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*Art Integration in Teacher Education:
Aesthetic Tools to Foster Critical Reflection*

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Art Integration in Teacher Education: Aesthetic Tools to Foster Critical Reflection

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[A]rt is necessarily a terrain of defamiliarization: it may take what we see/know and make us look at it in a new way...aesthetics nurture the spirit and provide ways of rethinking and healing psychic wounds inflicted by assault from the forces of imperialist, racist, and sexist domination.

—hooks, *Art On My Mind: Visual Politics*

The most powerful moments of my teaching - when we become vulnerable and honest with one another - are fostered by artistic or embodied strategies which help us engage deeply with topics we often avoid. These tense and unscripted encounters when students work together to challenge or reconcile competing viewpoints, adjust their mental frameworks, and collectively mediate conflicts are the richest moments of my teaching - moments my own pre-service education did not prepare me for. Now, as a teacher educator, I attempt to model a pedagogy guided by artistic provocations, where the arts (primarily visual art, drama, and dance) prompt us to see ourselves through others. The arts provide a powerful tool for inviting the uncomfortable and the unsayable into a lesson. In the following sections I outline the need for pre-service teachers in all content areas to reflect on their identities and outline three artistic strategies I use to deepen student reflections in my classroom.

Critical Reflection in Teacher Education

Pre-service teachers have accumulated a lifetime of fears, hopes, and experiences they need to unpack through critical reflection as they begin interacting with students. When asked what part of teaching makes them the most nervous, the pre-service teachers I work with often remark on their fear of being unable to “control” their future students. This apprehension drives them to seek out simple solutions and fool-proof recipes to manage student actions and classroom dialogue. For many new teachers controlling is conflated with teaching, therefore a loss of control signals a new-teacher’s failure (Britzman, 1986). As a result of this fear of losing control, new teachers compartmentalize their curriculum and attempt to minimize conflicts at all costs in a way that diminishes the depth of their teaching (Britzman, 1986; Emdin, 2016). This desire to control imaginary future students is often deeply tangled in pre-service teachers’ biography and racial imagination (Marx, 2006; Picower, 2009). In Texas, the percentage of teachers who identify as white (57%) starkly contrasts with the identity of Texas students in which only 26.5% identify as white (Morath, 2022). This cultural mismatch could lead to misunderstandings, deficit thinking, and stereotyping if new teachers are not prompted to critically reflect on the biases they may hold.

My own identity as a white female matches many of my students, and on the first day of class I read them a letter introducing myself, explaining my sheltered Southern Baptist upbringing and my journey to become aware of how my white identity shaped my work with students. Years ago, as a beginning art teacher my well-meaning attempts to include the cultures of my students were often culturally appropriative and essentializing. Over time I noticed that when opportunities for meaningful conversations about current events or social issues were presented, I shut them down in favor of my pre-prepared lessons, sidestepping conversations about identity and current events my students were eager to have. Why? What felt threatening about providing a space for students to process and question the world around them? As an art teacher I knew I had the aesthetic tools and

curricular freedom to engage with sociocultural issues in a powerful way, but I had to confront my dysconscious racism and my desire to control my students and our conversations.

Teacher educator Joyce King (1991) defines dysconscious racism as “a form of racism that tacitly accepts dominant White norms and privileges,” producing “an impaired consciousness or distorted way of thinking about race” (p. 135). She explains that her pre-service students’ partial understandings made it “difficult for them to act in favor of truly equitable education” (p. 134). Many white people may be unaware of the ways racism functions in and through them as it “is something most Whites inherit simply through participation in United States society” (Seidl & Hancock, 2011, p. 691). While having light skin is biological, whiteness is not. It is deliberately constructed and maintained by a society invested in white supremacy (DuBois, 1935; Mills, 1997; Roedigger, 1991; Watkins, 2001). It is in the self-interests of those who call themselves “white” to not name it, and to remain ignorant of the way it moves in and through them (Leonardo, 2009).

