

BREAKING BARRIERS THROUGH CHILDREN’S GLOBAL ARTS

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Fostering transformative learning requires a renewed vision for education and challenges students and educators to assess and redefine their roles, practices and worldviews. Nadine Cruickshanks explores the experience of the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria, in Canada with their new ‘Children’s Global Art’ project.

Introduction

In a world characterised by inequality and a lack of engaged communication across geographical contexts, Arts education has the potential to create connections and links to the ‘Other’ over distance. This paper describes three case studies from the ‘Children’s Global Arts’ project and highlights the potential of the project as well as some of the problems faced by participants.

As the third millennium opens, we are faced with a world of increasing terror and injustice. With rapid growth in globalisation, news of starving children in India, war victims in the Middle East, AIDS victims in Africa, displaced children in North America, terrorist attacks looming across the planet, the threat of a global pandemic, and the degradation of rainforests worldwide, life on earth is becoming increasingly threatened at every level imaginable. Moreover, a materialist-consumerist and ‘all about me’-centred culture is spreading across the westernised world. This frequently removes and desensitises humans from the ills of society and leads to a large proportion of us living a life of unprecedented privilege and abundance. The irony is that this ‘rich’ westernised culture has created an expanding human dichotomy of ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ across the world. It is the ‘haves’ of our western societies, who appear to have everything, who often lack the awareness of a meaning worth living for. Even our young people are haunted by an inner emptiness; an “existential vacuum” that manifests itself primarily in a state of student boredom, and student feelings of depression, aggression, and addiction

(Frankl, 1984:129). Increasing numbers of young people are falling “into the despair of hopelessness and appear to be apathetic in their responses to the future” (Ashford, 1995:76).

“At the same time that we face crisis in population growth, resource depletion, environmental destruction and new civil wars of horrendous brutality, many young people express cynicism, helplessness and despair that anyone can influence the course of events even on a local scale” (Ashford, 1995:75).

The Challenge

The great challenge that we are faced with in the westernised world is to become part of events and circumstances that disorient us to such a degree that we begin to see the world and our role within it very differently, and move us towards relentless commitment and action to care for the whole of humanity without disregard or distinction. As today’s children are the citizens of tomorrow’s world, their feelings and attitudes about the world mirror their future capability and motivation to meaningfully participate in, and contribute to, society. It is crucial to provide cultivating learning opportunities for young people that help them to face and confront the ills of society with an inspiring and liberating sense of hope, passion, and action.

Fostering transformative learning for the 21st century requires a renewed vision for education that breaks through desensitising barriers of ignorance, intolerance, and indifference, and seriously challenges students and educators to assess and redefine their roles, practices, and worldviews, in light of a new, more global and humane era of education.

“Educational spaces are critical for understanding, discussing, and developing a sense of democracy for children where they see themselves as active agents, are able to make changes, and are desirous of making changes, understanding their responsibility and role in community and greater society. It is the responsibility of schools to create those spaces, to create education for democracy, to

involve children and their communities at an early age, to involve children in taking action, to transcend boundaries created by language and political difference” (Sanford & Hopper, in press:.3).

Breaking barriers through global arts

‘Children’s Global Arts’, a new initiative founded in the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria, Canada, reminds us of the immense power and capability that children and the Arts play in breaking down prevailing barriers of ignorance, intolerance, and indifference. It also highlights the value of the Arts in speaking and communicating a universal language. Based on a simple theme of ‘the world we want’, children’s artwork from Victoria, Canada, and war-torn countries of Iraq and Afghanistan, was collected and displayed at the November 2003 Learning and the World We Want conference in Victoria. The sincerity and integrity of these images reveal children’s realities of war and injustice, and their visions for peace, joy, and beauty. Their artwork teaches us about the world as it exists today, and the world that children imagine for their future - the future of the world.

Since its inception in 2003, the ‘Children’s Global Arts’ initiative has grown contagiously, touching the hearts and minds of all those who come to know it. The process of creating children’s artwork has proved to be more than just sending out a message or the propagation of children’s visions and ideas. Through an exchange of creative and cultural art forms that reveal the world we live in and visions for the world we want, children from diverse parts of the world (Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Canada, South Africa, Zanzibar, Nigeria, India, and Chile, thus far), are communicating and interacting with one another through visual realities that inspire us all to make a difference.

