

The children's peace project: Service-learning and art education

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This paper presents the case of a service-learning art experience in an after-school housing development program. Beginning with a dialogue concerning peace and how it can become part of their world, children and pre-service teachers explored and connected the idea of peace through symbols, metaphor and idealism in works of art. A critical and reflective account of this experience demonstrates the ways that young children and pre-service art teachers can benefit from meaningful and socially relevant service-learning activities.

Service-learning, art, education, peace

INTRODUCTION

Boyer's (1994) vision for "Creating the New American College" called for "scholars who not only skillfully explore the frontiers of knowledge, but also integrate ideas, connect thought to action, and inspire students. . . The aim of education is not only to prepare students for productive careers, but also to enable them to live lives of dignity and purpose" (p. 77). In answer to Boyer's challenge, many universities involve their students in service-learning programs. Service-learning is a structured and theoretically grounded practice in which service experiences are directly connected to academic objectives.

Much of service-learning pedagogy is derived from Dewey's (1938/1963) theory of education, experience, and democracy. For Dewey, pedagogy connected practice and theory or "action and doing on one hand and knowledge and understanding on the other" (p. 107). Dewey believed that a democratic society lives in the knowledge that action and inaction must be made in regard to how they affect others (Rhodes 1997, p. 210). Dewey (1963/1938) felt that education should not merely be a preparation for future life but should be full of life in itself. He challenged educators to arrange the kind of learning experiences that engage rather than repel, promote further inquiry and the desire to know more.

Freire's co-intentional education theories also greatly affect service-learning theory and pedagogy. Freire believed that "committed involvement" was essential in an education that valued both teachers and students as active participants in the teaching and learning process. "The teacher is no longer merely the one who teaches but who him or herself learns in a dialogue with the students who in turn teach while being taught" (Freire, 1994/1970, p. 60-61). Freire looked at teachers and students (or service-learners and community agents) as co-learners or co-workers who work together toward mutual goals of social justice and personal transformation. This reciprocity is probably the most crucial aspect of service-learning theory as constant and meaningful exchange between all parties involved is critical for mutual respect, values, needs, and expectations.

Beans and Rice is a private, non-profit, tax-exempt community development organisation in Radford, Virginia. The organisation works with an under-served population of Central Appalachia

low-income African American, White and Hispanic women and their children through a variety of programs. (Beans and Rice, 2000).

The directors of Beans and Rice conduct regular formal and informal reflection sessions with the community, volunteers, and the children who attend their after-school program. As the local elementary public school that the children attend offers art classes only once a week, the children and their parents expressed a desire to have more opportunities to work with art materials in the after-school program. The directors approached the art education program at Radford University and asked for their involvement in both creating and facilitating meaningful art activities in the after-school program.

During one of their two art education classes per week, ten pre-service teachers worked with approximately 15 children at the housing communities for 12 weeks a semester. Working one on one with the older children and in groups of three with the younger children, the pre-service teachers helped the children with their homework and facilitated art study and making activities. The goals of the project began very simply to provide art-making experiences for the children and to provide art-teaching experiences for the pre-service art teachers. As the project continued, these goals were expanded and changed as needs, ideas, desires, and hopes became more apparent.

THE CASE

The Peace Project

The children at the after-school program ranged in age from 5 to 13 years old. Many of them lived daily with poverty, fear, and apathy. They were often hostile, angry, and treated each other and the facilitators at the program in disrespectful and hurtful ways. It was difficult to be there and yet the pre-service art teachers knew that their time at the program was possibly the most important experience they would have in their teacher training. This was a real environment with real children whose daily existence affected the way they learned.

In an attempt to address the often disruptive atmosphere in the after-school program, the pre-service art teachers wanted to begin a dialogue with and among the young students concerning the idea of peace and how it could become a part of their world. They wanted to assist their young students to develop a personal awareness and connection of how peace results from multiple understandings of the world around them. They attempted this through the creation and facilitation of a unit of instruction entitled 'Making Peace in Our World', which included research, interpretation, and self-reflection.

Through experience young students became acquainted with the multiple ways artists create their views of the world through searching for the ideal and displaying the harsh reality. Works of art chosen by the pre-service teachers and their professor included Hicks' *Peaceable Kingdom*, Rockwell's *Freedom from Want* (from his Freedom Series), Lomas Garza's *La Tamalada*, Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, and Howland's *Environmental Place Setting*. Young students answered and discussed such essential questions as "What is peace?" and 'Where is peace?' along with more probing and comparative questions about the works of art. For example, the discussion of *Peaceable Kingdom* and *Freedom from Want* challenged the young students to think about and question what is real in life and history and what we or the artist wishes or idealises to be true.

