

# What's Among and Between Us: Mining the Arts for Pedagogies of Deep Relation

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## Abstract

In this paper, I share results of collaborative inquiry with youth and teachers into how the arts can create more relational learning spaces in the classroom. I offer a framework for relational teaching and learning through the arts guided by the questions: Who am I? Who are you? And who are we? Through these dimensions, I explore how arts-based practice can support new ways of being in the classroom, where teaching creates conditions for students to be “among and between”: in relation to the material, the teacher, and importantly, to themselves, to each other, and to the world around them.

*Maybe the purpose of being here, wherever we are, is to increase the durability and occasions of love among and between peoples. — June Jordan (n.d.)*

A month into a yearlong study in an arts-based English classroom, 9th grade student Raquel told me what she thought was different about learning through and with the arts. “Well teenagers these days, mostly, they like something art-related, like drawing, or theatre, or dance or music. And you can all relate.” Throughout that year, the word “relate” kept recurring across student interviews. Students talked about *relating* to the arts, to English class, to their teacher, to each other, and to themselves. Because we don’t live in the world alone, learning is always to some degree relational. But students were telling me that this relating was somehow *different* from more typical classrooms they had experienced. In this arts-based context, they were learning to relate *differently*—to themselves, to one another, and to the world around them.

Pedagogical questions about how to develop students’ understandings of the inextricability of others’ experiences as connected to our own (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), are pressing ones. How we engage in profound relational work across different cultural, epistemological, and political frameworks and lifeworlds remains one of the biggest educational and societal challenges we face. How can teachers possibly take on this challenge within the complexities of classroom spaces that are increasingly diverse and where the potential for relational learning has long been suppressed by systems rooted in coloniality, white supremacy, and capitalism that uphold individualism and the status quo?

In this article I investigate how arts-based practice can support new ways of learning and being in the classroom, where teaching creates the conditions for students to be “among and between”: in active relation to the material, the teacher, and importantly, to themselves, to each other, and to the world around them. I’ll offer a pedagogical framework for relational teaching and learning through the arts,<sup>1</sup> guided by the questions: Who am I? Who are you? and Who are we? I’ll use these questions to explore pedagogical design around a complex set of interrelations.

## Background

Classrooms have the potential to be deeply relational learning spaces. However, unless planned and carefully structured as such, they tend to take on a life that is not. Practices steeped in the industrial model of learning that have been engrained in American schooling for over a century are tied up in ways of knowing, doing, and being that, at best, constrain relational learning and, at worst, prevent it through top-down relational structures. These structures rooted in coloniality rely on a power differential between student and teacher in ways that reproduce inequity in the classroom through individualism and expectations for compliance. Today, the current and deep influence of market logic on schools, with its emphasis on efficiency, quantification, and individualistic measures of success, brings a sense of urgency to the topic. Research on teaching is called upon to explore and reclaim approaches to teaching outside of the corporate logic that shapes pedagogies of authority, obedience, competition, and adjustment to the existing social order (Giroux, 2019; Hill & Kumar, 2009).<sup>2</sup>

Set against this backdrop, the arts and aesthetic experience are rich but too-often untapped pedagogical resources for learning in relation. The arts can focus our individual and collective attention, stimulate public discourse, and shape the cultural imagination. The arts can ask students, as viewers and makers, to think about how the world is currently organized and how it could be organized differently. However, advocacy arguments for the arts have insufficiently accounted for the role that pedagogy plays in what the arts actually do and can do in classrooms. In this paper, I focus on pedagogy as a site of inquiry because although the arts have the potential to support more relational learning spaces and new ways of being, this potential is never a guarantee. As Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) argues, “the arts don’t *do* anything” (p. 211): they can foster individualism and competition just as easily as relational understandings and an emphasis on the collective. For teachers who believe in the relational potential for the arts in learning, the question becomes, “How can I mediate and cultivate this potential in my classroom?” What pedagogical invitations can I create and how might these invitations encourage more humane, socially just *means* of learning toward more humane and socially just *ends*?

## Art and the In-Between

Conventional knowledge often positions the arts as irrelevant, individual encounters with a piece of artwork. From another view, the arts can be understood as occupying relational space, a space that imbues them with collective potential and transformative possibilities. Scholars across a range of intellectual traditions have theorized relational possibilities for the arts. Phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1967) asserted a holistic view of the individual in a lived world where the subjective body and lived body are intertwined. He argued that arts, the imagination, and aesthetic experience allow for a permeability of boundaries that we construct between ourselves and others, and that this permeability of boundaries allows for our perceptions to be affected and changed.

Art theorist Bourriaud (1998) posits that the arts and aesthetic experience create *social interstices*, “space[s] in human relations which fit more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system but suggest other trading possibilities than those in effect within the system” (p. 16). In these social interstices, Bourriaud argues, there is possibility for an “arena of exchange,” one with “epistemological breathing room” (i.e., flexibility in ways of knowing), and one that might “tighten the spaces of social relations.”