Through this art form of communication, we have the opportunity to see a reflection of our own lives through the illuminated lives of others, liberating us from a fixed sense of ‘I’, to an undivided connection and consideration of ‘We’ or ‘Other’. This significant transformation shifts habits of mind, and sets the stage for meaningful recognition of identity, connection, citizenship, and social and environmental responsibility. The invitation to

participate in global arts provides a context for children and adults from diverse communities to build relationships around a common goal, and to transform barriers into gateways that unite and mobilise communities in the building of ‘the world we want’.

One of the key intentions for the ‘Children’s Global Arts’ project has been to document ‘tales of transformation’ as shared by various global arts participants to discover how individuals learn to “see differently, hear voices of others, connect with the lives of others with different experiences, and collaboratively shape a new vision of the world” (Sanford & Hopper, in press:3). As the power of stories may be the key to, and perhaps the best hope for human understanding, I am in the process of collecting an anthology of personal narratives that reveal insights of the global arts initiative, and identifying in these stories, any areas of transformation at an individual, institutional, and/or community level.

Of particular importance are the transformational learning qualities identified within participants’ stories related to global arts that make them distinguishable from those associated with ‘informational learning’. Recognising these distinctions is a key feature for understanding the significance of this project - for having a more informed, nuanced, sophisticated, or deeper understanding of something (such as an idea, an assumption, or an educational practice) is not equivalent to transformational learning. Transformational learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift, or fundamental reordering in the basic premises of thought, feelings, assumptions, and action; a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters the way one chooses to live or act in the world (Morrell & O’Conner, 2002).

Paulo Freire (2002) advocates that every human being, no matter how submerged in a “culture of silence” he or she may be, is capable of looking critically at the world in a diagnostic encounter with others. Provided with the proper tools and environment, the individual can become conscious and aware of personal and social realities as well as the contradictions within them, and

ultimately play a part in the radical reconstruction of oppressive structures and situations. The following classroom scenarios demonstrate ways in which the Global Arts Project, under the mentorship of experienced educators, has provided a safe environment for students of diverse age, background, and worldview, to provoke a culture of silence through creative and candid encounters with ‘Self’ and ‘Others’.

Two teachers’ perspectives

1) Joe Karmel, an educator from Victoria, decided to open up the notion of ‘the world we want’ through a middle school social studies programme. Without pre-prompting or setting boundaries, Joe Karmel invited his students to draw their visions of the world they want freely and without restriction or expectation. When they had completed and shared their artwork, Joe’s story revealed how most students seemed amused with what others had drawn. A few themes also quickly came to light:

“The first was the increased presence of guns and violence in their pictures of the world they wanted. While not a theme present in all the pictures, it was a dominant theme. Other drawings of the world they envisioned featured elaborate skateboarding parks, bike tracks, big screen televisions, computers, large houses, fancy cars, dollar signs, and so forth. While not a singular observable theme like guns and increased violence, collectively these fanciful wishes indicated a vision which included more possessions and items of luxury, aggression, or recreation” (J Karmel, 2005, pers. comm., February 15).

A week or so later Joe presented the images of the world children live in and the world they want as expressed by children in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2003. The emotions and events illuminated in the 2003 artworks from Kabul are ones of fear, personal suffering, and uncertainty, and scenes of war, destruction, and injustice. One image shows a woman floating just above ground yet tethered by a chain - it bears a caption: “Mothers that are educated can teach their children well”. Another visual features two paths leading to a

school; the boys' path is clear, while the girls' path is blocked by brambles and a Taliban soldier whose outreached hand prevents the girls from proceeding to school. A further image reveals a self-portrait of a young Afghani child, named Froozan, who suffers ridicule from her peers after losing her legs when a missile struck her in the back. Another drawing reveals realities of violence against women and children, demonstrated by a knife penetrating the stomach of a child, and a missile entering the body of a young woman. A number of drawings also show destroyed buildings and villages, with captions revealing the desire of children to rebuild their beautiful country.

The vibrant and colourful images from Iraq reveal somewhat similar realities, and include pictures of the world children want: a world of freedom, justice, and natural beauty, with young girls going to school, fish swimming down a stream, and smiling, happy people celebrating family picnics, traditional dance, and dreams for peace in every country.

