We promise to provide a safe and respectful environment for life long learning which celebrates diversity, embraces the physical, spiritual, emotional and intellectual integrity of each individual, recognizes and acknowledges differences and prevents discrimination in all of its forms.

—B.C. Charter for Public Education 2003

Opening Thoughts

An essential component of teaching for social justice is recognizing the individual and understanding the relationship of that individual to other individuals in whatever community they live. For teachers and students, that community is the classroom. Marilyn Cochran-Smith, writing in “Learning to Teach for Social Justice” (1999: 114-144), outlines six principles of practice. This project addressed Cochran-Smith’s first five principles: provide significant work that is meaningful and interesting to students; build on what students bring to school in terms of their knowledge and interests; teach skills and help students understand ideas that they are working with; and pay attention to what sense they are making of what is being taught and work with (not against) individuals, families and communities. These principles neatly summarize what excellent teaching practice might look like and they directed my initial reading and thinking.

This article is based on a research project that was an analysis of what Grade 3 and 4 students said they liked and learned after they had created the artwork you see here. It contains drawings, photographs and text. The images and writing worked together to create an identity piece that contained ethical statements and symbols of culture that had significance for each student. There are twenty-one students of which seventeen have a language other than English as their first language. Two other students have First Nations ancestry. While most students were born in Canada, at least six immigrated to Vancouver from a variety of other countries. They were a bright, engaging and wonderful group of students.

I ended up with a completely different set of findings than I would have imagined based on my initial assumptions and biases. I was interested in researching what students said was interesting and valuable, and I felt obliged to pay attention to what my students were telling me. I ended up learning more than I ever expected about relationships, meaning, and the process that makes up what happens in the classroom. Engaging in curriculum such as this artwork/memory piece energized the classroom and strengthened our classroom community. Each student actively participated in the project, and eagerly informed each other about their own meaning-making and learning.

The research process turned into one of the richest and most meaningful things I
have done as a teacher. Becoming a researcher took a little getting used to. Any change in the parameters of the project, however slight, made me worry about the quality of the intended product. Qualitative research has a great deal to offer any teacher who wants to improve their practice. In the process of becoming more detached and focused, I became a much better listener. I was aware of seeing and hearing so much more than I would have otherwise. I felt a heightened sense of purpose and a significantly enhanced clarity about my intentions in my teaching practice. This learning has been carried over into subsequent teaching practice.

The Project Itself

Our class chose to work on a unit called “Community.” I used an old school textbook I had found buried in the bookroom called, *Creating a community* (1983). While the pictures are dated and textbooks are generally considered unfashionable teaching tools for primary students, I like this book because the language is easy to read and this particular textbook is filled with questions students can discuss together. The premise of the book is that a group of people leaves planet Earth to build a new community on a different planet. One of the assignments on the first day was for students to make a list of things they would take with them if they were going on this expedition. This project was set up as a kind of passport to be used as we set off to our new community.

Two books were used as a springboard into the assignment. The first book was *We are all related: A celebration of our cultural heritage* (1996), created by students at G.T. Cunningham Elementary School. After looking at the George Littlechild collage that served as the model for the artwork contained in the book, we looked at four student pieces and their attached explanations. Then we looked at the book, *Our Elders speak: A tribute to Native Elders* (1990). This book, assembled by Karie Garnier, was published to honour First Nations teaching and was originally an exhibition for Expo 86. This book was significant because it contained ethical statements that First Nations Elders believed were important for all people. Students were able to identify how parts of the *We are all related* book followed naturally from *Our Elders speak*. I said that the artwork they were going to do would look a bit like both of these texts.

I wanted to engage parents in my research; I was interested in doing something in this project that involved parents in a meaningful way. I had read a journal article written by Maria del Rosario Barrilas, called “Literacy at home: Honoring parent voices though writing” (2000: 302–307). Barrilas argues that it is critical that we invite parents to share their experiences and knowledge with their children. In addition to creating collaborative assignments, there is the added benefit of having parents use the family’s first language so that they may have a voice in their children’s academic development.

One of the assignments was to ask parents and children to create a piece of writing for one another about a belief that they believed would be beneficial in their lives. Barrilas advocates that students and parents need venues in which to express thoughts and feelings. Along lines of communication, the two groups would share needs, wants and expectations. Each artwork contained two ethical statements, something students said they had learned from their parents, and an ethical statement written by their parents that contained a teaching they would give to the classroom community. Significantly, there was an interesting overlap of beliefs that parents and students shared—but not necessarily within the same family. To avoid illiteracy issues, children were encouraged to scribe for their parents.