From a related angle in media studies, Ellsworth (2004) conceptualizes what can happen in Winnicott’s (1989) notion of “transitional space” where the arts provide a pedagogical holding environment for being in open relation. This space, also referred to as “zone 3,” is a fluid space that assumes the body is in constant motion and in relation to what is not itself, and therefore open to change. Linking the notion of transitional space back to Merleau-Ponty (1967), Young (in Ellsworth, 1994) argues that zone 3 is dynamic and ripe for relational sense-making because “what exists between (art) subject and object is in some sense a zone and in some sense a permeable boundary with constant traffic both ways and with objects often multiply presented” (p. 80). Although the potential for transitional space and change is everywhere, mining this potential in pedagogical spaces requires intentionality to both set up and facilitate this traffic. Ellsworth calls upon teachers to be curators of pedagogy who “innovate, design, and stage the materials of expression and conditions of learning so that something new may arise” (p. 28).

Taken together, these ideas challenge notions of the arts as peripheral, nonessential, and nonacademic vis-à-vis their transformative potential in these spaces of relation. They support a re-centering of the arts and aesthetic experience in the social spaces of classrooms at the intersections of relationships and in the interest of knowledge generation and change. In the next sections, I’ll share and explore images of how teachers strategically mined the arts for pedagogies of deep relation and consider implications for teaching and learning.

## Methodology

Data in this paper are from a yearlong collaborative practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) in two English classrooms at an urban public arts-based high school. The research was co-constructed among teachers and students as participants within a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) where teachers, students, and I shared an interest in what it means to learn through and with the arts. Situated within a constructivist epistemology and a mode of reasoning grounded in Heidegger’s (1962) notion of “being in the world” (p. 53), the research was taken up within a conception of reality as semiotically mediated rather than objective. The findings are thus what Gadamer (1960) might call a “fusion of horizons” (p. 306), although one meant not to flatten but to show texture and play across relations.

Within this epistemology, I approached my inquiry through an interpretive, hermeneutic paradigm motivated by questions of how and why, that is, how arts-based pedagogy was taken up and why it mattered. While much of school-based arts research in recent years has been called upon to justify itself within a logic of transfer and correlation, this inquiry draws from what has been learned about social

context and knowledge construction in recent years in social science and literacy studies, to better understand the role of the arts from critical, sociocultural perspectives on learning and inquiry (Gadsden, 2008).

Students came from a vast array of backgrounds and neighborhoods across a large northeastern city, and most travelled via public transportation to attend an art-based school. Students identified as Dominican, Brazilian, Bahaman, Asian, Black, Arab, African, Puerto Rican, Native, African American, and White. They identified as Christians, Muslims, atheists, and agnostics. They came from predominantly working-class families and many students were from first-generation immigrant families. The school was arts-based and college preparatory, so the emphasis was on integration of the arts into all subjects rather than on strict disciplinary arts study. Important to the ethos of the school, admissions decisions were made emphasizing interest and commitment over arts talent or expertise in a specific arts discipline.

Coming to this study as a former English teacher who had relied upon the arts in my own classroom to teach better, I positioned myself as a practitioner inquirer (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Both teachers, Molly and Lorraine, shared an interest in exploring the possibilities of arts-based English teaching with me and with their students. Both brought a critical lens to their teaching, had worked with the local chapter of the National Writing Project, and had won awards and accolades for their teaching. Both were innovators, inquirers, and designers of their curriculum in a school district with mandated standards-based teaching, as well as school and district oversight around achievement. Both teachers juggled working within and against these mandates to teach in ways that were art-based and responsive to their students' lives, cultures, and knowledge. While members of the school community shared a commitment to the arts, comprehensive arts-based teaching and learning was not common in the district, and teachers and students expressed how this work was easily dismissed and often misunderstood by those outside of the school. Variousy positioned as teacher/critical inquirer/daughter of Filipino immigrants (Lorraine); teacher/critical inquirer/White (Molly); and teacher/researcher/critical inquirer/White (Jessica), we shared a commitment to transformative teaching (hooks, 1994) and to the role of the arts in this project.

To study arts-based literacy pedagogy, I drew from ethnography with its origins in anthropology and sociology to understand holistically and over time, the ethnographic question, "What is going on here?" As Erickson (1984) argues, this approach involves a deliberate, reflective, and context-based inquiry process that is developed in situ and over time. The data set included observations, fieldnotes, interviews with teachers and students, student work, and classroom artifacts from across the two classrooms. Through recursive analysis of the data, I sought to make sense of arts-based literacy teaching and learning in this context as "bricoleur" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), piecing together language and patterns to characterize the implicit logic in how teachers were designing for transformative pedagogy with the arts. Data were analyzed first through open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and then through subsequent layers of conceptual coding. Through this iterative process, the deep, relational design of arts-based teaching and learning was identified as a central overarching theme. Through additional recursive analysis, I identified *who am I? who are you? who are we?* as a framework and heuristic for a deeper tacit logic within this relational design.

