

Facilitating Productive Encounters with Difference: A Visual Essay

Becky Shipe
Rhode Island College

ABSTRACT

Advances in technology and global migration continue to provide people from all over the world with greater access to a diversity of personal and collective narratives. Children and teenagers are becoming more aware of how people in faraway places live, and they are more capable of sharing their narratives with one another. If students consciously choose to consider these different ways of knowing, or “difference,” the experience can potentially enhance self-awareness, promote creativity, and generate a more compassionate perspective on human similarities and diversities.

AUTHOR NOTE: In this visual essay, the term “difference” is broadly defined and should provoke multiple interpretations. Nevertheless, relating this term to specific topics such as differing value systems or socio-cultural characteristics positions the audience to consider how perceptions of “difference” can impact our visual and collective beliefs and behaviors. Insights presented in this visual essay reflect the author’s personal understandings which have been greatly influenced by the literature listed in the references section.

Facilitating Productive Encounters with Difference: A Visual Essay

Advances in technology and global migration continue to provide people from all over the world with greater access to a diversity of personal and collective narratives. Children and teenagers are becoming more aware of how people in far away places live, and they are more capable of sharing their narratives with one another. If students consciously choose to consider these different ways of knowing, or "difference," the experience can potentially enhance self-awareness, promote creativity, and generate a more compassionate perspective on human similarities and diversities.

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Encountering differing global narratives can potentially confirm pre-existing assumptions or perpetuate stereotypes, but it can also open our eyes to a new point of view. Engaging with difference can potentially provide positive learning opportunities that inspire curiosity, imagination, empathy, and self-reflexivity. If educators encourage students to be self-reflective and aware of the way in which they respond to difference, these experiences might become opportunities for positive growth. Furthermore, when a child or teen makes a personal connection with a global partner whom they perceive as different, they might recognize and more fully appreciate the characteristics that define our shared human condition. In other words, engaging with difference also impacts our perception of sameness.

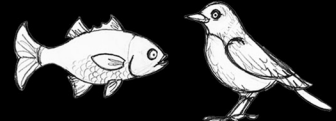
Engaging with global narratives through experiences with art naturally involves metaphorical thinking. Choosing to think metaphorically, or perceiving one thing in terms of another, helps us to comprehend how different people make meaning and share ideas in different ways. Encountering differing global narratives provides opportunities to consider how knowledge is individually constructed and contextually specific. Sharing personal narratives using visual metaphors can also enable global partners to build personal connections with those who speak a different language. Overall, creating and interpreting visual metaphors with others has the potential to transform encounters with difference into valuable learning experiences.

The following visual essay illustrates the process of encountering difference, and it describes how engaging with art and metaphorical thinking can promote imagination, empathy, and self-reflexivity.



The following series of visual metaphors intentionally simplifies the complexities of encountering difference by representing several intra- and interpersonal experiences that often occur during this process. Viewing this interaction through the lens of a bird and fish intends to provide an opportunity for the audience to think divergently while addressing topics that often evoke strong emotional reactions. Although their dyadic relationship can be interpreted as two individuals from different parts of the world, the audience is encouraged to consider the multiple ways that this interaction might represent the experience of encountering difference.

You are not a fish *You are not a bird*



Encountering difference can be both affirmational and transformational. It can evoke feelings of...

fear,

*I can't
imagine being
suspended in
the air.
I would
certainly
fall!*

*I would
never last
under the
water.
I would
surely
suffocate!*



curiosity,

*Maybe I
could leave
the water if
I jump high
enough?
I wonder
what the
world is like
out there?*

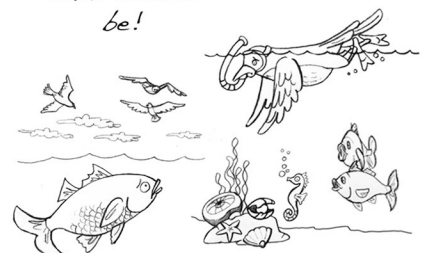
*I could use
this gear to
see and
breathe
under the
water.
I wonder
what I will
find down
there?*



or envy.