It was in the process of creating the artwork that I could see that making friends and understanding what friendship meant constituted the most valuable learning for the class. Throughout the project, the students had conversations and visited...
and helped each other, and these interchanges made the project meaningful, interesting and valuable. Students came to their own understanding that the project was about finding out about each other.

They helped each other out. Sometimes as many as five students would be working on one person’s artwork. Students used each other’s input to check the criteria for the artwork itself. They were told to make their drawings recognizable and the colours bright. They were told that many people would be looking at their work and that those people would be thinking about what they were seeing. Comments students made, as they worked throughout the construction of their artwork, indicated that they felt they were creating something important.

The students constructed envelopes out of paper in which to put their ethical statements. I allow a considerable amount of conversation in the classroom because I think students use conversation to make sense of my teaching and their learning. The conversations also help them to negotiate getting along and to create a safe place in which to share stories and make sense of the world. They shared crayons, and in some cases, helped each other out, filling in the colours of the symbols and backgrounds. While the researcher in me agonized about wanting this work be their own, the contradiction inherent in encouraging them to help each other out and then insisting that they do separate work was so glaringly obvious that I held back. For the duration of the project, students took breaks from their own work to look at and comment on each other’s pieces.

bell hooks in Race and representation (1992: 115) writes about being able to gaze. African American slaves were punished if they were caught looking. Students loved to look at each other’s projects even when they were in the early stages. They were not just looking, they were gazing into each other’s pictures and seeing the stories embedded within. hooks says that the white supremacist culture controls who is represented and how they are represented. Indeed, despite the number of minority students in the class, how many images do they see of themselves? What kinds of messages are we sending to those students who seldom, if ever, see themselves in books or pictures on the walls?

During the project, my time was taken up with a myriad of questions and calls for help; the stuff teachers do every day. Things like helping with spelling, holding a folded paper down so that it could be glued, reassuring someone who wanted to rip their project up because they had made a mistake in the colour they had chosen for one of the pattern backgrounds, and the inevitable repairing of construction paper that tears if you are not careful and press too hard with a pencil. My class is never an ocean of calm, yet it seemed to me that they were busy and happy with the assignment. They delighted in explaining the symbols they incorporated into their work. I would be consulted on colour choices, not because they didn’t have their own ideas, but rather it seemed to me, more as a way of checking in and as a gesture of inclusion.

After three weeks, when the project had been completed, the celebration of what we had accomplished provided me with one of the most emotionally important moments in my teaching experience. The presentations were electrifying. I will never forget that morning’s exhibition with its ritual and respectful coming together. We met at the carpet, sitting on chairs with our artwork on the floor in front of us. It was the first time that as a group we had a sense of what we had accomplished.

The excitement was barely containable. Everyone had a chance to hold their work up and say something about their piece. After each presentation, we all applauded. Some students self-consciously held their work up and said nothing or offered a comment about what they were doing when one of the pictures was taken. Some summarized their artist’s statements. In total, this took more than forty minutes and no one asked for a break or engaged in disruptive attention seeking. For students to sit and share so attentively made me aware of how proud they were of their work.

After lunch, we met so that I could ask them what it was they liked about the project and what kinds of things they learned from doing the work. Their conversations taught me to understand what they valued and learned. I think that all voices were heard. Everyone’s presence was recognized and valued not just at the presentation and evaluations but in a sustained way throughout the whole process. hooks talks of this in her book Teaching to transgress (1994: 179–180) and says that if there is prolonged silence in a classroom, it is because of an absence of safety. My students felt safe as well as noticed and respected.
The Analysis

I expected that students would talk about notions of respect and respecting difference while acknowledging the inherent commonalities of all persons. I thought they might talk about enjoying working together with a shared sense of common purpose. I hoped for comments about how their own notions of identity confronted them; perhaps, a comment or two about how they felt they knew themselves better after such a thought-provoking assignment.

Their comments reflected the huge issues they consider on a daily basis. Students reported in their own words that the project was valuable for them because:

“This project was about people.”
“We did it so people can know about you and you find out about them.”
“Once you understand them you can make friends.”
“You start being friends because you know them.”

What followed was a conversation about how the whole school should do this and then we would maybe see each person for who they are.

The second thing that they really liked was the process of creating the collage. They loved doing the artwork. They were falling all over themselves in a rush to talk about the designs and patterns, how cool the colours were, how they learned to make interesting envelopes, and how detailed everyone’s drawings were. The words “pretty,” “beautiful,” and “nice” were repeated over and over.