## Framing Arts-Based Teaching & Learning as Relational Work

The framework offers insight into three different dimensions of being in relation: the question, *who am I?* looks inward and asks who I am in relation to myself; the question, *who are you?* asks how I understand others in relation to how I understand myself; and the question, *who are we?* asks how we are in collective relation to one another and among a broader community. Differing from the notion of best practices, these questions comprise a pedagogical framework that can be taken up by teachers in myriad ways that are open to invention and context specific. Molly and Lorraine explored each dimension over time and differently, and space here does not allow for a full rendering of this range and variation in practice. Readers are encouraged to imagine the following examples as windows into a range of possible arts-based practices that invite students into a dialectic across relationships among themselves, one another, and the world around them.

### Who Am I? Looking Inward Through the Arts and Autobiography

*Art is about specificity not standardization - Because art seeks diversity of outcome, meaning is personalized: the arts develop personal vision which helps an individual to recognize what is distinct about themselves. —Eisner (2002, p. 44)*

Autobiographical work centered prominently in the teaching across both classes, building upon the unique cultural resources of every student and considering seriously students' own lives as academic subjects to explore. It also set up a fluid orientation to the self as a work of art (Foucault, 1990), making space for students to engage in identity work through art, and to do this in the social space of the classroom. As Molly described:

I hope to create a safe space, safe in the sense that kids can really be themselves and really be validated for who they are, and allow for that plurality of voices, and experiences, and personalities and styles... I find that really exciting and... really important to validate, to acknowledge in the classroom. That this is a place where it is okay to be exactly who you are, and if you don't know who that is, it's also a place to explore and figure it out...that is probably the most important thing.

Importantly, in this context, a range of art forms provided multiple ways of entering into an intimate dialogue with students' unique and individual selves. Students created playlists/music autobiographies, and *This I Believe* podcasts. They drew body biographies, wrote autobiographical poems, and created multimodal memoirs. In 9th grade, to prepare for writing their name vignettes, students listened to music about names and read short stories and poetry about names. A design that used a range of art forms to explore identity, created open and dynamic invitations for students to enter into autobiographical inquiry.

Aniya was a 9th grade student and voice major who identified as African American. She described herself as loyal and honest and told me that she worked hard to put all of her thoughts into her reading, writing, and art. When I asked Aniya what arts-based learning was like for her, she told me that it was very different from her previous experiences with school. With learning through the arts, she said, "It's interesting and you can actually get into it. We can actually *relate* to it. We relate to each other's

stories and it's fun." Getting into it and relating across stories involved ongoing autobiographical work. In her *My Name* narrative vignette, Aniya grapples with how identity is always shaped in relation—both constructed by the individual and imposed upon by others. As a Black girl, Aniya stakes claim to her name given to her by her African-American mother and to a strength and legacy associated with her name. She also pushes back against how names are linked to micro-aggressions and racialized harm that students of color experience in school and beyond (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012).

My name is Aniya. To me it means independent, successful, hardworking, and outstanding trooper.... The name I have been given sounds to me as a source of motivation, dedication, concentration, and last, but never least, determination. ... Motivation meaning I "must" strive to do my best and "want" to do my best. Dedication meaning I "will" stay true to myself and others and "never" letting an opportunity pass me by. Concentration meaning to be focused. Determination meaning to never give up and persevere through barriers that might knock me down. These four terms justify me as Aniya Alana Johnson, NOT just another name an African-American woman gave me as I was born into this place we call life. As I think about what my name means I also wonder how it will affect me as I become older and stand on my own two feet without my parents... My mind is still unsure about how to answer the thousands of questions I have.

What if my name was not Aniya? Would people look at me differently? Will my name determine whether I get a successful job or not? Do people have negative opinions regarding my name? My answer is: should it matter?! My personality is what makes my name stand out as an individual. So, when I look in the mirror staring back at myself – in my heart, mind, and soul – I will know that Aniya Alana Johnson is a leader I am proud to be and not a follower which I will never become.

The relational aspects of Aniya's vignette can be understood as what Chicana/Latina scholars have called opportunities for feminist affirmation and intervention (Knight et al., 2006). She uses the vignette as affirmation to assert self-determination and as intervention to resist imposition, writing herself as a powerful agent of her own story, shaping the narrative of her life as a work of art. As one of many art forms that could be easily shared, the vignette centered students' lives as a source of meaningful inquiry and learning. When Aniya shared her vignette with the class, this experience empowered not just personal affirmation and intervention, but public affirmation and intervention.

