

International Journal of Education & the Arts

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ISSN: 1529-8094

Volume 14 Number 13

October 7, 2013

Where I'm from: Cultural Exchange through the Arts and VoiceThread

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Citation: Song, Y. I. K., & Donovan, L. (2013). Where I'm from: Cultural exchange through the arts and VoiceThread. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 14(13). Retrieved [date] from <http://www.ijea.org/v14n13/>.

Abstract

This paper discusses a cultural exchange project that is being conducted between classrooms at the Songwon Elementary School in South Korea and the Lee School in Massachusetts, USA. As its main communication tool between the students in the two countries, this project uses VoiceThread—an audiovisual discussion tool that can serve as an ideal match for specific learning and reflection tasks. Through the arts, media, and technology elements that are embedded in this project, students in the two countries have been sharing each other's cultures. The paper explores the progression of the work from multiple vantage points—through an analysis of the role of authorship in students, the power of poetry to illuminate nuance, and the opportunity that technology (VoiceThread) provides to connect students across cultures despite geographic and cultural differences.

Where I'm from: Cultural Exchange through the Arts and VoiceThread

As the world becomes more interconnected than ever, it is important for elementary school curriculum to foster a global perspective in students in order to support their development into global citizens. Young Americans are reportedly less culturally aware than their same-age peers in many other industrialized nations according to a National Geographic Survey in 2002.¹ The 2006 survey² results “demonstrated a remarkable lack of awareness of people and places outside the immediate physical locale of their daily lives” among American youths (Carano, 2009). Moreover, Milner (2007) notes that many people have an ingrained sense of ethnocentrism, viewing their own culture or community as the norm and others with a negative perspective. This further highlights the importance of integrating multicultural perspectives in elementary school curriculum.

Meanwhile, South Korea faces many challenges to embracing multiculturalism. The overwhelming majority, about 98 percent of South Koreans have shared the same heritage for thousands of years, unlike Americans whose national identity was forged by immigrants from areas of the world in the past few hundred years. Thus, many Korean students have had very little exposure to the concept of multiculturalism or diversity, perhaps similar to students in small rural towns in America where students rarely have a chance to interact with different cultures other than their own.

In order to address these issues, interdisciplinary teaching through the arts and technology can be a useful vehicle to improve cultural literacy among young people, especially as “recent advancement in the web and digital technology are changing what is possible in educational practices” (Roland, 2010, p. 18). The youth of this digital age generation can experience and learn others’ cultures through a more vibrant, content-sharing environment than ever before.

This article describes an *Exchange Culture!* project, which was conducted from May 2010 to February 2011 between classrooms in the United States and South Korea, whose purpose was to share each other’s cultures through the arts (poetry, digital photo collage, self-portrait, drama) and technology tool called VoiceThread. In this article, we will explore the progression of the work from multiple vantage points—through analysis of the role of authorship in students, the power of poetry to illuminate nuance, and the opportunity that technology and the arts provide to connect students across cultures.

¹ National Geographic-Roper 2002 global geographic literacy survey, retrieved December 7, 2010 from <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/geosurvey/highlights.html>

² National Geographic-Roper survey of geographic literacy, retrieved January 10, 2011 from <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/roper2006/findings.html>

Participants

The American participants were 60 students in 6th grade and their three classroom teachers, Leslie Hickey, Sue Turner, Laurie Finnegan at Lee Elementary School in Lee, Massachusetts, USA. The Korean participants were 92 students in 6th grade, along with their classroom teachers, Hyeongseon Lee, Jeongmi Seon, Jeongyeop Lee, the school principal Byengsung Lee, and the vice principal Myongsoon Shin at Songwon Elementary School in Gwangju, South Korea. Lesley University professors Dr. Lisa Donovan and Dr. Young Imm Kang Song were facilitators for this project.