They also learned about the shifting meaning of symbols. The only comments they made about difference were comments on different ways they created symbols, patterns and envelopes. Their comments about symbols were repeated over and over too.

“People have all kinds of symbols that they use.”
“If you asked the other person they would tell you what the symbol means.”
“Symbols mean different things to other people.”
“Symbols mean words.”
“Even if you don’t know what a symbol means, it means something to them [the person who drew it].”

The next time we met, I took time to ask some questions about the comments they had made about symbols. I asked, “Everyone seems quite excited by the symbols. The symbols look like pictures, but they act like words when we look at them. Is this what you think?” There were hands up all over the place now. That was it! They said it was like learning a language. The meaning of the symbols shifted sometimes just a little, but sometimes a lot. For example, Jan (all names of students have been changed) had used grass as a symbol for the music that she loves to listen to. When she was asked why, she just shrugged and said, “Because.” They talked for some time about how hard it was to understand what someone was saying, especially if you don’t know them. I asked if I was hard to understand. There was agreement all around. “When we didn’t know you, we didn’t know what you were saying, but you are getting easier to understand.”

Students love making art. Students doodle and draw in their journals. They doodle on the edges of worksheets. They are as respectful of a picture as they are of the written word. John Ralston Saul, (2000: 126) puts it this way:

We are not all great or even good artists. But we are all intrinsically part of the imaginings inclusive nature. Those who believe in the dominance of understanding and methodology seem to miss the obvious. The tools they
He goes on to say only art can reveal to us what we already know. It is as if we restate or retell stories about ourselves with greater clarity through artistic representation.

Students have to have the opportunity to represent themselves and share those representations with each other. Paulo Freire says in The politics of education (1985: 78-79) that as societies work towards transformation, artistic representation moves from prefabricated images to art that is concrete or real. My students spoke about how great everyone’s art was. It had a special quality because they were not copying someone else’s idea. A basketball in a border pattern had personal meaning. The artist had a serious reason for including it. Other students could find out just what the images did mean by asking.

Henry Giroux, writing in the introduction of Freire’s book, The politics of education, (1985, p. xx), notes that the dominant culture controls the production of culture for everyone. One of the reasons students were so engaged in this project is because they understood that they were in control of the images and of the representation. They were telling their own stories. One of the other striking things about these images is the layered quality some of them have. Images are embedded under later changes. There is a sense of uncovering form and meaning that makes looking at the artwork a profound experience.

Indeed, early on in the project, one boy asked, “Don, if these pictures we are doing help us to know each other, why didn’t we do this at the beginning of the year?” It was a good question. I expect next year it will be one of the first projects we do. I also wonder if it might be interesting to work on those pictures over the year, to add to the images as we get to know ourselves better and as our understandings of ourselves change.

Another student, Lian, expressed considerable frustration about not knowing what the pictures meant just by looking at them. Lian’s statement echoes the intriguing idea contained in structuralism that meaning is constructed and not the product of shared systems of signification. Meaning is not intuitively shared. Other students loved this notion of not knowing. When you are in an ocean of language, ideas, and curriculum you are expected to understand or be engaged with, the delight of being able to make your own symbols and attach your own meaning to them was, in the words of another student, “Fun.” So, added to the power of being able to tell their own stories, the students had the opportunity to control the meaning they brought to the project.

Many theorists believe that words are instruments of power and that those who control the power control the meaning of the discourse. But meaning is constantly shifting as people engage in discourse. The excitement and energy generated by discussing these ideas with my students leads me to believe that students rarely get to control the meanings of things, and that they empower themselves when they do. It might seem unsettling for some teachers to invite students to make their own meaning. E. D. Hirsh, writing in Cultural literacy, (1987: 48-55), reviews the notion that our understanding of the outside world reflects our understanding of schemata or memory pictures we group together to facilitate our knowing. Hirsh wants all students to operate from the same set of schemata to facilitate literacy. Here is a man who is comfortable with the notion that hierarchies exist and he believes that the trick is to invite the powerless to understand the meanings and understandings of words and text so that they can succeed or at least work for those in charge.

Of course, it would be silly to suggest that everyone get together and start talking as if they are unconcerned with sharing meaning or understanding. The point is, I think, that sharing meanings requires a common language but, more importantly, requires the development of a set of relationships that allow dialogue and discourse to occur. Sharing is not something that someone imposes. Sharing implies notions of equality and relationship. Sharing implies conversation and time for each person to understand and think. The single largest learning I gained through this project was the beginning awareness that normal everyday tensions for my students are magnified by the uncertainty of understanding the language. Then too, there is the assumption that the words out of my mouth have greater power, meaning, and validity than the words that come out of their mouths.