Later in the year when I asked Aniya if there was a piece of writing that she was most proud of, she told me it was this vignette about her name because "it meant a lot to me." "I think it's more about how the person is and what they have to offer and you know, a name shouldn't define who a person is, so that's what I think. That's why it was my best writing." Aniya's work speaks to how the art form of the vignette made space to explore, relate to, and build a commitment to oneself. It serves as one example of the arts being engaged as an act of creation and a mode of inquiry. Aniya could both construct her own version of herself, while at the same time explore understandings of identity as an ongoing process of becoming, rather than something fixed, pre-determined, and to be discovered. Tenth grader Lys captured this affordance of fluidity well when she asserted, *I am striving to become the person I wish to one day meet.*

Even when students were looking inward autobiographically and asking, *Who am I?*, they were never doing this in isolation, because a central feature across both classrooms was ongoing dialogue and

sharing of student work in the interest of deep relations. So, while the dimensions (who am I/who are you/who are we) do represent important distinctions in ways of designing for relational pedagogy, drawing overly sharp boundaries across these dimensions would not accurately capture the fluidity and authenticity of the relations that were being cultivated. With this in mind, in the next section I'll shift to explore how arts-based pedagogy fostered outward-looking dialogue that was deeply intertwined with the identity work highlighted here.

## Who Are You? Looking Outward Through the Arts and Dialogue

*Well usually at my old school it was like... I'm not gonna talk to him because I don't speak his language – but here everybody tries to talk. They try to learn their language. — Justin, 9th grade*

Scholar and activist bell hooks (1995) asserts that even though we now have sophisticated cultural criticism with notions of cultural hybridity, border crossing, and the singular/plural, most still see identity as fixed and hold on to the idea that people have essential traits and characteristics that are unchanging and static (p. 10). She argues that self-work necessarily precedes and accompanies the work of relating to others; when we begin to know ourselves as mutable and open to change, we become more able to see others this way, softening our perceptions. Since this inward/outward looking process is always entangled, the inclusion of multiple voices and perspectives in classrooms can offer ways to map similarities and differences across experience. Such mapping can help students to develop deeper intrapersonal and interpersonal understandings, a process that is aligned with cultivating compassion (hooks, 1995; Hanh, 2005). For critical and transformative teaching, this cultivation necessarily involves attention to power that shapes whose voices are typically heard, and what perspectives are centered.

Pedagogically, multiple perspectives and dialogue can be enhanced by strategically inviting the diversity of students' lives and experiences into the classroom to be in conversation with a range of art forms and texts that center nondominant voices. In literacy classrooms, this can involve juxtaposing print text (such as a story or novel) with many short, related arts pieces. Taken together, many voices across art and experience can combine to create a unique and dynamic kind of "traffic," as described in the theoretical framework. And while this can open up spaces for dialogue "between me and not me," it requires that teachers do a lot of intentional planning around how to design and mediate this particular kind of traffic.

Ninth grade student Lys told me, "Here we do discussions instead of worksheets. It's kind of a different way to learn." When I asked her how this was different, she told me it was because the discussions helped to change her perspective: "It happens like every day—you just listen to people and what their actual opinion is about it and if it contrasts with, like, my own. It gives you a new perspective." While discussion isn't unusual in English classrooms, and adolescent development happens relationally whether we plan for it or not, the extent to which the arts opened up spaces for dialogue, and the extent to which students noticed this work changing their perspectives, stood out in the data. What also stood out were teachers' strategic efforts to mine these relational affordances. One morning in March, Molly placed large chart paper on the walls in the classroom and asked students to name what "bothered and offended them" in

discussions, what “made them think,” and what their “favorite kinds of discussions” were, as represented by the following chart:

Bothered/Offended	Makes Me Think/Favorite Kinds of Discussions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Discriminating against people</li> <li>● Racist comments</li> <li>● Wanting to talk and you can't get in</li> <li>● Putting facts on a topic you don't know</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Someone brings something new</li> <li>● It's about something I never thought of</li> <li>● Talking about our lives</li> <li>● Talking about other peoples' views</li> <li>● Breaking stereotypes</li> <li>● Making a difference in the world</li> <li>● One person at a time</li> <li>● Everyone's opinion is heard</li> <li>● Circle set-up</li> <li>● We respond to each other; it helps people build on each other's ideas</li> <li>● It goes beyond the obvious</li> </ul>

Fig. 1: Students comment on relational learning

Over halfway into the school year, these comments reflect some of the ways that students were experiencing and understanding relational learning in the arts-based classroom. They reflect a way of being in relation that centers race, discrimination, knowledge, power, and voice in the classroom. The comments also place value in students' lived experience, in equitable discourse, and in actively changing the world through what they think. The comments are instructive to pedagogies of relational learning through the arts because they place importance on the knowledge that each student brings as potentially transformative and, at the same time, on questions of power and voice. Importantly, the teacher didn't set these norms ahead of time; students were developing these understandings through the particularities of their lived experience with the arts in this context.

In a unit on immigration, students read novels, legal documents, and political cartoons; they watched film clips, examined visual art, and wrote a formal research paper. The juxtaposition of the different texts sought to disrupt the vitriolic and racist ways that the topic of immigration was being covered in the mainstream media and to invite more nuanced and humane conversations around belonging. This was particularly relevant because students in the school came from neighborhoods all over the city and brought a diverse range of backgrounds and cultural identities, including first-generation immigrant identities. To invite students into an encompassing conversation about belonging, Molly asked, “What happens when who you are is miscommunicated, misunderstood, misrepresented? Anyone ever had this happen?”