Research Questions

Through this project, the researchers sought to explore:

- How the integration of the arts and technology can deepen and expand elementary school curriculum.
- The benefits or challenges of interdisciplinary teaching and learning.
- How teachers can facilitate cultural exchange among students across the world using VoiceThread.
- How integration of the arts and technology each provide new strategies for assessing and documenting student learning.

Project Process

1. Writing Where I am from Poems

Over one hundred fifty students from the two countries crafted “Where I am from” poems of their own. The teachers used the writing structure of “Where I am from” poems developed by George Ella Lyons (2010) to encourage students to consider themes from their lives that make them who they are. In this structure, each stanza in the poem begins with the words “I am from” in a repeating manner. Lyons’ approach provides non-threatening ways to prompt students to gather memories and details from their lives, and then to use a particular form to write the poems

The process was:

1. The students created a list of anything that came to mind about their home life, such as family foods and traditions, relatives, household items, and memories.
2. The students divided themselves into groups of two and exchanged stories and had a discussion about the items on their lists.
3. The students developed “I am from” sentences from these items by adding descriptions and explaining how these items influenced the students or created a memory for them.

4. The teachers encouraged students to think and write in different ways, employing poetic devices, and exploring the impact of different choices in phrasing, word choice, and repetition.
5. Each student organized the sentences into a “Where I am from” poem.
6. The students shared their poems with the rest of the classroom.

The results are poignant—very personal poems that reveal much about what the writer holds dear. Reading across the work of 6th graders at the Lee Elementary school reveals rich diversity that students are often unaware of. The poems lead to discussions of difference, interests, tradition, and for individual students can remind them that they are unique. As Ms. Finnegan noted:

“We all realized just how individual we are even though we are all from the very same small town. Our experiences are unique.” Ms. Hickey also noted that “Hearing the students read their own poem and seeing their collages added more personalization to the poems.”

According to McKim and Steinbergh (2004), poetry allows us to “say what we need to say in the fullest and most authentic way we know,” and allows for “weaving together of feelings and environment.” This project demonstrates students’ ability to “describe the way they see the world, rather than how others want them to see it” (p. 7-8).

Initially, the students in Songwon Elementary were unsure about writing a poem of this specific structure. Because the poetry model by Lyons is a poem written in English, the students seemed to struggle with understanding the emotions or nuances of the poem when they first heard the poem read aloud in English. In addition to the difficulties of understanding a foreign language, the “Where I am from” poem structure had different rhyming and repetition structure more common to English poems than from what they were used to. So Dr. Song recommended that teachers write “where I am from” poems of their own in Korean as a model for their students. This turned out to be a very effective strategy. The students seemed to understand this specific poem structure far better after listening to the model poems in Korean language. In addition, when the students heard their teachers read aloud their poems and talk about their childhood memories and personal stories, they were excited to learn more about their teachers’ lives. Vice principal Shin of Songwon Elementary School said, “Many students told me that interviewing and talking with their family members about family traditions, values, and baby stories made them feel a stronger bond to their families.” Each poem reflected each personality. The students from both schools felt that they were important and unique figures in their families. Students also expressed a sense of accomplishment at being poets and authors.

One challenge that is inherent in international collaborations is finding a common language.

The common language for this project was English. In order to make sure the Korean students would be able to create expressive and nuanced poems, the students were encouraged to write in Korean first so they would not have to be concerned with English grammar or vocabulary. Then, they translated their poems into English by themselves during a 40-minute English class period, which was quite challenging for the 6th graders. Much meaning and nuances were unfortunately lost during the translation, but it was a good practice for them nevertheless (see Figure 1).

