

Leadership for Social Justice: An Arts-Based Inquiry

Lucy Barbera, SUNY, New Paltz

INTRODUCTION

Many theorists agree that educational reform is most successful when teachers are leading it. (Bullough & Baughman, 1997; Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). Teachers can take leadership at the ground level for social justice in their classrooms and schools. This is why social justice teacher education is so critical. Numerous researchers, (K. Brown, 2006; C. Clark, 2005; C. Day, 2002; I. Goodson & U. Numan, 2002; E. Hatton, 1998; C. Kenny, 2000; V. LaBoskey, 2006; M. Lynn & R. Smith-Maddox, 2007; J. Noel, 2003; C. Rodgers, 2006; A. Suominen, 2006), who have explored the field of social justice education, have identified the essential components necessary for effective social justice teacher education. According to these researchers, the components include: the exploration of self/identity, structured dialogue, and reflection. In my work as a social justice teacher educator, inspired by social justice educators (Shapiro; 2006, Katz & Ryan; 2005), I consciously designed these components into my graduate teaching to maximize student understanding and application of social justice pedagogy.

To these identified components, I have added the use of the arts in social justice teacher education. In March 2007, I presented the highlights of a social justice course that utilized the arts for teaching and learning. The conference, *The Aesthetic Education: Expanding Notions of Excellence in K-18 Learning Communities* was sponsored by the Lincoln Center Institute for Teaching and Learning and the Queens College Equity Studies Research Center. In this paper, I will give just a few brief representative examples of how self/identity exploration, structured dialogue, and reflection *through the arts* were used in my course for social justice teacher education.

I designed and taught *Expressive Arts, Leadership, and Change*, at SUNY, New Paltz for the Humanistic/Multicultural Education Program, in July, 2006. Expressive Arts modalities were employed not only to teach social justice but also to understand the impact of such teaching on student learning. Employing arts-based ethnographic and autoethnographic methods, I sought to understand my students' learning processes as well as my own teaching and learning process as college professor using the arts to teach social justice. My students were given the option of utilizing a spectrum of art modalities including, poetry, drama, mask-making, multi-modal expression, collage, music, painting, drawing, and movement to identify, explore, and create plans for change re: social justice issues in their schools and/or human service organizations.

SELF-IDENTITY

The course began with student exploration of self-identity in the context of social justice. Students engaged autobiographical explorations using (among other art modalities) poetry. Students used Christensen's (2000) "I Am From" poetical structure as a framework for their autobiographical explorations. One student, who I will call Maria, read her poem on the day of the conference to my session participants to illustrate the power and beauty of the form and later gave testimonial (unsolicited) about how, in her experience, the course spiraled from an exploration of the personal, to interpersonal, and then to the social, allowing her to imagine herself engaging in social justice work in a whole new way in her professional work. Maria read her poem with passion and feeling leaving conference participants breathless.

I Am From

I am from the womb of a diverse legacy.

I am from sleepless nights in Brooklyn, where you're lucky if the street light was your only light.

I am from the last of the penny candy store generation.

I am from free summer school lunches and monkey bars.

I am from a young mother and father, learning from me as I learned from them.

I am from where the ice cream song and the police sirens sound the same.

I am from where hope is a whisper from my mother's sweet voice.

I am from an only child's dreams that grew like weeds in the backyard.

I am from public school being the best education around.

I am from the struggle, the trials and the tribulations.

I am from the head of slavery.

I am from the torso of the black renaissance.

I am from the legs of the black power movement.

I am from the feet of the women's liberations.

I am from the heart of justice.

I am from the mind of change.

I am from a world where the social revolution is soon to come.

I am from you what you are from me. (Maria, 2006)

DIALOGUE

Expressive art created by students in response to readings and essential questions regarding social justice issues, provided authentic foci and a springboard for diverse perspectives, opinions, and understandings that were investigated in "dialogue groups". Dialogue occurred as students'

moved from individual art making in response to course material and/or assignments to collective discussions of their experiences of meaning making facilitated by the expressive art process. The following excerpt from my Teaching Journal gives a teacher educator's eye view of the power of dialogue as a pedagogical tool.