**Teacher:** What happens when who you are is misunderstood, miscommunicated, misunderstood, misrepresented. Anyone ever had this happen?  
**Stephanie:** When people, like my aunt and uncle, misunderstand what I sign. (Stephanie identified as deaf)  
**Ariana:** When I was younger, half of my face was paralyzed, people took me for being weird, not really on their level.  
**Sasha:** Someone on the bus said to me: this is a real good neighborhood. There are no Puerto Ricans. (Sasha identified as Puerto Rican)  
**Ariana:** [Even] at home in my house and something could happen. You can't worry... I think it's a race thing (she tells a story about a neighbor with a cat named Onyx, her mom yelling at the neighbor in Spanish about the cat and the neighbors being racist) they think Mexicans are dirty and don't know how to act (Ariana identified as Mexican American)  
**Anik:** in 7<sup>th</sup> grade... it was like why are you not beating people up? When you get mad, you're not like cursing? Well, maybe I'm just educated!  
**Tanesha:** People at my school thought I was Jamaican or African and it got in my nerves. Just people I wore bright colors I guess. (Tanesha identified as African American)  
**Vanessa:** It's like an internal conflict: we question our identity like is this okay? (Vanessa identified as Bahamian)  
**Haley:** People assume things because of where you live, how you talk things, that you do. When I go to the mall people seem to always think that I'm gonna shoplift because I'm a teenager. (Haley identified as White)  
**Tanesha:** When I get know a person I ask them after a while, they start asking me all kinds of bad stuff.  
**Natasha:** I think it's just a [this city] thing but sometimes people call me a hippie. I despise that word. They think that if I wear a tie-die shirt I do LSD! (Natasha identified as White)  
**Anik:** When people first meet me, they tell me they think I'm mean. That affects me after a while. (Anik identified as African American)  
**Shona:** People get angry about things from each culture and anger turns into hate. (Shona identified as Arab)  
**Tanesha:** I hate things because I don't know how to do it. Like in music class we are introduced to music maybe we don't like if you don't know something, you say you hate it, my teacher said, you'll like it soon. If you don't know something or someone, you say you hate

Fig. 2: What happens when who you are is miscommunicated, misunderstood, misrepresented?

By this point in the year, students had become accustomed to sharing and making meaning from lived experience in conversation with a range of art forms. In this excerpt, students name experiences with belonging that encompass race, class, language, culture, disability, and age. Shona theorizes that anger can lead to discrimination and hate, while Tanesha links hate to not knowing and argues that the arts, specifically music, can be a way to know something that you didn't know and thereby combat hate; it's about "knowing something or someone" because "if you don't know, you can say you hate." Relational pedagogies of being made space for this kind of knowledge generation to happen student to student, from their own lived experience, and in conversation with the arts and stories they encountered.

The above conversation about belonging provided a backdrop for exploring a travelling art exhibition called *SB1070: An Artist's Point of View* (2012), a multi-artist response to Arizona's immigration law, SB1070 which, at the time, was the strictest anti-immigration measure passed in the United States.