<p><u>나는 할머니의 주글주글한 손에서 왔다</u></p> <p>나윤범</p> <p>나는 할머니의 주글주글한 손에서 왔다. 엄마와 아빠는 일로 바빠서서 형과 나를 내버려 두시고 그렇게 나는 할머니의 손에서 자랐다.</p> <p>나는 열기가 후끈후끈 솟아오르는 다리미에서 왔다. 다리미가 신기해 슬쩍 만져본 다리미에 손이 데어 아직도 무섭다.</p> <p>나는 우리 형의 스타일에서 왔다. 형이 하는 머리, 신고 다니는 신발, 형의 옷 모두 기억해 흉내내어 입는다.</p> <p>나는 넓디 넓은 PC방에서 왔다. 친구들과 같이 엄마 몰래 가는 PC방 엄마한테 들키면 화들짝 놀라 다음부터는 말하고 간다.</p>	<p><u>I am from my grandma's wrinkled hands</u></p> <p>Na, Yun Bum</p> <p>I am from my grandma's wrinkled hands. Mother and father were busy with work, unable to take care of my brother and I, So I was raised by the hands of my grandma.</p> <p>I am from the hot hot heat, Rising up from the steam iron. Amazed by the iron, a gentle touch, I still fear it 'cause of the burn I got.</p> <p>I am from the stylishness of my brother. His hairdo, his shoes, his clothes I remembered everything and imitated him.</p> <p>I am from the grand, large Internet café. With friends I went, without telling Mother, But when I got caught I'd get a scolding, Next time I tell her before I go.</p>
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Figure 1. Na Yun Bum, Student poem. Korean version on left and English translation on right

2. Creating a Digital Photo Collage with 5 or 6 Images to go with a Poem

To depict the students' poems through visual elements, teachers asked the students take five to six photographs that capture the feelings or meanings of their poems. The students took photographs of not only realistic but also metaphoric images. We used the collage template from Microsoft Word (<http://www.microsoft.com/canada/home/memories-and-crafts/articles/create-a-digital-photo-collage.aspx>).

Digital photo collages are essentially the same as traditional collage techniques but use a digital platform. This allows us to arrange the photographs in various ways (see Figure 2 & 3). This collage created a visual essay that communicated as much about the students' lives as words did, infusing students' writing with rich details, and generating additional ideas for the

poems. Moving back and forth between image and text created more nuanced writing.



Figure 2, Alex Donovan, student digital photo collage

I am From

Alex Donovan

I am from a hammock that swings from a touch of my hands.
Strung from pine tree to bear, carved from my father's callused hands.
I am from my little brother's voice echoing in my ears.
I am from a fence stained from my hands around my father's paintbrush.
I am from an old swing set, which screeches and creaks when sat upon.
I am from trees towering over October Mountain.
I am from my refrigerator, from cookies dipped in milk.
I am from a Chinese dinner on Christmas Eve, and a family of sports.
From Jack, Rick, and Lisa.
I am from baseball, football, basketball, soccer, and volleyball.
From "use your indoor voice, Jack" and "do your homework."
I'm from Ireland and France, but born in Pittsfield.
From pasta and barbecued ribs.
I am from my cat Baxter, killing mice and leaving them on our doorstep
From a present but he always forgets to wrap them.
I am from birds chirping like a broken record.
I am from talking too much in class and being Mr. Drama Queen.

Figure 3, Alex Donovan, student poem

3. Expressing a Poem using Tableaux and Pantomime

The next step was to bring students' poems to life using drama and kinesthetic movement. Individual students or a small group of students explored the poems through dramatic structures using tableaux, in which they created frozen sculptures with their bodies that brought to life various lines of poetry; another technique was using pantomime to mime the meanings of lines of poetry with movement and gesture (see Figure 4). When this project was completed, a survey was conducted among the 92 students in Korea. Interestingly, they reported that it was most exciting when they were asked to express their poems through tableaux and pantomime. This was likely the case because drama is rarely a part of the elementary school curriculum. The integration of drama allowed students to work with ideas and phrases using their voices and bodies to play with ideas and transitions. At the Lee Elementary School, students reported that by acting out their poems, they were able to hear how words and phrases sounded out loud, as opposed to reading them in written form. This prompted students to play with different variations of word choice and structure which led to edits informed by experimentation. The work with peers allowed students to translate their ideas into gesture and physical expression. As Leah Mayers notes, the performance of written works creates an opportunity to "see the words in three dimensions." She suggests that performance can prompt editing. "Gaps in continuity or descriptions of characters are more visible than when they were on the page" (Weiss & Lichtenstein, 2008, p. 74). Playing with words and exploring poems through drama and creating short performed sketches generates interest in each students' experiences and choices of what to share and how.