As students are sharing their autobiographical, "I Am From" poems, in their Dialogue Groups, I hear fragments of conversation. They are testimonies of selfhood, mission, and courage. One student from each group is reading their poem, as other group members are sitting rapt and listening. The effect is a simultaneous chorus rising and falling in musical cadences:

If you want to talk about segregation, I'm from segregation in my own home.

I'm from second hand, hand me down, but clean clothing.

I am from middle child...

I am from substance abuse...

I am from where we smother the other...

I am from getting bills paid...

I am from all points in the universe. (L. Barbera, teaching journal, July 14, 2006)

REFLECTION

As I reviewed student projects, journals, self evaluation, and feedback, "reflection" as a recurring theme emerged. Reflective journaling was crucial in helping students understand and integrate their learning. Equally important, as it was with dialogue, was the alternation process, this time, between self-reflection and "collective reflection". Students explored personal and

social issues through the art making process. Their learning, demonstrated through their artwork, allowed them to access, challenge, and often transform their deepest values, beliefs, hopes, and dreams.

Going from a very personal introverted process and then to sharing their discoveries in dyads, then in triads, then with their dialogue group, provided students an opportunity to “hear” themselves (perhaps for the first time) and others speak their truth and realizations out loud, thus concretizing their beliefs and empowering them to plan social justice action. One student said, “I have had more (meaningful) social exchange with many people in a single day than usually occurs in years in other day to day relationships.” (D.C., Journal Entry, 2006). Another student summed it up by saying, “I found the people that would help me change the world as we know it.” (M.B., Student Journal Entry, 2006)

ART AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTION

Maxine Greene (1995) encourages educators to

[L]ook at the realities of our world, the harshness and the horror...to find ways of creating situations in which persons will choose to engage in cooperative or collective action in order to bring about societal repairs. (pg. 61)

To this end, students were asked to work cooperatively to develop an “action plan” that utilized the expressive arts to identify, explore, and address social justice issues in their school setting. The final presentations of action plans were experientially demonstrated.

One group of students designed an action plan called “Taking the Diss out of Disability” to raise awareness regarding the challenges of living with “disability”. The students had the class

pair off with each pair doing a full silhouette body tracing to map on the body when and where in our lives we felt disabled. Students in groups created a dramatic tableaux of the individual body maps forming a “parade of images” (Boal, 1979), of inclusion and exclusion.



Sharing Body Tracing

Parade of Images: Inclusion Exclusion

Again, my teaching journal captured the dialogue fragments that follow.

We take for granted things we do everyday.

The body tracing had to do with medical issues.

What did you learn about your own perceptions about disabilities?

When my husband became disabled, he was no longer considered a professional. He no longer knew who he was. He was lost, angry. He was grieving his loss. We were both able to do it together.

What is this teaching us about ability? (L. Barbera, teaching journal, July 29, 2006)

One of the Action Plan team members wrapped up the activity with this statement.

We have to reconstruct the “norm” of what we see people as. Disability and power are connected. If you are normal, you have power. If you are not “normal”, you don’t. We

(the Action Plan Group) want that to be seen and to be changed. (L. Barbera, teaching journal, July 29, 2006)

CONCLUSION

I received very insightful and positive feedback from conference participants who attended my session. One said the autobiographical work and the stories told “touch who people are”, (Lucy Barbera, conference notes, March, 2007). Another pointed out the connection between the expressive art and accessing the emotions for student learning. Others commented on the ability of the arts to build confidence in students, so necessary for social justice action. Many participants agreed that the use of the arts for social justice education provided an alternative, holistic model, allowing the head and heart to join in teacher education.

Through my arts-based research, I discovered that the arts provide “palpable pedagogy”, that is teaching methods and tools that allow students to see, feel, hear, touch, sense, breathe, and experience the focus of their inquiry, dialogue, and reflection, regarding social justice issues, on a physical, emotional, cognitive, spiritual, social, and aesthetic level simultaneously. The arts, used in tandem to explore identity, facilitate dialogue, and foster reflection, offer social justice teacher educators a vital framework and methods to help their students identify, explore, and address social justice issues in education.

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