

Focus

Fabric crafts and poetry: The art of development education in Canada

New forms of development education are emerging in Canada. These aim to engage people in critical dialogue by creating new lenses through which to see and explore the world. **Budd Hall** and **Darlene Clover** look at the importance of innovative learning models through examples of arts/crafts-based development education in Canada.

“Our strategy should be not only to confront the empire but to mock it...with our art...and our ability to tell our own stories”.

Arundhati Roy

Introduction

In the mid 20th century people travelled to the majority world and returned home with stories that often contradicted the dominant narratives of the day. They argued that there were in fact rich and powerful indigenous knowledge systems still at work and that poverty was a result of global trade, colonisation, patriarchy and the growing need for resources in rich countries. Development education is the term which Canadians used to describe this counter learning and teaching.

In the early 21st century the dominant discourse of the powerful has reached fever pitch. Economic globalisation, in spite of daily evidence to the contrary, is said to be the universal pathway to well being. A warped vision of democracy is being sold as our global salvation whilst the solution to global conflict is military power and force. Ideas around a tide of human security and prosperity that would float all boats have been overshadowed by views that sink us through an isolation and polarisation of critical voices. The greatest global crime may not be solely the ruthless scouring of the world for oil and natural resources but rather the perpetuation of a myth that there is only one way for humanity to organise, teach and learn which ultimately chips away at our ability to re-create and re-imagine the world.

New forms of development education are emerging in Canada. Their aim is to engage people in dialogue and critique by creating new lenses through which to see and explore the world. Importantly, many of these new practices provide people with the opportunity to be creative and imaginative together. We speak here of arts/crafts-based learning practices which we have both, through lengthy, varied and different experiences, come to value, promote and use. We begin this article with a brief history of development education in Canada, emphasising the role of arts/crafts. We then provide two examples of contemporary arts/crafts-based learning activities in a community and a university and using these as platforms, share the elements we feel make this type of learning so inviting and valuable.

Development education in Canada

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold”.

W.B. Yeats

In 1983 the late Ivan Head, former President of Canada’s International Development Research Centre, said in his keynote address to the First National Conference on Development Education that “International development education in this country must necessarily elicit changes in how Canadians perceive the world, giving them a clearer and sharper understanding of the interdependence of all the nations, and a keener appreciation of other cultures and ways of life” (Zachariah 1983, p.7). This was arguably the peak moment in development education in Canada.

Development education as a concept and practice was largely stimulated by the experiences of Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO) volunteers who in going, in the 1960s, to countries of the majority world discovered many contradictions to what they had been taught. Poverty, it was shown, was linked to an entire structure of unfair trade policies, lending practices, pharmaceutical pricing and arms sales (Christie, 1983, p.9). They also discovered the writings of many majority world intellectuals such as Paulo Freire, Walter Rodney, and Amilcar Cabral. In 1971 the Treasury Board of Canada authorised the ‘Development Education Programme at the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)’ and funds were made available to non-governmental organisations. During this period a network of ‘learning centres’ was established across the country. CUSO, Oxfam Canada, the churches and others also established development education units.

Development education focussed on several objectives: consciousness raising, empowerment, building coalitions or alliances, making connections at home and abroad and/or influencing policy. Historically development education in Canada has been united by common efforts to answer questions such as: With whom do we work? How do we reach beyond the already converted? How do we reach those in power and make our voices heard? How do we strengthen networks, coalitions and actions? Who educates the educators? (Hall, 1983).

In 1994 government support for development education was totally withdrawn. Learner centres across the country closed although a few such as the Victoria International Development Education Centre (VIDEA) and others linked to larger organisations such as CUSO survived or evolved. Interestingly, CIDA has recently begun to re-examine the question of funding development education and has several newer activities such as The Global Classroom Initiative that supports work with schools (www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/gci).

The driving energy however for learning about the world has shifted from the stories of returning volunteers and solidarity workers to the challenges of globalisation. Savage development practices let loose on the world by an unrestrained global imperial capitalism have horrified a new generation of people. The World Social Forum process with leadership from the majority world has attracted the participation and interest of an entirely new set of actors. The large civil society demonstrations in Seattle, Melbourne, Genoa, Quebec, and Cancun against the World Trade Organisation and other international financial institutions have served as recruiting grounds for an edgier, more strident generation. Global capital has generated global resistance and this resistance and organising is more creative and far reaching than ever before.

Arts and crafts in development education

“Some have exploited the rich and exuberant cultural traditions and have used the arts for education and conscientization and for the dissemination of development messages and information”

David Malamah-Thomas, (1987, p.60).

In 1969 Malcolm Adieseshiah, Deputy Director General of UNESCO argued that development education could best be realised by understanding the key role culture plays in people’s lives and using culturally appropriate practices to stimulate new ways of thinking and acting (1969). For many development

educators and activists the arts were seen as the culturally appropriate tools. Perhaps the most far-reaching and popular arts-based educational practice of the 1970s and 1980s was popular theatre. Through its

“communal and fictional imaginative nature, theatre can provide a graphic and vivid forum [for dialogue]...accessible to large numbers of people, based in local social, cultural and other realities, expressed in local language and idiom, and uses the people’s art forms such as music and drumming, singing and dancing, miming and storytelling” (Malamah-Thomas, 1987, p.61).

