

An Invitation: Multicultural Art and Visual Learning in Elementary Education

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I recount pivotal encounters that occurred in a course entitled Multicultural Art and Visual Learning during the summer and fall of 2016. I approach this as teacher research, as I personally faced the challenge of how to responsibly engage with Culture Wars as an educator. Through recounting experiences, I extend an invitation to others who are open to the possibility that learning with and through the arts provides students opportunities to make meaningful choices within in their own learning, helps them develop empathy for each other, engages them in challenging dialogues about culture, and prepares them to contribute to life in our democracy and efforts to create a just world.



Figure 1. Students in Multicultural Art and Visual Learning in Elementary Education composing a collaborative poem in response to a cut and forged metal sculpture in the Haitian Art Collection at the Milwaukee Art Museum. Author photograph.



Figure 2. Solidarity Rally and Protest Surrounding Lost Lives. July 11, 2016. Milwaukee, WI. Photo by Joe Brusky. [Attribution-Non Commercial](#).



Figure 3. Black Lives Matter Message over I-43. Overpass Light Brigade, July 22, 2016. Milwaukee, WI. Photo by Joe Brusky. [Attribution-Non Commercial](#).

In the call for this special issue of the *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education*, the editors noted that the definition of “culture” has changed over time. Rather than historical definitions of “good taste,” broader and more recent definitions of culture consider groups’ ways of living and being in the world and shifting identities (Hutzel & Shin, 2016). Through conflicts over ideas and values, we face social and political tensions. Especially in such polarizing moments, it is important to remember that artists are researchers and storytellers within cultures; they work to make sense of experience. Artworks can document important moments, demand action, inspire solidarity among groups, or invite viewers to consider different points of view. Educators can leverage art experiences to deepen students’ understandings of cultures and the tensions between them, as well develop students’ senses of empathy and ability to engage in challenging dialogues.

In this article, I recount pivotal encounters that occurred in a course entitled *Multicultural Art and Visual Learning* (MAVL) during the summer and fall of 2016. I approach this as teacher research (Henderson, Meier, Perry, & Stremmel, 2012), as I personally faced the challenge of how to responsibly engage with Culture Wars as an educator. Avoidance was not an option. Summer 2016 included the Black Lives Matter movement, media representations of police shooting black men and of police being shot at, and tensions and unrest in our own city rooted in segregation, poverty, politics, and inequities (see Figures 2 and 3). Fall 2016 heightened hopes and fears surrounding the presidential election, the environment, and civil rights. It is my hope that through recounting parts of these experiences, I can extend an invitation to others who are open to the possibility that learning with and through the arts provides students opportunities to make meaningful choices within their own learning, helps them develop empathy for each other, engages them in challenging dialogues about culture, and prepares them to contribute to life in our democracy and efforts to create a just world. Each of the following sections is entitled with a message students in my classes remember.

It's possible to shift your thinking.

MAVL was designed to meet the needs of education majors preparing for work in urban communities while being accessible to students from a variety of majors who participate in our university's Cultures & Communities program. It was a logical move because of the art education program's social justice identity (Cosier & Nemeth, 2010) and work with issue-based approaches aligned with the Cultures & Communities program's belief that "Learning to work across differences of cultural background and experience is a process essential to intellectual growth and lifelong learning, and ultimately to building a better world" (Cultures & Communities, n.d.). As an instructor, I focus on ways art integration can support multicultural (Au, 2014) and anti-biased (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2012) teaching approaches. In my experience, two of the biggest – but certainly not insurmountable – challenges in MAVL are people's discomfort with their own artistic knowledge and ability and concerns about when they would actually have time to incorporate art into their future curriculum.

Before considering the ways that experiences in the arts can uniquely support multicultural and anti-biased teaching approaches, it is important to evaluate one's working definition of art and what prior experiences might have shaped that definition. The following table (Figure 4) summarizes comments I have heard frequently in papers and conversations through several semesters of MAVL. The themes below are paired with statements that I have identified to not only challenge common misconceptions, but also to help students shift their thinking by working with a growth mindset over the course of the semester.

We develop a growth mindset through educational journeys where we come to understand that our own intelligence can be developed, rather than remaining fixed (Dweck, 2006). In other words, a growth mindset is a state when students understand that they can learn, have structures and strategies with which to do so, and as a result put in more effort and achieve better outcomes. Opportunities to seek input from others when students are stuck or facing momentary setbacks make a difference, too. Though we are all a mixture of fixed and growth mindsets, if students can learn what challenges trigger fixed mindset moments, it is possible to move closer to a growth mindset in thought and practice (Dweck, 2015), which is essential to meaningful learning with and through the arts. Furthermore, it is important for students to practice habits of mind exhibited by artists (Hetland,

Winner, Veenema, & Sheridan, 2013), such as engaging and persisting through challenging moments, whether they are artistic challenges or conceptual ones. The following section describes some of my own engaging and persisting, as my practice merges art, teaching, and research.