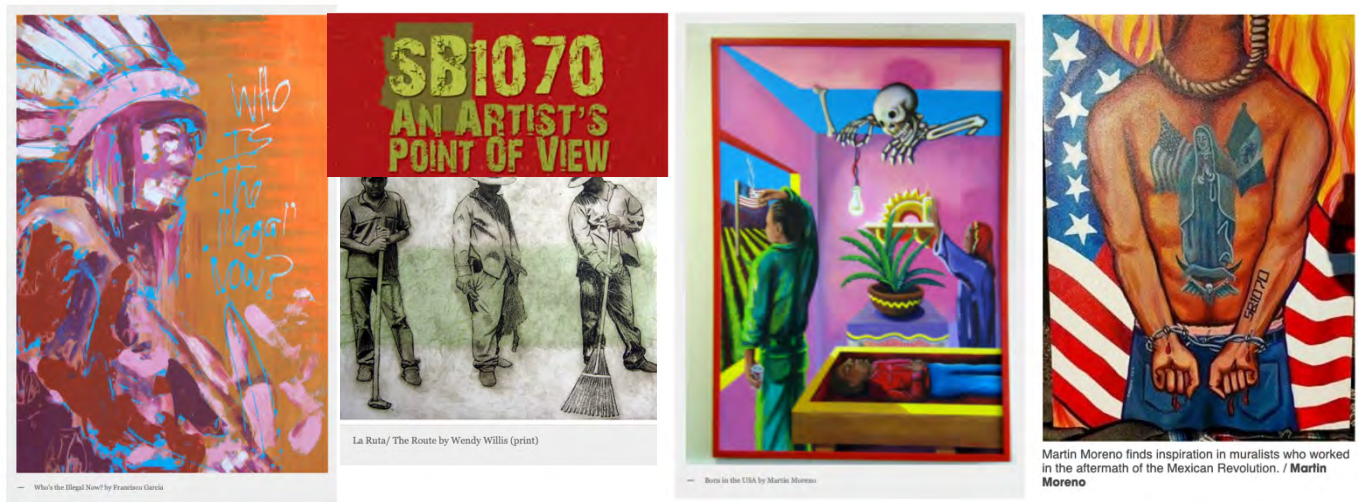


Fig. 3: SB1070: An artist's point of view

The show took inspiration from artists Vasquez and Payan's (2002) poster and manifesto, *Keep on Crossin'*: "For long before there were borders, there were crossers. We are the proud sons and daughters of these crossers, and we hold that crossing is a basic human right." Molly introduced the term "cosmic immigration," a metaphor that invited students to think about immigration as a broad topic that encompasses physical, social, technological, and political borders. The idea that if crossing comes to a standstill, life comes to a standstill was a concept that resonated with students as learners, inquirers, and artists. Here students argue that migration and crossing is about openings and relations across difference:

**Ariana** (who identified as Mexican American): If we stop [crossing] altogether we'll run out of space to explore, we'll run out of ideas, there'll be nowhere else to go.

**Vanessa** (who identified as Bahamian): It would stop social development. How would we develop as a community if we aren't open to new things? Different ways of speaking, living, etc. It opens new doors.

**Shona** (who identified as Arab American): I agree. It opens up new ideas, like new fashion, food. You learn a lot about different cultures. If we didn't let anyone in, we'd just be Americans.

Ariana, Vanessa, and Shona articulate understandings of a connection between the movement of people and the movement of ideas across spaces of relation. They argue that crossing invites an outward-facing exchange and openness to new ideas; space to explore; and opportunities to learn across difference. In this brief excerpt of conversation, they link the relational benefits of crossing to intellectual, personal, cultural, and social development.

When I asked what stood out to students from the year, Natasha named this unit on immigration. When I asked why, she said it was because of the relational understandings that were made possible through this way of teaching.

Yeah, the immigration unit. I really liked that because that's not something that you'd typically discuss in an English class ... we didn't talk about who migrated where or who emigrated from this country to that... more so we talked about the immigrant experience ...in relation to us. .... I think that discussing that in English class gave people a new way of thinking -- perhaps a better way of thinking and I think that the goal is to open minds and to pretty much eliminate single stories.

Natasha's comment reflects her understanding of pedagogy that cultivates transformative ways of being in relation. She suggests that arts-based inquiry shifted the emphasis away from othering immigrants or exploring immigration at a distance, and toward being in closer relation to themselves, thereby offering a "better" way of thinking. She links the notion of better to the concept of eliminating single stories from Adichie's (2009) TED talk that students had watched earlier in the year. In making this link, she suggests that the relational focus in their learning was linked to openness and less essentializing of cultural experience.

Because so many students found deep relational work atypical, as the work was happening, it invited critical understandings of their own education and what makes for good teaching and learning. Ariana suggested that pedagogies of relation that invite looking outward through the arts and dialogue to ask,

“Who are you?” don’t just enhance the learning in that one classroom, but have a reach into other areas of the curriculum and daily life.

If you’re in one class learning perspective is important, you’re kind of going to use that in other parts of your life – so whether it be critiquing someone’s art, it sort of just goes on to having empathy and having a perspective for somebody else’s like feelings and the situations going on in their life and being able to understand them, it just sort of counts for everything. Perspective is just something you need – you need to have it in order to connect with other people and to learn better and just to be able to explore your surroundings – that and curiosity.

While the arts are often framed as nice to have but not needed, Ariana makes the case that the arts with a relational focus can help you learn better, but also offer something you “need to have.” Ariana makes the case that the perspectives gained from arts pedagogy can provide a critical foundation for human connection and a pathway to fundamental ways of being in relation that are rooted in curiosity, learning, and empathy. These relational bonds, connections, and tightened spaces of relation made collective commitments possible, as I’ll explore in the next section.

### **Who Are We? Building Collective Commitments and Making Appeals for Change**

Rather than putting activism solely in the hands of organizers outside of school, the classroom can become its own site of activism when students have opportunities to be agents of change for each other. When engaged critically and authentically, arts-based pedagogies can unveil the ways that power is exercised, and in doing so, make calls to activism. In these ways, the arts can offer ongoing opportunities for students to speak up and out to one another in the classroom across a range of forms of art and representation. Arts-based opportunities to explore *who are we?* are one way to build energy around collective concerns, helping students to see the power they have to affect audiences to think and to change (Royster, 2000).