Hicks' 1833 oil painting *Peaceable Kingdom* features small children amongst a band of large and diverse animals. A Quaker, Hicks is said to have derived this image from Chapter 11 of Isaiah. "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young lion and fatling together; and a little child shall lead them." Hicks incorporated a scene in the distance to represent Penn's treaty that was said to have been adapted from a popular painting by West (Curry, 1997).

The young students quickly exclaimed that a lion or tiger would not stand idly by a young child or other small animal that could be a meal. Pre-service art teachers then pointed out the human figures in the painting and explained Jackson's Removal Bill of 1830 which resulted in the "trail of tears" forcing eastern American Indian tribes to move beyond the Mississippi River (Curry, 1997). Many of the young students remembered studying this event in their history classes. And although they readily acknowledged the oppressive nature of this event, the realisation that Hick's idealised and metaphorical approach represented a *zeitgeist* of the time led them to a more critical interpretation of Rockwell's painting *Freedom from Want*.

Rockwell's *Freedom from Want* is a part of his *Freedom* series that was inspired by President Roosevelt's January 1941 State of the Union address that outlined four basic human liberties: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Featured on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1943, Rockwell's paintings reached millions of Americans and became symbols of American democracy. Rockwell's *Freedom from Want* painting has become the quintessential Thanksgiving image featuring an older man and woman bringing a large golden cooked turkey to a pristine table of smiling and eager guests.

"I see that picture on television every Thanksgiving," said one of the young students of the painting. "Is this what every American's Thanksgiving dinner looks like?" asked a pre-service art teacher, "Does this represent peace in our world?" "This is what it's supposed to be", answered another young student. Further discussion of the painting included questions surrounding supposed gender roles, foods, colour of faces, dress, and placement of people at the table that Rockwell's painting characterised and ultimately idealised. In the midst of this discussion, pre-service art teachers presented artist Garza's *La Tamalada* painting. *La Tomalada* is a colourful painting with simplistic images of many people in a kitchen preparing a meal. The young students discussed the differences in style and colour as well as the relative view of reality. Pre-service art teachers explained that the artist was telling a story of a Latino or Hispanic family preparing a traditional meal of tamales. In this painting the kitchen is a social environment as well as a place for food preparation (Katz, Lankford and Plank, 1995). The discussion continued as the pre-service art teachers explained that even though peace may look different or be associated with different sounds and space in cultures other than their own, the basic idea of peace as living in harmony is the same.

By incorporating multicultural perspectives, tasks, and questioning strategies into this unit, the pre-service art teachers witnessed first-hand how issues of cultural diversity may play out in their future classrooms. In fact, many of the issues such as multiculturalism, interdisciplinarity, postmodernism, and critical pedagogy, that the pre-service art teachers were reading about in their classes were interwoven into this service-learning experience. In addition to multicultural education theories, environmental educative issues were also illustrated in the service-learning experience during discussions and comparisons of Chicago's *The Dinner Party* and Howland's *Environmental Place Setting*. Chicago's *The Dinner Party* is a triangular multimedia construction of a table and table settings that represent women artists, writers, and feminist theories. For example, the place setting honouring artist O'Keefe features a large flower hand-painted on a plate that sits on an exquisitely stitched runner. The centre of the construction contains the names of 999 known and unknown women on a black porcelain floor. Howland's *Environmental Place Setting* is a table setting installation with miniature toxic waste drums or barrels as glasses, plates with images of oil spills, and a centrepiece made of smudge pots and candles.

Comparisons between the two groups of art works inspired discussions about thinking and motivation. For example, some young students said that Howland's *Environmental Place Setting* caused them to think more about the ways that environmental issues affected their ideas of peace because her images and symbols were violent and obvious. They compared these observations

with images and scenes that they had seen portrayed in movies and television shows dealing with everything from war to family sitcoms featuring teenage rebellion.

Including the study of such non-traditional art forms as television and movies in art education is a new direction in the field known as visual culture art education. Duncum (2002, p. 8) characterises this approach as a “focus on the extraordinarily diverse ways people deal with the visual products of global capitalism as people negotiate, resist, and appropriate the meaning of images in terms of their own cultural predispositions”. For example, the young students involved in the after-school peace service-learning project looked critically at signs, symbols, and places of peace in works of art and popular culture. They looked at and discussed the peace symbol, hand gestures, advertising logos such as Dove soap, television commercials, and situation comedies. They discussed the ways that such images of peace affected their purchasing and viewing practices.