As Joe's students experienced these images one by one, it was observed that their reactions were rather sombre, and their behaviour became uncharacteristically well behaved, listening patiently to the stories and the comments being read out by classmates as each drawing was being reviewed. During the viewing, several students commented on the quality of the drawings and the vibrant colours that had been used. They seemed very surprised, given what they knew of war-torn Afghanistan, that the children there would be able to draw so well. By comparison, the drawings done by Joe's students were mostly in pencil, with some colour added to indicate visions of blood, explosions, or the path of tracer bullets.

The students also noted the difference in themes being expressed between the artwork from Iraq and Afghanistan and their own artwork. Firstly, they noticed that instead of guns or violence in the world wished for by students in Iraq and Afghanistan, their pictures were filled with happy looking people doing things together. Some of Joe's students expressed embarrassment in their own work after seeing the work from the students of Iraq and Afghanistan, and felt that they could do a better, more serious job if they had

a chance to do it again. In summary, Joe made reference to the transformative learning potential of this experience:

“I do think that thinking about the world as it is and the world we want to see was an interesting way to start off the social studies and philosophy program. It is a theme that seemed to keep popping up in a lot of the current events discussions that start off our mornings in my class. I think the artwork had a real effect on my students. It would be interesting to see what they might draw given a second opportunity to do so” (J Karmel, 2005, pers. comm., February 15).

2) When Laura Nimmon, an English as a Second Language (ESL) instructor at the University of Victoria, first told her ESL art students (from Mexico, Spain, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Brazil, and Italy) about the global arts project she was not sure if they understood her because their English proficiency was not very high. However, once they understood that they would have the opportunity to have their voices heard by others about such an important topic (the world we want), it gave them a momentum that she had not seen in the class before. Laura was amazed at how focused students became when her lesson was connected to some kind of tangibility in the real world. When they worked on the art projects students were quieter than she had ever seen them - as though a spiritual forum was taking place and not an art class. Through this sacred, creative energy, Laura’s class was reminded of the power that resides within the visual form of communication and the beauty in language that need not be spoken. Once the artwork was completed, Laura observed how The World We Want representations were as eclectic as the group itself, embodying the fundamentals that make us human: love, peace, and hope. What Laura found most interesting about the pieces was that they were centred not only on the world that the artist wanted, but the world that the artist wished other people to have:

“This is probably the theme that strikes me most about this project on a whole. That it helps people all over the world step out of themselves and their own worlds and consider the whole of humanity

as a connected experience...The repercussions of this project are not subtle, because the project reaches us at a time in the world when we feel increasingly compelled towards an intrepid compassion. Thus, this innate desire within so many of us towards gestures of compassion at this global time is stimulated in the Global Arts Project”(L Nimmon, 2005, pers. comm, May 29).

Breaking barriers in the Teacher Education Program

As demonstrated by the following 4th year student responses from the University of Victoria’s Teacher Education Program, the ‘Children’s Global Arts’ project is not only provoking awareness of the world’s personal, social, and environmental condition, but is also inspiring the transformative potential to break a prevailing culture of silence. By eliciting emotions, unearthing a sense of ‘Other’, altering perceptions, and inspiring action, the walls of ignorance and indifference are breaking down and the building of a more humane and just world is on the rise:

“I found that the pictures made me think about these children and the world that they know, and it really made me quite emotional. The pictures from Afghanistan especially, displayed such heartfelt emotion and pain that I had to really stop and imagine living in a place where children are being stabbed and hit with missiles and begging for freedom of this horrible place...Looking at the pictures of these children’s lives and how they are feeling, really makes you step back and reflect on your own life and values”.

“As I walked throughout our University classroom, observing the children’s art, my heart both ached and rejoiced. Though I was in Victoria pursuing my Elementary Education Degree, the artwork pulled me in and forced me to travel to a world I had never witnessed; a harsh and wicked world. The artwork from Afghanistan affected me very deeply, especially the self-portrait of a young Afghani girl named Froozan who had lost her legs when a missile hit her in the back as she sat in her home...“What can I do?” I asked her. I felt so

helpless, so useless, as I looked in the portrait's eyes... I feel extremely connected to the children that are suffering unjustly throughout the world”.

“This presentation made me realize how oblivious and ignorant I am to the horrible things that are happening around the world. I always seem to think that it does not really affect me and that I do not have to think about it because it is half way around the world, when it actually affects me more than I will ever know. I've never really been that involved in art, but seeing what kind of reaction it can bring about has caused me to recognize its value and power to influence people around the world, regardless of race or language barriers”.