Challenge yourself to shift your thinking from this...	... to this.
"Art can be anything."	"The role of art and the meanings of individual artworks can vary depending on context."
"Art is important because it gives people a chance to express themselves."	"Artists explore processes that are interesting and present topics that are important."
"I'm not good at art."	"There are knowledge and skills that I can learn and practice in order to create effective visual artworks."
"I don't understand art."	"There are strategies I can learn to better understand how to respond and connect to a variety of artworks."

Figure 4. Themes from art education autobiography papers paired with statements that can help students shift to a growth mindset.

Start something. It is your responsibility to do so.

Posts in social media, the news, and even conversations among students during transitions highlighted concerns and fears over current events during summer 2016. Because of my background as an art educator who identifies with visual culture based approaches (Woywod, 2004), I asked my students in MAVL to record information in a four square table over the course of a week, with the intention of later using this as content for an upcoming art making experience. The first square included current events they heard people talking about or discussing online. In the second, students recorded their reactions to the conversations they witnessed, and in the third, how these exchanges made them feel as a future teacher. In the fourth and final square they listed how they wanted to be able to feel as a teacher.

The day that we reported back and started to discuss, students first

identified the topic of state spending on building a new arena for the Milwaukee Bucks basketball team and the recently approved plan to divert drinking water out of Lake Michigan to the city of Waukesha, outside of the Great Lakes basin. Both issues brought up controversies about access to resources and potential points of tension between people who will experience benefits and people who will face new challenges as a result of each situation. I was somewhat surprised that no one had brought up events receiving intense coverage in national news that week. After a pause I sensed some hesitation among the group, so I asked my class if anyone within their tables had noted current events involving police. Several students nodded their heads. One student, Annie¹, even stated upfront that she would not be able to handle participating if the conversation became graphic or brought up violence. After a few vocal students used their collective knowledge to describe what they heard during the past 24 hours about the shooting of Philandro Castile in Minnesota, I could tell they were trying to do so carefully out of respect for Annie's request. When there was a pause, Ian stated, "As a teacher, I just don't think that I should start things that aren't there." Somewhat perplexed, I asked, "But isn't news like this unavoidable? It is constantly popping up on our computers and in our newsfeeds." Jennifer retorted on behalf of the group, "You just turn it off. I was tired of all the updates [from CNN] so I turned off the notifications on my Apple watch." The layers of privilege in that statement momentarily stunned me.

I continued to mull over Ian's statement the rest of the semester. Since I had posed a question about a topic that people were avoiding, had I started something that was not already there? Or perhaps more accurately brought up something that they were not ready to deal with?

Some of the MAVL students pointed out that schools can be safe places for students to take a break from challenging situations at home and that art can even be a reprieve during a tense day. While that can be true, schools are also sites of institutional racism (Rosales, 2016) and harm (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). As a result, it is necessary for educators to address injustices by implementing counter-storytelling approaches (Whitehead, 2012) and engaging in restorative justice practices (Editors of Rethinking Schools, 2014).

¹ With the exception of Mark and Elizabeth, pseudonyms are used for all students.



Figures 5 and 6. Front and back views of the ofrenda designed and installed by the Young People's Resistance Committee, Students for Justice in Palestine, and the Black Student Union. Author photograph.

One such moment came up during my fall 2016 classes, near Dia de Los Muertos. Students deepened their multicultural art learning by engaging with a ofrenda collectively designed and installed in the Theatre Building by three student groups in solidarity with each other: the Young People's Resistance Committee, Students for Justice in Palestine, and the Black Student Union (see Figures 5 and 6). In their artist statement, the creators explained that while Dia de Los Muertos is a traditional holiday, it also demonstrates resistance against forced colonization and eradication of people. They also described that the intention of the ofrenda installation was "to honor the lives lost through systematic inequality, occupation, displacement, warfare and migration." After a few moments of quiet looking, student volunteers pointed out parts that they thought were interesting and parts about which that they wanted to know more. In wondering, students realized that there are people, events, and issues they needed to learn more about. As student Leslie described in a reflection about this experience, "art can also be a way to raise awareness of issues that are occurring in different communities and bring people together to protest racial and cultural injustices" (personal communication, December, 2016).

Take the time to listen to stories.