Continuing their discussion of Howland's *Environmental Place Setting* and Chicago's *Dinner Party*, the children and the pre-service art teachers discussed the ways that the arrangement and settings of the tables in these works of art affected the meaning and interpretation. The young students talked about their ideas of a peace table and or peace talks in relation to politics as well as the ways that a peace table is used in school and home to solve problems.

THE SERVICE-LEARNING PEACE EXHIBITION

Following the completion and facilitation of the ‘Making Peace in our World’ unit of instruction, the pre-service art teachers curated an exhibit entitled “The Children's Peace Project”. Children's voices filled the gallery at all times from the television in a corner where a video continually displayed the unit of instruction, resources, and student examples. In front of the television, pillows lay on the floor beside a low table covered with markers, tacks and stacks of coloured paper hand-shapes. Visitors were asked to ‘lend a hand’ in making peace in our world by writing or drawing on a hand shape and then attaching it to a large world collage on the wall. A long table stretched at an angle in the gallery space and featured the children's peace place settings. ‘Peace Mirrors’ made by imbedding objects and text into plaster frames hung on the walls with a text panel that asked, “Who is ultimately responsible for peace in your world?” ‘Peace Boxes’ created from tissue paper and text sat on pedestals in the middle of the gallery and held secrets that the young students formulated for making every day a peaceful one. Text panels contained explanations as well as provocative questions concerning personal reflections of peace.

REFLECTION

Throughout the creation and facilitation of the ‘Making Peace in Our World’ unit of instruction and resulting exhibition, ‘The Children's Peace Project,’ continual efforts were made to stress the connections between the young students' lives inside and outside the after-school art program. According to Cahan and Kocur (1996, p.xxv), “such an approach not only encourages students to speak from their own positions and to represent themselves, but also encourages them to critique their environments, and confront social issues in ways that are synthesised with the study of art”. The keystone of service-learning pedagogy is this kind of reflection. Rhodes (1997), referring to Freire (1994/1970), called for action and reflection that suggested looking forward, continually working, and actively seeking ways to address community needs. Service-learning reflection may involve such activities as individual and group discussions face-to-face or online and reflective writing journals or formal papers. The ‘Children's Peace Project’ exhibition became another reflection activity that involved art criticism as well as the sharing of personal anecdotes, thoughts, and ideas.

CONCLUSIONS

One main goal and hope of service-learning is to instil an enduring sense of civic responsibility. By 'enduring', I mean that service to and with our communities becomes just as habitual as brushing our teeth in the morning (Taylor, 2002). It is part of our everyday existence and we simply know no other way to live.

In addition to making service to and with our communities a part of our everyday existence, it is important to recognise critically the political implications of what we do and think about in education and service. "As Freire suggested, education is not just about learning to read, but learning to question the conditions that leaves many without access to education, economic opportunity or political power" (Eyler and Giles 1999, p. 132). Therefore, our service-learning experiences must assist us in critically perceiving how we exist in the world. Through such experiences we may learn to see the world not as a static reality in which we must function according to the rules and values of the dominant culture but as a process of transformation (Freire, 1994/1970).

There are many concerns facing our world today. Environmental atrocities threaten the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the ground on which we walk. Illiteracy, language barriers, health care, drug addiction, physical, mental and emotional disabilities, elderly care, child care, food and nutrition, intolerance, hate, and violence are a part of many teachers' and students' everyday experiences.

In our service-learning experience, we discovered that responding to the idea of peace is both simple and complicated. Peace at home, in school and in our community is just as significant as peace in the world. From going to bed at night to eating a meal, the idea of peace affects almost every aspect of our lives. Our young students understood not only that this idea applied to their personal lives, they began to see how the way they live their lives affects the idea of peace to others. Pre-service-art teachers learned how approaching the study of works of art and art-making activities through critical and self-reflective practice is relevant to the lives of their students and may assist them in developing an empowering sense of life and living. In other words, if our young students began to see themselves as having the power to affect their world now, they may see how their actions and inaction can affect the future world. As teachers and students work together toward such meaningful endeavours as making peace in our world through service-learning, we just may see the value of becoming actively involved in service to and with our communities for the rest of our lives.

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