Marx (2006) examines the racial attitudes of white pre-service teachers, noting that they often hold deficit views of students of color attributing perceived failures to their racial or cultural identity and overlooking their assets and the structural barriers working against them. Marx argues the entrenchment of deficit thinking is informed by their unexamined white identity. The pre-service teachers in her qualitative study viewed students of color as threatening, less intelligent, and in need of white role models (Marx, 2006). It is difficult to make a case that teachers’ racial attitudes and assumptions about students do not impact their teaching. In fact the American Civil Liberties Union (2022) recently found that Black students are suspended and expelled at three times the rate of their white counterparts, and often face harsher punishment involving law enforcement. In Texas, African American students drop out of school at three times the rate of white students, for Multilingual students the dropout rate is five times higher (Morath, 2022). The overwhelming evidence of racial disparities in academic achievement, graduation rates, school funding, and disciplinary actions “map perfectly onto race” (Vaught, 2011, p. 76). This evidence suggests that teacher educators need to cultivate the development of cultural knowledge in addition to content and pedagogical knowledge.

Many teacher educators are dedicated to confronting issues of identity and power in their classrooms, yet find that sparking meaningful conversations about identity is challenging (Link, 2022). Critical reflection on ones’ biases and biography is one tool that can disrupt dysconscious racism (Acuff, 2016; Dewhurst, 2018). Mezirow defines critical reflection as “a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 1). Planning to critically reflect with students entails “deliberate and skillful scaffolding” to prompt students to move past discomfort, fear, or anger which may prevent them from speaking up or cause them to shut down completely (Seidl & Hancock, 2011, p. 690). Teacher educators Seidl and Hancock invite their white students to move beyond a surface-level colorblind understanding of identity and race which “creates friction and personal discomfort as Whites awaken to the multiple raced images that Whiteness carries...and begin to perceive themselves as racial beings through the eyes of others” (p. 690). This new recognition of oneself as benefitting from a system of privilege and white supremacy is painful and, as Picower (2009) finds, white pre-service teachers may use emotional, ideological, and performative tools of whiteness for “active protection” against information that challenges their deracialized self-conception (p. 197).

Confronting whiteness and racial power dynamics in the pre-service classroom can be volatile leading to emotional outbursts, disagreements, withdrawal from conversations, or quiet resistance where students shut down or refuse new information (Ladson-Billings, 1996). How can teacher

educators permeate the defenses of whiteness and engage in meaningful, transformative learning? In the following sections I outline some strategies for using the arts as provocations for critical reflection with new teachers. Through aesthetic analysis, embodied exploration, and art making, teacher educators can mediate meaningful dialogues about whiteness and power through art objects, invite students to see their role in these systems, and work with them to envision other ways of being.

Aesthetic Analysis: What Do You See?

The use of art as a powerful tool for critical pedagogy is not new. Freire (1983) noted the possibilities inherent in aesthetic analysis as integral methods for the development of literacy and critical consciousness in his culture circles, a dialogic education practice. He commissioned a series of images codifying various real-life situations, which were then decoded by participants in the culture circles through a facilitator-led dialogue. Freire theorized that it was through this process of decoding that participants began to “read the world” (1983, p. 5). These images prompted larger conversations about social roles and power that fed into Freire’s eventual goals of consciousness raising. Later, Augusto Boal (1979), an activist and drama educator, built on the work of Freire using a combination of visual and dramatic strategies to engage in critical dialogues about power.

I frequently use visual images in my classroom as well as many of Boal’s strategies including The Great Game of Power. This strategy combines an element of art-making with aesthetic analysis to build students’ capacity for analyzing representations of power (Cawthon & Dawson, 2011). In this simple strategy the class forms a circle as the teacher places four identical chairs and a water bottle in the middle of the room and asks that one student arranges the objects in a way that represents how power works in the traditional classroom. After one brave student advances and “sculpts” the objects, the class silently looks and then we begin our analysis. The sculptor remains silent until the end when they have the final word. This lets the sculpture speak for itself and ensures we do not foreclose meanings prematurely by arriving at the artist’s intended meaning. I use an analysis sequence from Dawson and Lee (2018) to scaffold our conversation and slow the rush to jump to interpretations. Below is a recreation of how these conversations often develop.

Describe the observable evidence.

Teacher: “Describe what you see.”

Student: “I see 3 chairs flipped over on the ground and one chair standing far away at the front with a water bottle on top of it”

Teacher: “What else do you see?” (The teacher should be sure to hear from many different voices gathering a full description of evidence before moving on)

Analyze the evidence for possible meanings.

Teacher: “What meaning can we make from this?”

Student: “They are very far apart, like there’s a big space in between them. Maybe the distance is important.”

Student: “The chairs that are tipped over are lower than the upright one, so maybe there’s a hierarchy.”

Teacher: “So, you see a relationship between these chairs? If the upright chair seems higher what might the water bottle on top of it represent?”

Student: “Maybe knowledge?”