“Seeing the artwork was what made the presentation a reality. Knowing that young children drew these sad pictures with guns and war zones in them was very eye opening. It made me realize how lucky and safe we really are, and left me wondering how I could help these children”.

“I feel that this project, in all its facets, has many messages and layers to it. The fact that children are so poignant in the work transcends political bias and the cloud of problems that money, oil and war has created. Children's voices are so true and unbiased. They do not care about who did what, they care about their families, friends, and other people around the world.... I will think differently when an opportunity arises to help people”.

“I found this entire study of the Global Arts Project to be of immense importance and value. Having the opportunity to learn about Global arts through such an amazing project such as the 'World We Want' has been an incredible learning experience. It has made me think of both art and children in a new light”.

“It really is amazing how a drawing or an image can say so much. I look around the room at all this art and think about how much hope for the future and life these pictures display. It is so easy to live our own lives in our own world and turn our backs on those who are less fortunate but not so easy when you are confronted with these images. They do not offend or present radical opinions, they just say that others deserve more, others deserve our help. It really is true that if we do nothing, whether or not we know it we are saying there is nothing wrong, no changes need to be made, but the voices of these people need to be heard”.

“I would like to get involved and contribute my arts in words to this wonderful cause. I would like to travel to Afghanistan and Baghdad and see for myself what is going on there. Personally I have not found that act which could help change the life of others but just seeing this today makes me want to do something about it in my future”.

Changed Lives

Since its inception in 2003, it has become increasingly evident that meaningful pursuits in the field of global arts can change lives. At many levels, the powerful events and stories that are intertwined throughout this project are inspiring participants to look differently at the way they view the world and their role within it. Moving from a realm of familiarity to a space of unfamiliarity is, however, not always easy. With reference to Plato’s ‘Allegory of the Cave’, when education involves “breaking those chains and leading a person from the cave into the bright light”, (Reed & Johnson, 2000:6), the outcome is not always cheerful and bright, but rather disorienting and confusing. We are comforted by Freire’s (2002) words that suggest the role of transformative education is not the making of a complete being, but the process of becoming. As Freire suggests, we can only attempt to play a part in an ongoing process of transformation, and trust that those individuals who have been moved enough to consider taking action to change the world, will follow through with committed action as personal situations and circumstances allow.

“I do not yet know how I will help and I am frightened of the things I will see, but I will help. Programs, such as ‘Global Arts’ are creating a better world for those children, as well as creating awareness in developed countries of the atrocities that are occurring throughout the world. All children deserve all that we can give them; a world where that cannot happen is a world that must be changed. It is an almost impossible mission but we, as educators and social activists, must do all that we can to help children throughout the world” (University of Victoria, student response, 2004).

“At times the state of this world seems so unbelievably unharmonious. I find myself lost in the pandemonium of human mistake. It is so often too big of a problem for me to try to make a difference and then you find that someone, somewhere feels the same as you and you regain slivers of hope that keep you going. Projects such as the global arts have brought a much needed hope to the globe. What a blessing!” (University of Victoria, student response, 2004).

Perhaps the significance of the ‘Children’s Global Arts’ project has only begun to be revealed. As this initiative gains increasing momentum, it is anticipated that the compelling and empowering nature of the stories and events that unfold in response to this project will continue to provide an anthology of opportunities in which to explore the transformative visions and ideas as discussed in this article. Taking into account that “[t]he practice of transformative learning is still inadequately understood, researched, and present in the professional literature” (Taylor, 2000:24), it is hoped that this paper will help to reveal the significance of global arts and transformational learning experiences, and provide support for further educational change and renewal in this direction.

Through creative and cultural exchanges of the world we live in and the world we want, we can break down barriers of indifference, intolerance, and injustice, and begin to honour life’s most basic rights for all beings of the

world. For what is the use of education without providing opportunities that benefit all who inhabit this earth? What serves the purpose of academic discussion without the inclination for thoughtful action, and, what possible good is excellence of skill and knowledge without the science of goodness to guide it? “Real education consists of drawing the best out of yourself. What better book can there be than the book of humanity?” (Gandhi).

“From what I have seen, the Global Arts Project breathes new life and vision into anyone that is involved and shifts the way they view the world. This new world, the far away neighbour, becomes a valued part of our community. The neighbour is now not even the other, he/she is loved for differences and similarities and for being oneself. The Global Arts Project helps us become more human in the process of recognizing the human experience around us” (Nimmon, 2005, pers. comm., May 29).

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