*I wish that
I could
soar above
the clouds.
What an
amazing view
that would
be!*

*I wish that
I could dive
deeper and
explore life
under the
sea.*



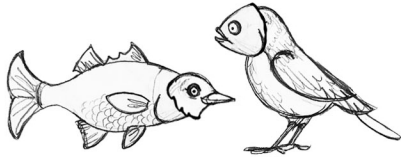
Encountering difference opens our eyes to other ways of existing and provides an opportunity to imagine seeing the world from a different point of view. "Playing" with different perspectives and identities can reveal unending possibilities as we realize our power to define who and what we want to become.

Considering new perspectives can lead to feelings of self-abandonment or betrayal. It might cause us to address why we share similar perspectives with those we choose to interact with, and recognize the benefits and disadvantages of sticking with our "kind."

Encountering difference can stimulate our desire to learn about the origin of our differences. We might wonder how our ancestors have responded to their environment over time. How have historical events, influential figures, and contextual circumstances contributed to their worldviews?

Look at me!
I am no longer a fish!
I am now a bird!

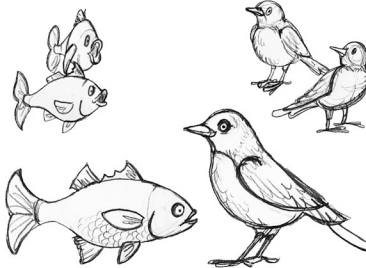
I understand how it feels to be a fish.
I see like a fish.
I am a fish!



Furthermore, we might reconsider who or what determines our identities and group affiliations, recognize the power of self-determination, and question whether we really need to be defined!

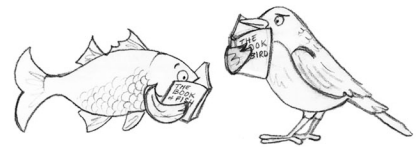
We travel in groups and go with the flow.
It is necessary for our survival.

We do too - especially when we migrate to new places.



Why must we travel in groups?
Does it protect us from predators?

Wow, some birds don't have to migrate because they adapt to their changing environment.

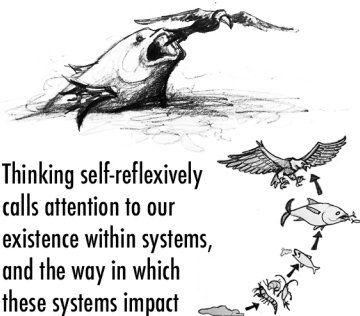


In addition to looking critically at our past, we should apply these new understandings to our present lives and future goals.

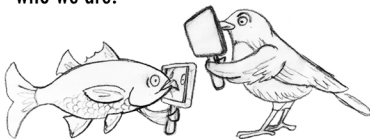
Encountering difference gives us opportunities to become more self-reflexive. Self-reflexivity involves acknowledging how our presence and our interactions within a particular environment impact the way that we interpret what is going on around us.

Encountering difference can help us to avoid becoming too rigid. Rather than drying into fixed, impermeable stone, we should aim to maintain our integrity while adapting to the dynamic environment that we share with our local and global neighbors.

Engaging with difference can open our eyes to new perspectives and possible ways of living. This can potentially release our imagination, promote self-reflexivity and empathy, and help us to be more adaptable and receptive to our environments. This can be a transformational experience if we are open to the idea of transforming.

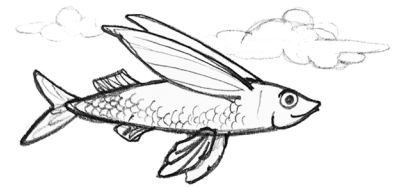


Thinking self-reflexively calls attention to our existence within systems, and the way in which these systems impact who we are.



We must consider both the present and historical purpose of systems as well as the roles that we play within them.