Teacher: “Could be knowledge. Does anyone have a different idea of what the bottle could mean?”

Student: “It could be authority, like if these other chairs on the lower level are the students.”

Relate the interpretations to current events, issues, or students' lives.

Teacher: “How does this sculpture relate to your own experiences in the classroom?”

Student: “In my high school the teachers' ideas were the most important and the students' interests were not really valued. They just lectured at us and gave worksheets.

Student: Yeah, I had some great teachers, but some would just not listen to you. They would be like, ‘take off your hat!’ and they could send someone to the office for something small like that.”

From here the conversation often develops into teachers' need to control and manage students, which can go deeper with more discussion. This conversation is tethered to a simple set of objects, yet it produces rich interpretations and connections, allowing dialogue to progress beyond the discomfort of students through what Ranciere (1998) terms “silent speech.” Every piece of art contains “silent speech,” or a multitude of meanings that depends on viewers' interpretations to bring them to light. Without the viewers, these would just be a random assortment of chairs and a water bottle, but with the interpretation of students they are transformed to embody deeper sociocultural meanings. Students, especially those who have grown up in the age of standardized tests, are used to arriving at a correct answer. The silent speech of the arts slows this rush to arrive at the “correct” interpretation and instead fosters divergent views, using our differing interpretations as a point of discussion. The process of slowing down our impulse to arrive at consensus enables viewers to read images as aesthetic texts, taking time to move beyond the surface to explore deeper meanings.

While aesthetic strategies are one method teachers can use to move towards culturally responsive pedagogies, they can also be used to reaffirm rather than challenge the status quo. The intentional use of aesthetic strategies with critical reflection can enable teachers to initiate sociocultural dialogue, cultivate empathy, value divergent thinking, and make harmful systems visible. Teachers who provoke dialogue through artworks will also discover that the conversation is unique to the class as two students often interpret them in different ways, this difference of interpretation provides an opportunity to discuss why students may decode images differently. While this may sound stressful for new teachers, their role is not to control the dialogue but to act as a guardrail, providing background information and asking probing questions to stoke further conversation. By inviting a range of interpretations teachers can create space for rich, varied, and vulnerable classroom dialogue.

This process of “dialogic meaning making” or interpretation and critical reflection is where students are invited to see the world and themselves through a different perspective (Dawson & Lee, 2018). We learn as much about ourselves through interpretive dialogue as we learn about the artwork. When teachers take the time to decode images in the classroom, they can explore the dissonance of students' conflicting interpretations as a provocation that interrogates why we might all see contradictory things in the same artwork. Art teacher educator, Dewhurst (2018), explains how she uses art as a mediating tool to spark and buffer vulnerable conversations about identity with pre-service students, saying, “The arts can surface ideas that we can't easily talk about by making them visual and outside ourselves. Suddenly we're not talking directly to each other about our views of

identity, but instead we're talking together about a third object-the artwork-in front of us" (pp. 34-35).

The removal of distance provided by art objects can be a helpful tool for teacher educators who want to engage in discussions about race and identity and circumvent the defenses white students often employ to protect their sense of a deracialized self (Picower, 2009). Wilson (2019), an art educator, uses film and TV artifacts from visual culture to critique white media tropes with pre-service teachers. She explains that the use of visual culture "provided just enough distance, that my White students were able to enter into these worlds largely unscathed. They were able to critique the villain without needing to critique themselves" (p. 86). Here again, the arts provide a safe distance for white students to critique whiteness and systems of oppression they operate within without feeling attacked or threatened. The use of art as a mediating tool is a powerful addition to teacher education curriculum and can aid critical reflection before students enter the teaching force.

Embodied Exploration: How Did That Make You Feel?

When we expand our text-based curriculum to include art objects and embodied strategies we expand "beyond cognitive recognition, memorization, and regurgitation" and towards the "empathetic and felt space of ideas" (Desai & Hamlin, 2010, p. 64). Shifting from aesthetic analysis to embodiment can extend critical reflection even further to make theoretical ideas felt in the body. This transforms learning from something students understand cognitively into something they feel, embody, and practice (Dawson & Lee, 2018). This process is especially potent when discussing power relations and social dynamics that often function on invisible registers. As students physically embody or creatively represent the invisible mechanisms of power, they may notice the "normal" position they occupy become problematic. This may feel uncomfortable, because "if the 'outer' shell of their official affiliation turns out to be implicated in unforeseen ways with oppression, so too does the 'inner' core of our person" (De Lissovoy, 2010, p. 426).