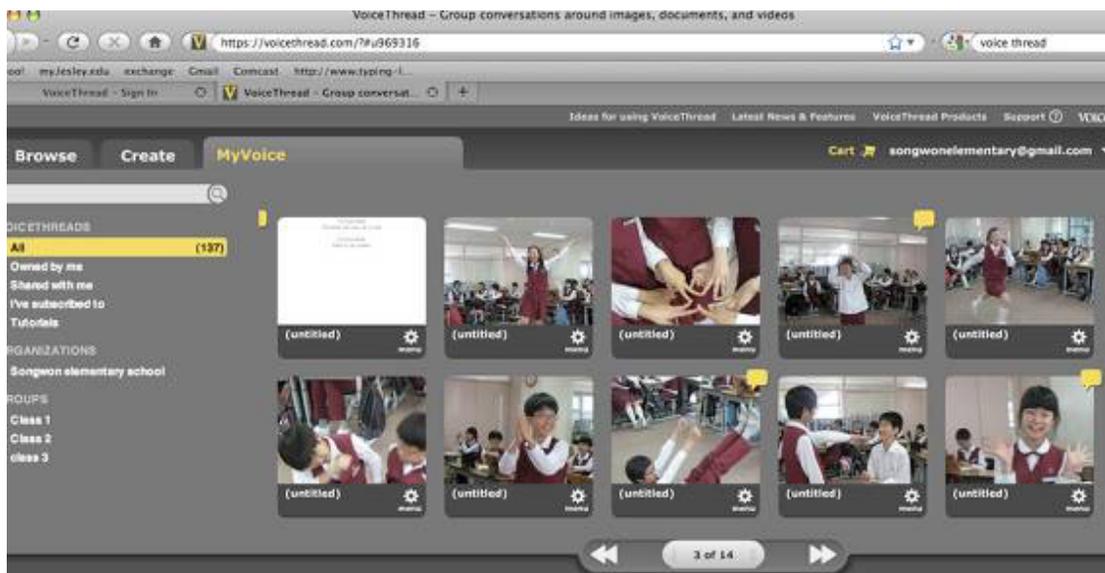


Figure 4. Screenshot of VoiceThread Platform

4. Creating a Self-Portrait

Then the students were encouraged to create their own self-portraits by either drawing and scanning the portrait into the computer or by creating a self-portrait through Photoshop. These were to be used as icons for each individual student for the VoiceThread website where they would later put together the poems, digital photo collages, and photos of the dramatic enactments of the poems to share with their classmates and international project participants (see Figure 5).

This assignment generated a lot of excitement from the students who were enthusiastic about seeing what their international friends look like, and showing themselves to their American or Korean peers. Some of the students stated, “Should I draw myself to be more realistic or more comical?” and “How should I make my portrait so they will think I am so cool?”

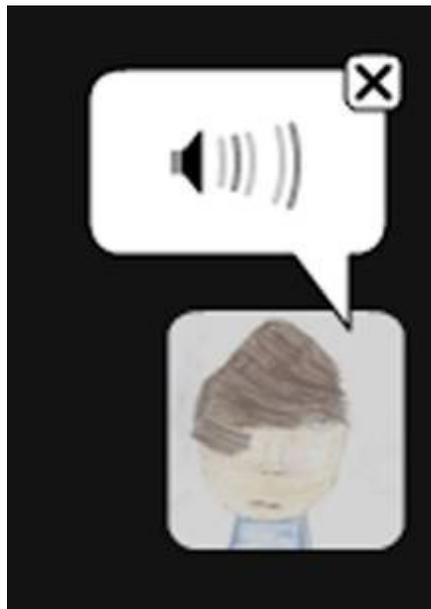


Figure 5. Matt Reynolds, student self-portrait

5. Using VoiceThread to Advances the Work

Finally, in order to share the students' poems with the students from the partner schools, we used a technology tool called VoiceThread. VoiceThread is a collaboration-based multimedia slide show website that allows people to upload and share images, documents, and video. As this is a website, all materials are shared online and accessible for account holders across the