How do we want to be remembered?
What characteristics and values do we want to pass along to future generations?
How might they interpret our stories?



Flying fish propell themselves out of the water and glide through the air using their wing-like fins.



Puffins' short wings enable them to swim underwater using an adapted flying technique.

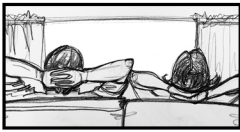
How does this relate to art education?

How might teachers facilitate experiences with art that will help students to transform encounters with difference into opportunities for productive growth? In order to avoid perpetuating stereotypes or unexamined beliefs that confirm existing generalizations, teachers must help their students to become self-reflexive and aware of the following challenging questions:

Can we embrace
the tension between



comfort



and fear?



Can we push ourselves
to the learning edge
and open our minds to
a new way of knowing?



After this transformational
experience, can we
maintain a positive
identity and sense of
belonging?

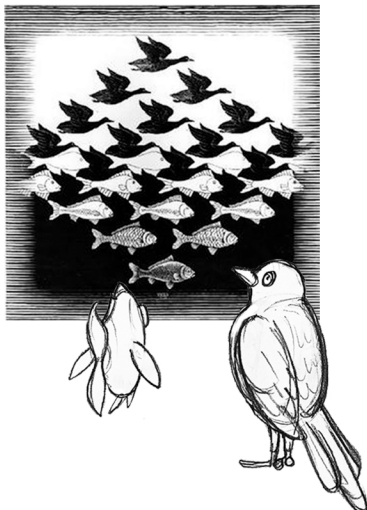


Furthermore, how do we maintain a sense of belonging and civic responsibility while exercising a more autonomous and dynamic personal identity? Does this involve belonging to nothing and everything at the same time?

Interpreting works of art employs metaphorical thinking because we construct personal meaning from images rather than from language. Sharing our interpretations with others gives them a window into our imaginations. Encountering difference in this way can promote empathy and creative thinking.

Art educators can provide opportunities for their students to encounter and interpret one another's personal narratives by exchanging pictures rather than words. Students in different parts of the world can create visual responses to a given theme, and then share these metaphorical representations with global partners.

Students would then create individual visual responses to this theme that reflect their personal narrative.



Students might begin by discussing the theme with their local peers in order to broaden their individual understandings.

Creating a visual metaphor to represent an idea requires divergent thinking and imagination. Rather than drawing commonly used symbols to represent ideas, teachers could introduce students to creative thinking strategies that would help them to generate more personal visual responses.



Students would then use technology to share their visual responses with partners from a different part of the world. Exposure to this potentially different global narrative provides opportunities for productive tension to occur. Teachers can help guide students through this process by encouraging empathetic and self-reflexive thinking.

As students generate, share, and interpret one another's personal responses to the given theme, their existing understandings expand as they consider new points of view. This ultimately increases the number of metaphors that they can pull from while making meaning of this theme.

As shown in this visual essay, educators can promote healthy encounters with difference through experiences with art. Proactively soliciting and engaging with diverse global narratives can promote empathy, self-reflexivity, and creativity. This is just one example of how creating, sharing, and interpreting visual metaphors with others can potentially lead to both affirmational and transformational learning experiences.

Encouraging students to consider differing perspectives can potentially counteract their tendency to make quick judgements. These conversations might involve investigating their personal biases in order to become more self-reflexive and empathetic toward others. Specific instructional strategies would depend on contextual circumstances such as the students' developmental levels and other distinctive conditions which define the learning environment.



Facilitating this type of exchange can feed students' innate curiosities and fuel their desire to engage with difference. In addition, establishing this type of personal connection during their formative years can potentially increase their willingness to appreciate "difference" later in life.



How might the art education field validate the claims proposed in this visual essay? Can research prove that this type of experience does, in fact, lead to greater empathy, self-reflexivity, and creativity? In order to further investigate these questions, art educators and researchers must create and monitor this type of visual art exchange and document the outcomes. Are these collaborative efforts worth pursuing? Let's work together and find out!

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