In a course I teach for pre-service teachers on art integration, their assignment was to work with a partner to design and facilitate a lesson that investigates an essential question through aesthetic analysis and an embodied strategy. Each pair choose a work of contemporary art by a marginalized artist to work with. Using their research on this art piece they generated a list of themes the artist was exploring. After deciding on a theme, they crafted an essential question to guide the lesson and then paired the artwork with a dramatic strategy that could take the class dialogue to a deeper level. A sampling of their essential questions revealed a desire to have deep and meaningful dialogues with their peers about issues of identity, community, and voice. Here are a few of the provocations that drove their lessons:

- "How much of your story do you tell and to who?"
- "Does the separation between family and land have lasting effects today?"
- "How [do] your experiences or environments shape your identity?"
- "How can diversity play a role in collective action?"

Students used these essential questions to ground the conversation as they looked at artwork and engaged in the subsequent dramatic strategy. In one facilitation, a pair led their peers in interpreting a photograph by Lorna Simpson entitled *Waterbearer* and then prompted the class to create a tableau using the strategy, This Setting Needs. After discussing the artwork, the pair divided the class into

small groups and assigned each one a setting to explore where they saw inequities in schools, the workplace, and social settings.

In This Setting Needs participants construct a tableau with their bodies by entering the frame saying, “this setting needs...” and then announcing the object they create in frozen pantomime. During the students’ facilitation, one group depicted gender inequality in the workplace by physically embodying the wage gap. Female students entered the “stage” one at a time saying “this picture needs... a qualified female worker” and sitting down on the floor. After all four women entered the scene and remained sitting the lone male group member entered saying “this picture needs... a man.” With this statement he stood above the women physically embodying the often-invisible gendered hierarchy through levels. After their peers interpreted the tableau, the group unfroze and the male group member exclaimed “I felt horrible saying that!” He continued to apologize to his classmates throughout the day, long after we had moved on.

The invitation to take up his usual position in a new way caused him to feel unsettled and may have initiated what Mezirow (1990) terms a “disorienting dilemma” or a moment when an uncomfortable situation prompts you to reevaluate your cognitive schemas and adjust based on this new knowledge. Teacher educators can intervene in these moments to facilitate dialogue on other perspectives as schemas are rebuilt and restructured to accommodate new information in a “conceptual shift” (Vosniadou, 1999). While I cannot say for certain that my student’s discomfort led to deeper schematic shifts, his persistent unease showed that this activity caused him to feel the often-hidden power dynamics in a tangible way. He remarked after the strategy “I’m feeling so much after our group.” By making his normative position of power visible, he felt his body implicated in oppression. In this way, the creative and embodied component of the arts has the capacity to provoke disorienting dilemmas that can lead to conceptual shifts. Students’ understandings may shift and deepen when they are asked to take something they see as separate from themselves (e.g., oppressive systems, theoretical texts) and put it into their bodies. Embodied strategies can prompt pre-service teachers to feel their identity in a new way, bringing their dysconscious understanding of their identity into question.

Teacher educators Seidl and Hancock (2011) explain that experiences in which we see ourselves through the eyes of others are necessary for new teachers to grapple with before entering the teaching field. Their work designs service-learning opportunities in which teacher educators work with communities of color, prompting white pre-service teachers to acquire a double image of themselves as racialized subjects. They call on teacher educators to create a

“transformative set of opportunities and experiences in which their lives ‘bump into’ others’ lives in ways that help them challenge the stories that have constrained their possibilities, a space where differences enter into dialogue with one another. It is in these liminal spaces, the ‘in between spaces’ of lives, relationships, and discourses that identities are defined, reworked, and elaborated.” (pp. 118-119)

Using visual and embodied tools provide transformative opportunities to “bump into others” in a university setting where we can process our experience together. Too often we limit teacher education to the cognitive development of our students. This neglects the affective and embodied dimensions leading to ideas that students know in theory but do not feel connected to. Scholar and educator Delpit (2006) reminds us that the deepest learning happens on an emotional level saying, “we must learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow

the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness” (p. 47). How are teacher educators accounting for the affective dimension of their pedagogy? The arts can be a tool to investigate this dimension alongside our students as we allow ourselves to play, experiment, and be vulnerable in the classroom.

Art Making: What Can be Expressed Beyond Words?