Sharing meanings in conversation is not something that only teachers have to think about. Nor is it something specific to classroom teaching or curriculum. At the 2002 Lafontaine–Baldwin lecture, George Erasmus, the great First
Nations statesman, said that researchers who examined more than two hundred commissions and task force documents found that even when the same words were used, Aboriginal people and government representatives were talking about different things. What Erasmus was advocating was that we find ways to develop relationships with each other so that we can talk together. He suggested that it was time that we examine the inequities of power contained in the discourses in which we are currently engaged.

In my literature review, I happened upon a draft document that was looking at ways to establish performance standards for human and social development. While the document identified valuing diversity, cultural awareness and participation as important aspects of social responsibility, the paper avoided any discussion of how such concepts might be evaluated. It seems that we are soon going to be called upon to teach and evaluate student understandings of cultural diversity, as well as their understandings of cultural heritage. What kinds of curriculum will teachers use to teach these concepts? The kind of project reported on here is a good place to start teaching and learning in this curricular area. It has the added benefit of creating at the same time an opportunity to foster friendship and understanding.

I think, as teachers, we need to be ever aware of the relationships we have with our students. Some of us are more comfortable than others with the notion that we have enormous amounts of power compared to the students in our classes. Some of us take it as a given that the curriculum is a reflection of those who hold political and economic power. We don’t let students get in touch with each other. We limit the time spent in talking and fill the day with planned curriculum that is meaningless and devoid of real content and relevance. It is to our detriment that we do this daily….unthinkingly….reflexively.

For me, the issue is that each teacher should be aware of the political implications that are inherent in each of our teaching practices. Marilyn Cochran-Smith’s principles of education became so real to me as this project took hold of the students and myself. Teachers have control and often limit individual student autonomy and identity. More to the point, we limit ourselves to teaching the curriculum, worried about the politics of what we are doing. Many teachers are afraid to teach what is real and settle for what is concrete. I believe that what truly matters is seldom, if ever, on the page but something that comes out as process. We teach who we are. We teach the relationships we believe are important.

For students, learning how to make friends and live together is fundamental. It was in engaging in the artwork that the understandings of friendship came up. Throughout the project, conversation visiting, and helping each other made the project meaningful, interesting, and valuable, and provided the students with an understanding of the importance of finding out about each other. Along the way, their own relationships were strengthened and new relationships were forged. We learned a lot together.

One Year Later

One year later, I am reminded that friendship and finding out about each other represented the core learning and understanding in this project. Right now, as I write, the United States and a number of its allies are at war with Iraq. I feel the world right now is at a crossroads. In the past two months, while thinking and reading for this paper, two articles in "The Globe and Mail" resonated personally and for me, connected to this project. On February 8, 2003 (F6-7), there was an article about the plague of suicide bombings that routinely occur in Israel. Arin Ahmed, a would-be Palestinian suicide bomber related that:"

"I got out of the car. The place wasn’t exactly like I’d seen on the map. I saw a lot of people, mothers with children, teenage boys and girls. I remembered an Israeli girl my age whom I used to be in touch with. I suddenly understood what I was about to do and I said to myself: How could I do such a thing?"

All Arin Ahmed, the “failed” suicide bomber, did was remember a real human being who she had known. How do we get in touch with anyone else? We talk to them. We listen. We pay attention. Is it such a stretch to imagine the reason that we, as teachers, engage in the projects that we do is to have the classroom community find out about one another? To create community, to build friendships, we have to talk and listen to one another.

Exactly one month later (2003, F6-7), another article appeared in "The Globe and Mail" entitled “Making peace one person at a time.” The article describes how Michelle Divon, the Israeli ambassador’s daughter, made friends with the daughters of the Jordanian and Iranian ambassadors. They met at school and found themselves working on a thirty minute presentation that addressed each
other’s different cultures, religions, and upbringings as well as celebrating their similarities.

Divon says that meeting in Canada created an opportunity for them to learn from each other and to enjoy a friendship. I knew their experience because that is what had happened in our class working on this project. Echoing the promise contained in the quote that opens this paper, Divon says,

“Our similarities are far greater than our differences and I would like to provide people with the opportunity to discover this on their own. Just like we cannot shake hands with a clenched fist we cannot make peace without looking each other in the eye.”

Resources


Texts Used


Editor’s Note: The phrase “We teach who we are.” is attributed to Parker Palmer(1998) in *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life*. San Francisco:Jossey-Bass.

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