Theatre has been used in Canada’s arctic and elsewhere to provide people with the skills and abilities to not simply cope with the transition from a more traditional way of life to a more modern one, but to actively take charge of and steer that process (Hamilton, 1987). Popular theatre has recently been reinvented in other playful ways in Canada such as in the emergence of new traditions like ‘Critical Cheerleading’, where the tradition of mostly women cheering sports teams on has been turned on its head with performances of young people leading the crowds in ‘cheers’ against continued global warfare.

Other arts have also been used as tools of global education. Bishop (1988) used cartoons and soap operas with women in a Nova Scotia fish processing plant to help them uncover and challenge local and global ideologies and practices that had a negative impact on the fisheries and their jobs. Although often ridiculed or ignored, women’s fabric crafts-based practices have been used to critique, raise awareness and overcome injustices (Clover, 2001; Stalker, 2003). For example, women in Chile created *arpilleras* (detailed hand-sewn three dimensional textile pictures) that were able to slip “through strict border controls to tell the stories of Pinochet’s repressive regime” (Stalker, 2003, p.402). We both have much experience in using the arts or crafts as part of our education practice for a more just and sustainable world. In this next section we describe a fabric crafts project in a small community on Vancouver Island and a poetry course held at the University of Victoria. We then use these as platforms to explore the elements we believe make arts/crafts-based learning important tools.

Feminist arts-based community learning: The case of quilts

“Sewing becomes a feminist metaphor for editing in which the subversive stitch can be viewed as a motif that disrupts...But is the narrative really disrupted by the sewing? Or does the sewing make the story visible?”

Mireille Perron, (1998, p.30).

Perron (1998, p.124) argues that “textile practices have been treated with disregard for so long it is almost inconceivable for some...to acknowledge them as discursive formations from which meaning can emerge”. While on the one hand this statement is absolutely correct, it is also being challenged.

The Positive Energy Quilters are a group of women artist-educators on central Vancouver Island, British Columbia who initiate collective quilting projects to help people understand, address and voice their concerns symbolically and metaphorically around development and global issues. The first project addressed the impact of a gas-powered plant planned for construction in their community. An agreement between two United States (US) corporations and a local hydro company would have meant the installation of a polluting plant in their neighbourhood with little benefit of jobs or even power. The women sent out squares of materials asking people throughout the community to use their imaginations and passions and create images and stories that showed how they felt about the plant. While some messages are gentle – save the environment for our children – others are extremely provocative showing the violence and power being exerted on their community from a foreign country (the US). When the squares were returned by community members, the women set about weaving them into six beautiful protest quilts.



The women engaged in what they referred to as ‘quilting in public’ which meant quilting in front of the official hearings. The purpose was to be visible and to reach out to and engage even more people in dialogue. The finished quilts were proudly draped over the women’s shoulders and worn in marches on City Hall to protest at the plant (Clover & Markle, 2003).

Nearing the conclusion of this project, the United States declared war on Iraq and horrified, the quilters realised they could not stand idly by. There was a chance that Canada could be bullied into taking part if people did not speak out. Again, squares of cloth were sent out around the community and formed into four stunning ‘Peace Quilts’. Again, some squares were gentle whilst others showed Uncle Sam standing in a pool of blood shooting at a flock of doves. The squares were quilted together through a public quilting process and again worn in the many protest marches held across the Island.

These collective and creative projects drew many people’s attention and provided a symbolic and creative vehicle for people to speak out publicly. However, the quilts also drew criticism and censorship as they dared to stitch new stories of development, war and community power which we return to shortly.

Poetry and peace in the university classroom

“Poetry is an act of peace. Peace goes into the making of a poet as flour goes into the making of bread”.

Pablo Neruda

“Poetry is perpetual revolt against silence exile and cunning”.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti

Can we transform university classrooms into transgressive and transformative learning environments? Can we create a space for mutual learning about the world, its pain and its hopes? We believe that we can and Budd deliberately set about creating such a space in the summer of 2005 at the University of Victoria in Canada.

The invasion of Iraq by the government of the United States with the critical support of the United Kingdom and other client states in the “coalition of the willing” produced an overwhelming revulsion in the minds of many ordinary Canadians. In response, Budd offered a course within the Curriculum and Instruction Department of our Faculty of Education called, ‘Poetry, Social Movements and Peace’. The course filled quickly as we

grappled together to understand how we can use poetry to disrupt the dominant narratives of obedience, violence and peacelessness in the world. We became part of the spoken word revolution for a period of five weeks during July and August of 2005. We exchanged news of poetry readings, we read about poetic form, we read and wrote out our own pieces and ended our time together with the creation of a public poetry café where we read our collective work to a local audience. For a text, we used a poetry anthology called *Waging Peace* that emerged from a poetry and political action project that took place in Ottawa in 2000. Poets and artists from across the country were invited to contribute a poem wrapped in individually designed papers to each Member of Parliament (McMaster, 2001).

