

# Art-Centered Approach to Diversity Education in Teaching and Learning



By Lorena Johnson

The cultural diversity embodied in our country's changing demographics presents a critical challenge to America's future. For educators, the changing demographics pose a difficult question: how do we educate our students to live, work, and succeed in a pluralistic society? The question takes us beyond the current debate about education reform that regards standardized testing as the singular solution to our present educational dilemma and reveals the complexity of the issues facing education in the 21st century.

My work as a visual artist and an educator has led me to explore the visual arts' capacity to translate difference into common bond and to examine art's power to develop students' intercultural competence. Through the years, working with K-12, college, and university faculty and staff, I have viewed diversity education as central to teaching and learning, "not just because some students may require new approaches, but because what and how we need to be teaching has changed" (Smith, 1998).

Do educators have the knowledge to meet this emerging educational challenge? Most Americans' knowledge about differ-

ence is often mediated by popular culture, which distills cultural differences into stereotypical clichés. Instead, what our students need is cultural knowledge. The visual arts are a natural place for the pursuit of the intercultural dialogue and knowledge our students require to succeed in the 21st century.

The visual arts are an integral part of my diversity education workshop curriculum. They provide new knowledge and strategies to help educators address the emerging issues and realities caused by the dramatic demographic shifts facing our schools and colleges today. An art-centered approach to diversity education in teaching and learning can provide students with the essential knowledge, experiences, and skills to function, learn, think, and communicate across cultures. Art-centered diversity education can facilitate students' intercultural competence in the following ways. It:

- Exposes students to the voices, images, feelings, ideas, and experiences of diverse cultures;
- Provides opportunities to broaden and enrich students' cultural knowledge of diverse peoples;
- Facilitates the opportunity for students to communicate and to share

knowledge and information across cultures;

- Explores the cultural, historical, psychological, and political roots of students' own identity and examines the complex intersections and interconnections of race, gender, class, ethnicity, religious belief, sexual orientation, ability, and age that comprise the American culture;
- Develops critical thinking skills by providing students with activities that will enhance their capacities for imagination, intuition, reasoning, and evaluation, as well as contribute to achieving perspective, constructing and discerning relationships, and gaining self-awareness;
- Develops skills to differentiate between "looking" at the surface of art and culture, and "seeing" beneath the surface to discover meaning and values in one's own culture and the culture and art of diverse peoples; and
- Explores the impact of aesthetic norms on our inclination to favor the familiar, and to narrow our vision of others.

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## Art as a Way of Knowing

How do we begin? First, we must teach our students to view the arts as a source of knowledge, rather than ornamentation with no value outside the realm of entertainment or commerce. The poet Shelley believed the arts open a window on the world, transcending our narrow boundaries and creating new ways to interpret life (Avis, 1999). Oscar Wilde described the visual art's capacity to render visible levels of meaning not revealed by other ways of knowing when he said of James MacNeil Whistler's *Chelsea Wharf*, "there was no fog in London before Whistler painted it." (Gombrich, 1989). It is doubtful Oscar Wilde looked at fog quite the same way ever again. For Wilde, Whistler transformed his perception of fog as a phenomenon of weather to a sensual experience, inviting him to contemplate life more profoundly.

Frida Kahlo's *The Two Fridas* is another example of the arts' ability to help us "see" beneath the surface. Kahlo's visual narrative conveys the emotional pain and isolation of two conflicting identities: one representing her Indian-Mexican heritage and the other her European heritage. *The Two Fridas* vividly expresses the physical and emotional suffering of a crippling disability and also laments Kahlo's failed marriage to the famous Mexican muralist

Diego Rivera (Fisher, 1993). Kahlo's *The Two Fridas* illuminates human nature and the human condition, not as physiology and psychology do, or by presenting new facts about the human condition, but by providing images that help us to re-conceptualize what it means to be human. The alchemy of the visual arts is their ability to articulate the inexplicable emotional truths about our world. Although this work is essentially autobiographical, *The Two Fridas* enables us to contemplate and perhaps glimpse into the nature of our own conflicted and fragmented selves in ways that science, for example, cannot.