After students in 10th grade read the play, *The Laramie Project* (Kauffman, 2000), they were invited to research and write their own plays in a similar style, bringing together and juxtaposing multiple voices to tell a story about an issue in their city that they cared about. Students self-organized into groups around collective concerns, interviewed family and friends, co-wrote their polyvocal scripts, and performed them for the class. In creating their scripts, students were tasked with bringing multiple voices together, highlighting shared concerns, and accounting for resonances and dissonances across voices of participants. The form of a script allowed for creative juxtaposition and arrangement to make their appeal to an audience on their chosen issue.

One group (Sofia, Sheri, Travis, and Max) chose the topic of district budget cuts for their project. The school district at that time was in the midst of a years-long and poorly managed financial crisis and deep cuts to education were pending. This group’s polyvocal script was composed of excerpts from interviews with teachers, parents, and students. Using patterns, juxtaposition, and overlapping voices, they transformed their research into a script that they performed for the class. Their work highlights four aspects of funding that they were especially worried about: transportation, arts, sports, and

extracurriculars. They called their piece “Start at the Top,” making their appeal to those who held fiscal control of these important aspects of their everyday lives.

**Start at the Top**

**Overlapping Voices:** *Go to the top. Businessmen, philanthropists, the top of the school district and the mayor himself.*

**Parent:** Parents and teachers must work together – the education of our children is the future. I am sure there are other areas to be cut. Although I am not a proponent of excess taxation I wouldn't mind paying a little more if it helps our kids

**Parent:** *The only ppl who can fix it are at the top.*

**Student:** *But they won't hear us unless there are enough people that the bottom who shout loud enough to hear us.*

**Parent:** Start with our state reps who need to get to the Governor.

**Student:** I'm entirely sure who should fix this but maybe the head of the school district.

**Student:** We as kids have to voice our thoughts and voice them to everyone. Someone needs to help the School District in the sticky situation it is in. I think we need to go straight to the top with our ideas and let them know this is not the way to go!

**Scene 1**

**Transportation Cuts**

**Student:** This would be a major kick in stomach for schools' attendance percentages since some kids won't be able to get to and from school every day.

**Parent:** Cutting transportation would make truancy would go up. Children would not get to school because most do not live in walking distance and most parents could not afford to pay for transportation

**Student:** This is a terrible idea. Many students travel ridiculous amounts to get to school. Not every student can afford to pay \$20 for septa busses not including transfers or train rides. I also think this would cause many students to drop out seeing as they have no way to get school

**Parent:** School transportation should be cut. It is much easier to keep kids at the schools in their neighborhoods. The school they live near is just as adequate as the one they are being bused to.

**Student:** It would be extremely hurtful for kids to pay for their own transportation and attendance would go down. Take this school for example. Some kids take 2 busses and trains, and it costs a lot of \$. Some kids could end up paying \$10 and another \$10 to get back and it would be ridiculous.

**Overlapping Voices:** *Everyone is on the same page. No one is going to come to school. No way will every student be able to afford that on a daily basis.*

**Student:** Cutting transportation is like cutting school out for kids altogether. It gives us as kids an excuse not to go to school. Kids rely on public transportation. To get to school because they can't walk, they can't drive, or their parents don't have the time in the morning to take them. Cutting out transportation would make a higher dropout rate, especially in high school.

**Student:** I don't understand how this could happen – for instance at my school, I take 3 busses to get home. Some students even take trains because of how far away they live. I don't think anyone wants to start paying to get on the bus to get home from school.

**Parent:** I think if push comes to shove, we should try to cut transportation to keep more important things in school and I am sure there are other ways.

**Scene 2**

**Sports, Music, Extra-Curricular Cuts**

**Teacher:** I don't think is a good idea to cut art, music – some kids get a LOT out of it. As for extra-curriculars, an even worse idea. There has to be a way to find money. Extra-curriculars are one of the best things schools have, and some kids get more out of that their regular classes. If you cut sports there will be a lot of kids with nothing to do at their schools. Think about all the kids that play sports. It's a lot.

**Student:** As much as I hate to say it as an artist myself, I think the \$\$ going to art and music could go to better causes. Even though most students are only exposed to art in schools. That's how terrible I believe the budget crisis is. On the other hand, extra-curriculars are what set students apart applying for college. The one with more is going to have the advantage. There needs to be a way to keep that going.

**Teacher:** Art is very important. It has been proven that kids do better in math and reading when they are involved in music and arts. If these are cut, students will not have anything to look forward to so we shouldn't cut them.

**Parent:** As for sports, a lot of students rely on them for scholarships plus being involved in sports gives them an extra push to work harder in academics.

**Student:** We all came to school for art and music and love it. I can't imagine not coming to school and getting music. It's an awful thought.

**Student:** I love music so much and never want that to be cut. I am not really into sports, but singing is my thing. I'm grateful to come to a school that lets me do that every day.

**Student:** I love music and sports and I don't want to see either cut. Kids need sports and music AND art. Dropping these things may be like dropping students. That may be the only thing they come to school for.