In the context of thirty three hours of classroom time, twenty four people who, with few exceptions, had been neither poets nor peace activists became both. They defined what was to be learnt, took leadership in designing workshops, learned about the technical writing of poetry, shared their work with friends into the night, organised a public event in a hired theatre, performed like veteran poets and self-published their work in an anthology. Our poems tackled peace and global conditions in a cacophony of voices. *London Attack*, *The Smoking Gun*, *Sunday in Auschwitz*, *The Greenpeace Girl*, *Inner Peace*, *The Pain Bores a Hole in the Soul*, *Bullying*, *Lullaby for Nations* and *Babytalk* were just some of the titles. We took chances with each other that many of us had never tried elsewhere. Twenty four more poets were added to the global outpouring of poets that can be found on scores of web sites around the world all using words and images to resist the global killing machine.

Why are arts/crafts important and powerful tools for development education?

“If globalization is characterized by disjunctive flows that generate acute problems of social well-being, one positive force that encourages an emancipatory politics of globalization is the role of the imagination”

Arjun Appadurai, (2001, p.6).

Aesthetic knowledge and oppositional imagination

Dewey (1934) felt the aesthetic imagination had the ability to animate and pervade all processes of making and observation, a blending of interests where the mind comes in contact with world (p.237). Arts-based learning, as these examples demonstrate, actively encouraged the telling of counter stories through an oppositional aesthetic form of imaginative thinking.

Oppositional imaginations are premised upon daily lived realities and/or deeper understandings of inequity or oppression and give expression to this through creative form. They are points of reflection from where the gaze turns outward to imaginatively ponder one's own place and association in a larger picture. This self-social reflection becomes a different kind of relationship through art, one that speaks to a power of connectedness and establishes bonds such as those made in the community through the quilts and in class through poetry.

While learning through dialogue is very important, feminist adult educators have also argued that we need to be sensitive to other forms of communication (Walters & Manicom, 1996). In the two projects, there was much challenging and enriching discussion. But images - whether they be stitched on a piece of cloth or created through a poem - play an increasingly important role in society. Image making is a process of metaphoric exchange and metaphor and symbols play key roles in reasoning, and understanding the world (Kazemek, 1992; Shakotko & Walker, 1999). With metaphor, we compare an image of something we are familiar with to the image of something we are seeking to understand. Where the images match we transfer our understanding from one to another but where they differ, we change the image of what we know in an attempt to better understand. Metaphors and symbols make connections between things that are concrete and things that are abstract, things that happen directly to us and things that happen far away. Poetry has a magical quality to both draw from deep within us and give us new ways of seeing and hearing through the most efficient use of words imaginable.

Fun and humour

Tackling the negative aspects of globalisation is neither fun nor humorous. However, Illeris (2003) has found that people often develop sub-strategies to deal with contradictions and problems in society and one is humour. The quilts are poignant but they are also funny and irreverent. Roy (2004, p.59) writes that humour is often a sign of rebelliousness; laughter can defeat the fear of the unknown. "Humour works as a metaphor for transformation...a communal response of sensuous solidarity as it implies common understanding with others [and helps people] to cope with the situation of the world" (p.59). Making people laugh, as the arts can do so well, has proven to be an effective way to address issues which might otherwise have people shutting down or turning away. This does not mean that they are trivial and mindless, but rather that they are versatile and provide opportunities for creative self and social critique.

Risk and challenge

Development education has always understood the need to challenge people to take risks in learning. Diamond and Mullen (1999) add that arts-based learning is about “thinking imaginatively, performing artistically and taking a risk on behalf of...development” (pg.152). It was a risk for students who knew nothing of poetry to decide to take the course. Safety in the academy means staying within the formulaic writing of a term paper. It was also a risk for these students to perform in public. As noted above, many did not see themselves as poets so it took courage to share their work in front of others. There was sufficient concern for the apolitical (read disruptive) nature of the quilts that they were actually denied access to two public hearings. On another occasion of public quilting, although the women were given permission to quilt outside the hearing, they were told by one of the security guards that while they could work on one of the quilts all the others had to be put into the trunk of a car. He did not even want them folded at the side as he felt that would only encourage passers-by and others going to the hearings to ask difficult questions!

Conclusion

In order to combat the savage and destructive forces of certain aspects of globalisation at play in the world today, we need innovative and creative practices of education and learning. Development education has always drawn on and from arts/crafts although the primary emphasis has been on theatre. We believe that arts and crafts are powerful tools of learning because they are able to actively encourage new aesthetic knowledge, stimulate oppositional imaginations, encourage people to have fun together but are also risk-taking, an essential element of learning for change.

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Please see the following website for more information:
www.educ.uvic.ca/communityarts/index.html