Reflecting upon the forces that shape the visual arts, one is intrigued by the visual arts' capacity to inform and reveal the history, the political and social ideals, the literature, the folklore, and the underlying psychosocial dynamics of a culture. *The Ordeal of Alice*, Jacob Lawrence's work about the tragic 1963 church bombing and death of four young girls in Birmingham, Alabama is an example of the visual art's ability to inform history. Lawrence's powerful use of color and form illuminates the nightmarish environment African Americans in the South endured and persisted against, in their efforts to achieve human equality.

Juxtapose Lawrence's *The Ordeal of Alice* with *Guernica*, Picasso's famous paint-

ing of the bombing of the Spanish town of the same name during the Spanish civil war. Both works are vivid visual accounts of the horrors of violence and articulate its devastation in ways a history lesson or sociopolitical commentary fail to fully explain.

Art not only provides genuine insight into a particular cultural experience, but also expresses the universal truths of our shared collective genealogy. Art reveals the fundamental ways human life shapes itself and is reproduced in every culture. Zora Neale Hurston (1997) described art as, "the boiled down juice of human living"—the raw material out of which humans not only make sense of their world, but of themselves. Embedded in a culture's art is the psychic material that contains the ultimate dramas of human life, such as, birth, death, and rebirth, love and joy, pain and suffering, friendship and family, identity, and sexuality. Jacob Lawrence's *Ordeal of Alice*, Frida Kahlo's *The Two Fridas*, and Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* express the human struggle to reconcile senseless pain and suffering. Yet, each artist contemplates that struggle within the context of his or her unique culture.

These works of art give us both a view of the breadth and depth of a people, and at the same time, a view of our collective human spirit's ability to persevere in the





face of enormous barriers and oppressive conditions. Essentially, an art-centered approach to diversity education in teaching and learning can help students to understand how culture shapes experience and also helps students to see culture as a complex web of significance.

### Art and Culture

Art-centered diversity education in teaching and learning challenges conventional notions about art that consider it as in a world of its own, on a pedestal, and free



from the corruption of culture. Art is culture, and through art, culture expresses itself in complex or elliptical ways, revealing a great deal about a culture's perceptual and conceptual world. Visual art's power lies in its ability to give us a view of a people from the inside out, rather than from the outside in, providing both a point of entry into and a point of exit out of the murky world of human feelings, perceptions, and values.

Cultural characteristics, such as individualism/collectivism, high/low context, Eastern/Western knowledge construction, linear/circular cognitive styles, tradition/innovation, and action/being orientation are embedded in an artist's work. Works of art illustrate the ways in which cultures view nature, human concerns, and notions of time and space. Artists reveal a culture's values, assumptions and biases, attitudes, beliefs about life and the world, giving us imitate knowledge of the cultural dynamics that underlie and condition a culture. For instance, embedded in the art of cultures like the Native cultures of the Americas, the Dagara culture of Ghana in West Africa and the Aboriginal cultures of Australia, are traditions and practices that are more collectivist in nature, more circular in their aesthetic style, and that express a being orientation.

These cultures and similar cultures like them do not conceptualize art as having an objective and quantifiable existence apart from the natural world, but view art and art-making affirming and

maintaining human existence in alignment with nature. For these cultures, art is indistinguishable from the sacred. Such art traditions can open a window for our students to alternative visual narratives about the human experience that differs from our Western European art traditions that are often individualist in nature, more linear in their aesthetic style, and that express an action orientation.

Native American art traditions and practices, for example, often convey a sacred bond that articulates living in harmony and balance within this circle of life. The individual is not the subject or the center of Native American art, but is often depicted in relationship to the natural world. For many Native American cultures the creation of art demonstrates the collective powers and knowledge of a people, rather than the inspiration and genius of an individual artist. Unlike Western art traditions where works of art allude to or are fixed in a particular place and time, notions of time and space in Native American art are blurred. Art and art making, in Native American traditions and practices, articulate an existence outside the flow of history.

Cultural variations can be found too in the art of women, African Americans, and Latino Americans. Many women artists and artist of color in the United States operate under different assumptions and aesthetic visions than those expressed by male artists and artists of European descent. The content of their art is often influenced by social and political conditions that shape their lives, generating different experiences, questions, and desires. These works of art and others like them can educate our students' imagination to probe beneath the surface of things to gain awareness of themselves and others within the context of a larger and complex society. This is essential because the emerging world we are educating our students to live and work is increasingly culturally diverse.