world. VoiceThread members can interact and converse with each other through any of the multimedia methods like an audio or video comment.³ On this VoiceThread website, the students first uploaded their self-portraits to be their icons. Then the students uploaded their poems (both Korean and English for Songwon students), digital photo collages, and in some cases, photographs of themselves dramatically enacting their poems. Afterwards, the students recorded themselves on the VoiceThread website, reading aloud their poems in English for the Lee Elementary School students and in Korean for the Songwon Elementary students. Then, in some cases, students posted comments on each other's poems, digital photo collages, and photographs both within their own classrooms and with classrooms at the partner school in another country.

Ms. Turner stated, "The VoiceThread program was fun and new to them. I think exposing them to what they can do with technology was worthwhile. Although we had to make numerous recordings, I think the more they did it, the more empowered they felt and the better recorders they became. The sense of accomplishment came when they saw and heard all the pieces including the self-portrait come together."

Conclusion

Students learned about each other by sharing their lives in ways that are sometimes absent from the curriculum. They discovered the diversity within their own classrooms, which had been invisible to them previously. They also learned more about Korean and American cultures from their peers than they would have from a text. Their natural curiosity about students their own age heightened an awareness of differences and similarities across cultures. This kind of interdisciplinary, cross-cultural exploration demonstrates the usefulness of technology to bridge content and worlds and the power of the arts to transcend language. According to Ms. Seon, "At first, there was a concern that it would seem unnatural to integrate many subjects including poetry, drama, technology, visual art, and cultural studies. But after the project, I realized that it worked very smoothly. I understood that interdisciplinary teaching and learning could be very effective and enjoyable".

By using technology as a communication tool, it was possible to connect to geographically distant places in the world. Students did not simply write a poem. They brought their personal lives into the classroom, expressed this in visual art form through photos and drawings, conveyed it through body language and a reflective self-portrait, and ultimately communicated this through a VoiceThread to someone of another culture. It became a unique

³ VoiceThread, Retrieved November 2, 2010 from <https://voicethread.com/about/features/>

interdisciplinary experience that utilized technology to share each stage of the project with others. This illustrates how certain technologies can be selected and used by teachers as an educational tool that can create cross curricular and cross cultural connections. Despite these strengths and benefits, teachers are often hesitant to use technology in their classrooms. But teachers should “focus on outcomes, not tools” in designing their curricula (Ronald, 2010, p. 19). Therefore, they should not think of technology merely as a tool, but rather as something that can potentially improve and expand outcomes.

For technology adoption to be long lasting, it is critical for the school administrators, principals, and education policy makers understand the educational benefits of integrating technology into the classroom. They could play an important role in supporting the teachers who seek to employ these new technologies, both through encouragement and by purchasing and updating the most appropriate educational software for the context.

For ensured safety, they should ensure that the chosen software have limited access between members of particular groups rather than no regulations or access restrictions.

Technology can provide new strategies for bridging disciplines and geography. By using technology as a tool for communication and documentation, it is possible to engage in interdisciplinary teaching through the natural integration of a variety of subject matter.

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Lisa Donovan is an Associate Professor in the Fine and Performing Arts Department at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. She is a theater artist, educator, and researcher. Formerly the Director of the Creative Arts in Learning Division at Lesley University, she has researched the impact of arts integration on teachers' practice and students' academic achievement. Donovan is the co-editor of a new series on arts integration by Shell Education and co-author of three books within the series; *Integrating the Arts across the Content Areas (2012)*, *Integrating the Arts in Math (2013)*, and *Integrating the Arts in English Language Arts (2013)*.

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