The act of artmaking helps students sit with complex issues and work through them in a way that bypasses language. Many general education majors do not identify as creative and definitely do not see themselves as artists, so the prospect of making art is challenging at first. In order to remove the impulse for perfection or to compare art to their peers, I often give them impossible tasks with limitations to break the ice. Limiting the time, techniques, or tools can help those uncomfortable with creating brave their fears. In one lesson I taped paper under their desks and invited them to draw a map or image showing how they approached a creative project. These blind drawings always get a laugh and break the ice, but there is something more going on. Through the process of thinking about their cognitive journey and finding a way to express it, they turn unformed feelings and ideas into tangible symbols, objects, or lines. Through this assignment, they are able to see their thinking visualized in a new way.

Our larger projects are more open-ended during which I ensure assignments are conceptually rigorous but open to a variety of responses. Students in the course I teach on sociocultural influences on learning are required to complete service-learning hours, which provide opportunities for them to put theories from our class into practice. For their final reflection on what they learned during their placement, I asked them to conduct interviews and research the community cultural wealth of their site (Yosso, 2005). Looking beyond the deficits in a community trains students to find and build upon the assets that may be overlooked or undervalued. Next, they could choose to write a traditional reflective essay or create a practical application for how they would foster and sustain those assets through a lesson, grant, or by developing a reflective visual artifact. Each of the aesthetic options tied in the cultural community assets to their learning in the course and was accompanied by a rubric and a short reflective paper.

I was surprised by how many students were eager to move beyond the essay format. Some students designed decorations for their future classrooms imagining their students brought similar cultural assets from those at their service-learning communities. These included a set of posters depicting science icons often absent from history books (see Figure 1), a colorful papel picado banner celebrating the achievements of Latinx women (see Figure 2), and a collection of inquiries to guide students to think deeper (e.g., Who was this story written for? Who is missing?). These posters and banners may seem small, but they communicate big ideas about who is welcome in their future classrooms and what kind of thinking they will value. These classroom decorations are transformed into meaningful invitations when considered from the viewpoint of a young person who sees a teacher who recognizes her worth and invites her to think deeply and step into a lineage of powerful innovators and scholars.

Some students chose to process their ideas in a more abstract way, by creating original artworks. One Latinx pre-service teacher reflected on the power and possibility that comes from recognizing students' community cultural wealth in the classroom for bilingual/bicultural students. In her painting (see Figure 3) we see an empty chair, perhaps representing a student who is disengaged, absent, or feels invisible. A speech bubble stretches above their desk and expands past the

boundaries of the canvas to illustrate a dancer and scholar, a graduate driven by a love for family and friends who has broken free of shackles labeled “social reproduction” and “deficit thinking.” We also see a wrecking ball destroying a house with a shackle labeled “poverty”, perhaps a reminder to teachers to include the realities of students’ lives and experiences and not just aspirational stories.

These pieces are powerful artifacts of student thought and critical reflection, and they bypass the confines of what is sayable in traditional academic assessment forms of essays and tests. While the sentiments expressed perhaps could have been written or spoken, there are layers to their visual production that transcend the essay format. What new ideas and directions might emerge through these artistic processes? What options and thoughts are foreclosed when we rush to translate affect and the intangible into speech?

Conclusion

Through reflections on my own practice, I have demonstrated the powerful possibilities of the arts in pre-service education. These artistic strategies defy the urge to control student behavior and speech and model another way of teaching that thrives on provocations and the unpredictability of critical reflection mediated through embodied and aesthetic tools. Pedagogical methods such as aesthetic interpretations, embodied explorations, and art making can be invaluable for teacher educators preparing new teachers to educate in liberatory ways. Art teacher educator Acuff (2015) reminds us that “art educators have the linguistic, theoretical and philosophical tools to open a dynamic discourse that actively responds to and potentially transforms the way images re-inscribe oppression and racism” (pp. 39-40). Educators can wield these expressive tools in their anti-racist work with new teachers. Teacher educators have a responsibility to help prospective teachers recognize and process their dysconscious racism. While we cannot root out racism or biases in a single course, we can open the door for transformative moments and disorienting dilemmas through the arts.

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Appendix

Figure 1

Sarah Stark, 2021, *Untitled posters for science class [Digital Art]*.



Link

Figure 2

Natalie Quintanilla, 2021, Untitled classroom papel picado featuring Sonia Nazario, Ellen Ochoa, Selena, Dolores Huerta, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Sonia Sotomayor [Digital Art]



Figure 3

Mireya Reyes, 2019, Untitled [Acrylic paintings on canvas]