An art-centered approach to diversity education in teaching and learning provides students with both a window and a mirror<sup>1</sup>—a window into others' reality, experiences, stories, and memories and a mirror that reflects the student's own cultural identity and community.

It can encourage our students to make associations across cultures and can convey and reveal our shared American and human heritage. In the end, students learn to conceptualize cultural diversity as a strength and an asset and to see themselves and others in meaningful and in significant ways.

## Crafting An Art-centered Approach to Diversity Education in Teaching and Learning

Art-centered diversity education exposes students to various methodologies for examining art: historical, formal analytic, semiotic, didactic, political, biographical, autobiographical, contextual, iconographic, psychological, and spiritual. Each method illuminates art's elusive nature, while at the same time giving students different ways to interrogate and interrupt the multiple levels of meaning in an artwork. An art-centered approach also gives students various frameworks to "see," decode, and read images often rendered in combinations, patterns, and forms unfamiliar to them.

Art-centered diversity education is especially appropriate for middle school to high school; however, this approach can also be adapted for college level courses.

Crafting an art-centered approach to teaching and learning means creating a classroom climate that facilitates intercultural knowledge and dialogue and creates a learning environment that supports intercultural sensitivity, awareness, and understanding. This includes giving attention to:

- The placement of images, artifacts, and artworks of culturally diverse artists in the classroom;
- The organization and structure of the classroom and its impact on student-student interaction and teacher-student interaction; and
- The support of each student's learning style, while also providing the opportunity for each student to learn through different cognitive styles.

Here are some examples of instructional activities and strategies using an art-centered approach to diversity education:

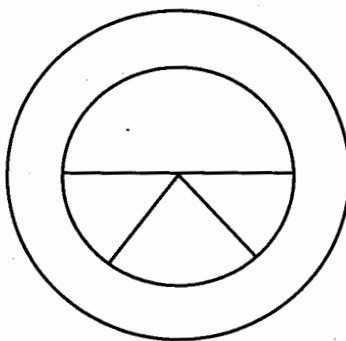
### What Is Art?

- **Small Group Discussion:** Students generate 5 to 10 ideas and share with the class at large.
- **Individual Assignments:** A one to two page essay on "What Is Art?"

### Cultural Identity Exercise

- Students are instructed to place in the top half of the inner circle the identity most central to their sense of "who they

are" as individual's and/or as a member of a society, community or group, (i.e., racial and ethnic origins, religion, gender, social class, sexual orientation, geographic location, physical ability, hobby or recreational activities). This core identity not only shapes but also affects one's self-image, worldview and interpersonal relationships. The bottom three sections are for the identities that have importance yet are not central. The outer realm of the circle is reserved for identities that one might acquire and are modified throughout one's life.



- **Cultural Identity Small Group Discussion:** Students pair up or form small groups to share information from their circles. They are instructed to discuss their reactions and implications of the information.
- **Questions for Cultural Identity Small Group Discussion:** How has your culture shaped your perception of art? How has culture influenced how art is defined, viewed and created? What conflicts might arise from different cultural interpretations of what art is and art's purpose and function in society and in a community?

### Ethnographic Research Project I

- Students research a three to five page paper that looks at how historical, geographic, economic, social and political factors have shaped the values, beliefs, and worldview of the student. The student is required to interview family and other community members to acquire more information. Students create a collage or computer/digital collage that explores the student's own cultural background.

### Ethnographic Research Project II

- **Small Group Project:** Using Jacob Lawrence's *Ordeal of Alice*, Frida Kahlo's *The Two Fridas*, and Pablo

Picasso's *Guernica*, discuss how historical, geographic, economic, social, and political factors have shaped the values, belief, and worldview of these works of art.

- What cultural knowledge is being expressed and revealed by these art works?
- What commonalities do they share?

### Conclusion

Art is like the one perfect food. Contained in it are all the essential minerals and vitamins we will ever need to sustain life. Whether students create art or contemplate art's meaning, both activities yield important knowledge essential to our students' achievement and success in the 21st century—knowledge that is so vital to America's future.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> The metaphor window and mirror is taken from Emily Style's essay Curriculum as Window and Mirror.

### References

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