**Student:** Someone important needs to see what damage may be caused and try to fix it.

**Overlapping Voices:** *Face it, us kids rely on everything that the district offers, and we can't afford to lose a thing. Agree.*

Fig. 4: Start at the top

Centering multiple voices was a figurative way for students to “shout loud enough” about school funding, to raise their voices as “people at the bottom” to “the people at the top.” Students relied heavily on public transportation to get to and from school, some taking two to four buses and sometimes trains, traveling up to two hours each way to get to and from school from different neighborhoods across the city. They liked school and they often talked and joked about the efforts that they made on a daily basis to get there. Public transportation for these young people, made their lives work every single day. *Everyone is on the same page* they assert, taking up a collective voice. Pending transportation cuts, they argue, there is “No way every student will be able to afford that.” The consequence, they implore, is a fundamental one: “No one is going to come to school.”

Earlier in this paper, we saw how Ariana reframed the arts as important “need” for cultivating empathy and connection. In this script, the students also redefine what is a need, centering what they collectively cared most about in school: music, sports, and extracurriculars. “Kids don't just *want* sports and music”—they *need* it, students suggest (emphasis added). Losing these aspects of school life, they argue, would be like “dropping students.” “It may be the only thing they come to school for.” The students reframe

music, arts, and extracurriculars not as extras, but, like bussing, as basic needs to literally be present at school. Aware that decisions come down to money, their script ends with a challenge to the concept of what the district can afford, reframing what is at stake and for whom: *we* (the students) can't *afford* to lose a thing! With this, they assert what is of value to *them* as experience, access, and opportunity when they know well the fragility of arts experience in school, and the ways that the arts are routinely cut and cast as nonessential.

The arts-based invitation to explore *who are we?* meant developing a shared concern, collectively researching that concern, and representing their research to an audience. The form of a polyvocal script provided a unique space to put forward a collective voice, argument, and appeal, while at the same time accounting for many voices. Pushing back against the ways that literacy classrooms tend to privilege univocal and authoritative texts by focusing on singular meaning and comprehension, a polyvocal script was one arts-based mode of teaching and learning that made space for relations, multiple voices, and contestation. Polyvocality can be likened to what Royster (2000) calls a kaleidoscopic view, where multiple meanings can push learning contexts to be more reciprocal, complex, interactive, and rooted in mutual exchange. The script was a way to curate these voices and bring them together into a transitional space among and between participants both in the classroom and beyond.

## Implications

The design of relational learning spaces through the arts looked like what Anzaldúa (1987) calls sites of cultural contact, where diverse people come into contact and where the spaces among and between individuals shrink with intimacy (p. i). What I have aimed to show is that relational pedagogy wasn't guaranteed simply through arts inclusion, nor was it something that teachers could simply claim or assert into being through classroom norms and expectations. The three dimensions offer a way to think about how relational pedagogy was and can be facilitated through architecture and planning. More specifically, the dimensions offer insight into how pedagogical design can frame and take into account different angles on being in deep relation—opening up spaces to be in relation to oneself, to one another, and to the world around us. Through the examples, I have invited audiences to consider how an ongoing placement of the arts at the center of classroom life can support the design of these deep relational spaces.

The framework explored here resonates with what Irwin and de Cosson (2004) characterize as a way of living" in the classroom, in other words: not just *a way of knowing*, but an embodied practice that involves a *way of being* and *way of doing*. This practice knits together the personal and political by centering dialogue within and across the relations of self, each other, and world. As such, it shifts the focus of research on art in schools away from arts activities or projects and toward transformative practice and relational, arts-based ways of being. It invites audiences to consider a design of arts-based pedagogy that provides students with ongoing opportunities to negotiate *I*, *you*, and *we* across the everyday work of schooling and over time.



When we ask students to stop and think about what's important, to consider and debate meaning, and to determine what is necessary for change, we have a moral obligation to ask ourselves about the ways of knowing and being that our pedagogical choices cultivate in schools. Pedagogies of relation must extend beyond a bidirectional teacher-student relationship, in order to decenter where knowledge comes from and who controls it in the classroom. Arts-based pedagogy can be designed in a way that centers the generation of knowledge among and between relations, thus decentering power in the classroom.

In this way, asking questions, who am I, who are you? and who are we? are important to inquiry-based teaching and learning in any context committed to social justice, because these questions are questions that push teaching and learning toward more ethical arrangements. They can humanize learning spaces by centering students as individuals and as members of community who negotiate identity, each other, and shared concerns as part of an ongoing practice. Strategic uses of the arts can support the cultivation of these practices, can generate knowledge in the spaces among and between us, and can draw attention to the means and ends of teaching, making space for new arrangements that are simultaneously more intimate and humane.

## Notes

1. I refer to the arts broadly as they were taken up in this context and drawing from recent theoretical shifts that consider the arts within an epistemology that relies upon the aesthetic, the imagination, and the embodiment of meaning (Abbs, 2003).
2. Although these consequences are not entirely new historically (Tremmel, 2006), they are heightened by the ways in which privatization is rapidly proliferating in the educational landscape.

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