, my selection of these token multicultural activities shows that my abilities in critical reflection were not yet advanced enough to recognize that textbook industries are part of institutionalized systems that may perpetuate culturally insensitive and depersonalized representations of minority populations. While I am not claiming that these types of books are unusable, I am suggesting that packaged teacher resources should be consulted with careful consideration and primarily as jumping-off points (Davenport, 2000) for tailoring activities to locally specific needs.

#### **Self-Reflection**

The fourth level of reflection, self-reflection, involves a teacher's willingness to look inwardly at themselves and uncover any hidden cultural or social assumptions that he or she may hold as shaped by their own family history or unacknowledged socio-cultural privileges (Larrivee, 2006). If surface reflection deals with a teacher's need to respond to readily identified classroom situations, then self-reflection is a difficult tension-filled process likely to occur after greater passages of time, as it deals with characteristics in ourselves that we may not recognize immediately. I have grappled with self-reflection related to my missteps in implementing the Huichol art lesson for many years, beginning from the moment I first questioned the value of our trip as we descended the Sierra Madres, to my disappointment in viewing the resulting display of student artwork, and even in the writing and revising of this particular article.

No matter how long it took, I can now acknowledge that I did take a privileged stance throughout the creation and implementation of the art unit described above. I did not engage my students in selecting culturally and locally relevant themes for classroom investigation; I chose it *for* them. Furthermore, even after my missteps in this selection process, I went about collecting information on Huichol art and customs with much of the same privileged authority noted of culturally-insensitive academic research into indigenous cultures. For colonized peoples, such academic investigations can be painful reminders of their struggles against imperialism as such research tends to treat indigenous people more as exoticized subjects or objects, not as human beings, and certainly not as human beings

possessing the capabilities to describe themselves and their lived experiences with organized expertise (Smith, 2012). I had traveled abroad, collected art from indigenous people, came home, and presented these artifacts to my students much as a cultural tourist might, unwittingly implying and promoting cultural hierarchies in that process (Ballengee-Morris, 2002) and as if I were doing my students an assumed favor, rather than consulting their true needs, interests, and artistic traditions within the local community. A more inclusive approach could have involved student research into their own family links, or the invitation of local Mexican American artists into the classroom to share and discuss their work.

The critical incident described in this article also reveals missteps related to false assumptions of cultural homogeneity (Brody, 2003; Saldivar, 1990). Such assumptions are created by superficially generalizing specific cultural practices, traits, and interests to all members of a larger ethnic group or nationality, without realizing that there are distinct differences within those groups. I had assumed that McCarty Elementary students would find the yarn painting unit intrinsically interesting simply because Huicholes live in Mexico, without realizing that migrant Mexican-American experiences may have little in common with Huichol culture and customs. In this particular case, but fortunately not all teaching during my time at McCarty Elementary (Broome, in press), my missteps were both figurative and literal: I had traveled great distances to conduct indepth border studies, yet my best resources were only steps away in the communities surrounding McCarty Elementary.

## **Conclusions**

The purpose of this article was to use autobiographical teacher reflection and the description of a specific critical incident to share what I have learned from my errors in implementing a unit on Huichol art and customs. While I have described my progression through levels of teacher reflection in repositioning my stance on this particular unit, some readers may still wonder exactly how this reflection contributed to my growth and evolution as a culturally sensitive educator. A cursory reading may have left some to conclude that I evolved from a considerably insensitive person with minimal levels of teaching competence, to one that just recently awakened to any sense of awareness to issues of cultural diversity. I hope that is not the case, as the incident described in this article only represents a small snapshot of my early teaching practices and who I was as a beginning art teacher and young adult. A more comprehensive view would reveal that I chose to work at McCarty Elementary among several other options in different socio-economic communities, that I was honored with an award for teaching excellence during my time there, and that I have always been proud to learn and explore Mexican cultural traditions with Monica and, now, our two young children who are experiencing a *border consciousness* (Gómez-Peña, 1989) of their own in a household of mixed heritages.

By the time the critical incident occurred, I had already realized, largely on my own, many of the failings of DBAE to resonate with the lived experiences of McCarty Elementary students, and I had begun to seek out approaches that were more culturally inclusive (Broome, in press). I may have had good intentions in wanting to share examples of Mexican art and culture, but my execution was poor and reveals where there was room for additional growth in terms of cultural sensitivity and awareness. In retrospect, I can now see that I did hold unacknowledged biases related to assumptions of knowledge that privileged my own status as a formally trained educator with discipline-based expertise, and that perpetuated an institutional divide, rather than partnerships, between us, as academic instructors, and them, the progeny of prior colonized peoples. In sharing the Huichol unit with my students, I primarily relied on a metaphorical banking system of education (Freire, 1970/2002) that assumes that lecturers are experts who can make deposits of information into the minds of passive and uninformed learners.

By sharing my missteps, I hope I am able to encourage other art educators to avoid similar mistakes, to continuously reflect on how awareness of cultural issues can guide practice, and to more quickly consider alternatives to frequently packaged teacher resources that call for the reproduction of cultural artifacts. I am also hopeful that this article will provide an impetus for teachers to take the time to nurture their own reflective practices, particularly at the highest levels that seemingly relate to the further development of sound cross-cultural instruction. Finally, I encourage other researchers to more openly share their own mistakes and evolving conceptual orientations; otherwise we adopt a stance as incontrovertible keepers of great knowledge that runs countercurrent to the spirit of student-centered active learning and critical pedagogy.

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