As education scholar Ivor Goodson (2014) so accurately put it, "we have to understand the personal and biographical if we are to understand the social and political" (p. 1). Learning to work across differences and participate in a civil society demands that we hold space (Plett, 2015) for each other and listen deeply to stories that offer insights into each other's beliefs and experiences. For example, in fall 2016, students in MAVL looked at and discussed artworks by the artists Kerry James Marshall, Do Ho Suh, and Kehinde Wiley to consider how and why people memorialize. Students initially suggested people memorialize in order to remember people and events, recognize or honor significant accomplishments, and teach others about these people and things. With the addition of contextual information about Suh's work, and videos of Marshall and Wiley speaking about their works, they also concluded that it can be important to question what stories are told through memorials and whose stories or points of view may be absent. Then, in planning for their own artworks, each student needed to provide a photograph to work from, along with brief writing about their personal connection or interest in the subject, and explain why it is important for others to learn or know about this person. Students shared this same

information when presenting their artworks during a midpoint critique. Mark, who initially expressed concerns about taking an art class, persisted and created a portrait of his daughter when she was four years old (Figure 7). Mark explained that the butterflies both represent his memory of his daughter telling him about her favorite insect, and the butterflies he saw while walking in the park shortly after she passed away. Another classmate, Carissa, described in a reflection, "I really felt appreciation towards this project when we went around the room and everyone told their stories about who they were memorializing...you could see the joy on our faces when we talked about how important each person is to us" (personal communication, December, 2016). As an instructor, I knew it was important that the students within each of my classes had a moment in which they could face a common challenge while also seeing the variety of life experiences, values, and concerns within the group.



Figure 7. Mark Van Weelden's portrait of his daughter, based on a photograph of when she was four years old.



Figure 8. Elizabeth Herber's portrait of Ruth Bader Ginsburg inspired by memes of the justice as the Notorious R.B.G., a nickname derived from a Tumblr account of the same name.

We can talk about this.

The philosophical foundations for education in the arts value its roles both as a means for enhancing mental, physical, and emotional well-being, as well as channels for individuals and communities to express their ideas, experiences, feelings, and beliefs throughout history (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014). In other words, the arts are a way to develop authentic voice. Yet if I were to make a chart similar to Figure 4 listing the comments I most frequently hear during the course of the semester, "I can't talk about these things with young students" would probably be at the top of the list. This often-shared sentiment comes from future teachers who demonstrate care and concern for students as they refer to work in field experiences, and represents the fear of crossing a line when they grapple with how

they might use contemporary art in their future classrooms. However, in order to become independent and informed learners, students need to be able to explore and talk about issues. Art has a unique role in this, piquing viewers' curiosity, starting conversations, and making issues visible. For example, Elizabeth started her portrait of Ruth Bader Ginsburg (Figure 8) because she admired many of the decisions the Supreme Court Justice has made regarding civil rights. While this started off as a tribute to a figure of historical importance, Megan encountered new information during the course of the project: the Supreme Court Justice's comments about Colin Kaepernick's refusal to stand for the national anthem. As a result, Elizabeth decided to slightly break apart the crowns in her background as she finished her work.

Even the youngest students are able to engage in conversation about what is fair treatment (Carter & Curtis, 2008), and this concept can be investigated in actively creating, responding to, presenting, and connecting with artworks. Sometimes, it cannot be avoided. During the campaigns leading up to the 2016 presidential election, buildings on the very campus where I teach were sites for a nationally televised party debate and visits from both of the final presidential candidates. While exciting, these events displaced students and faculty, offered only limited opportunities for participation, and in one particular instance, inspired protest and art actions. Later, in early field experiences during the first week of November 2016, some of my students were surprised not only by a cooperating teacher's request for assistance in helping elementary students create posters to encourage their parents and guardians to vote (Figure 9), but also by the students' eagerness to discuss the upcoming presidential election and their strong opinions about the candidates.

The morning after the 2016 presidential election was surreal. I had been up at 3:00 am that morning, trying to figure out how to help students who would be heading back to field experiences with elementary students who I suspected may be rather upset, based on the previous week's conversation. As MAVL students came into my classroom for their 8:00 am class, they were oddly silent. Some people were heartbroken, some people may have been excited but somewhat fearful of speaking up because of the opinions they had heard classmates share previously, and some students were just plain tired of all of the hoopla surrounding the election. I started by asking my students if they like to feel respected and if they like to feel heard. They all agreed. I asked them to remember that throughout the day, and challenged them to apply what they have learned so far and

create spaces where people felt respected and heard, whether in class, on the street, or in the Union.



Figure 9. Working on a teacher requested “vote” poster in early field experiences. Author photograph.

Conclusion

While the role of art and the meanings of individual artworks can vary depending on context, artists humanize. Producing, presenting, responding to, and connecting with art are humanizing acts. Multicultural art learning presents opportunities to seek information, feel discomfort and wonder, and participate in dialogues by telling our stories and engaging with points of view other than our own. Through recounting impactful moments within my courses, I described how I worked to face the challenge of responsible engagement with multicultural art learning, which can inform and transform perspectives within Culture Wars. In doing so, I invite educators who participate in sections of *Multicultural Art and Visual Learning* – or other courses like it – to approach art experiences with a growth mindset in order to deepen their understandings of cultural complexities and consider issues that are important to engage with in contributing to a civil society.

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