



## Peer Reviewed

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Unknowing in Circles: A Story of Artful Inquiry as Praxis

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### Keywords:

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### Abstract:

This paper shares a story of community, vulnerability, art-making and possibility that arose within the context of a Social Foundations of Education course. Drawing on arts-informed epistemologies, the authors began the semester by inviting students to critically engage with the central ideas of the course through the process of creating a mandala. At the end of the semester, students were once again invited to (re)create their mandalas as they reflected on how their understandings had evolved over the course of the semester. Within what was initially a very uncomfortable act, a community emerged as students sought to support and encourage one another. This sense of community remained consistent across the course of the semester and



students regularly returned to the initial activity as a starting point during class discussions. Using this particular classroom experience as an illustration, this paper posits that it is important for educators to engage their students in centered, aesthetic and communal acts of reflexivity as a means to facilitate the development of fluid pedagogies and ways of being in the world that are informed, critical, and transformative.

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(Un)Knowing in Circles: A story of artful inquiry as praxis

**Entering the Circle**

We find  
self  
full  
a circle of solos  
sung in unison  
harmonic knowledge  
of experience  
desire for truth  
disrupted  
beyond the predictable  
we find  
community  
through curves along the journey  
of our be(com)ing

We write this article as a means to share and explore our experience as college educators who yearn to challenge our students to move beyond traditional epistemological notions of knowledge— notions that position understanding as something that is fixed, acquired, achieved, and tangible, rather than a spiritual form of engagement. To integrate arts-informed, spiritual epistemological practices within the context of the college classroom is risky work as it challenges students to move outside those positions where they feel most comfortable. There are times when the resistance may become so strong that we find ourselves questioning the arts-informed pedagogy; after all we want our students to feel they are learning something; we want to be retained as faculty members. However, as Palmer (1994) reminds us, it is important to maintain a sense of groundedness in our work, following our own truths as educators, so that our pedagogies might reflect those elements we believe to be most important. Perhaps, even in the discomfort we might then find peace, actively helping our students' journeys within an unfamiliar, but hopeful, learning landscape that embraces the individual and the community, inviting them to engage in a reflexive dialogue of praxis and possibility.

As we examine the ways in which art may lead to dialogues that are deeply transformative (Greene, 1995), we share a story of experience and risk that unfolds to expose resistance and possibility within the context of a Social Foundations of Education course. It is a story that begins with a dialogue between two educators and artists, who seek to find meaningful ways to engage their students, by weaving together the artistic and the intellectual as a means to enter into deeper and more soulful academic landscapes. We began the journey together, collaborating on the development of an introductory lesson that challenges students to begin the semester by engaging in self and social inquiry as they explore what they know and what informs this knowing. This is accomplished through dialogue and the creation of a mandala—an ancient and cross

cultural philosophy of existence that makes use of the circle to organize and unify particular aspects of one's being in relationship to the larger context of the world (Cornell, 1994; Trungpa 1991)--which reflects the layers and facets of this dialogue. It is this introductory lesson that sets the stage for the entire semester: introducing students to the particular pedagogical qualities of the course, serving as a place to return to throughout the course, and finally offering a "final" point for reflection at the end of the semester. We offer this story as a means to demonstrate that, even within the context of courses that have traditionally been absent of arts-informed epistemologies, there are significant opportunities that can arise when we embrace the arts as a way of knowing self and other, knowledge and experience, fact and fiction. Beyond this demonstration, however, we seek to share our story as a means to explore our experience as we enter into a dialogue, with you, the reader, about the possibilities that arise when we engage our students in centered, aesthetic and communal acts of reflexivity that might lead the development of fluid pedagogies and ways of being in the world that are informed, critical, and transformative.

### **The (Im)Possible Gaze**

As society evolves, our exposure to knowledge increases dramatically; however, our epistemological positions seem to remain static amidst a life that is often chaotic and outwardly centered. Irigaray (2002) acknowledges this confusion, remarking that, "know more things but we return less to ourselves in order to examine the meaning of all those things for a more accomplished human becoming"(p. 93). If we were to reflect upon Irigaray's statement in relationship to the needs of our students, we might see that, for many of them, the gaze is focused externally on expectations and desires shaped by popular culture, parents, or peers. Rarely do students have the chance to engage reflexively with their experiences and perceptions, exploring their origins as well as where these experiences and perceptions fit in relationship to those more internal, but often unspoken, needs of the self. We believe it is important to provide communal opportunities for students engaged in the learning process to fully reflect upon their experiences, becoming better aware of the messiness and aesthetic qualities of teaching and learning, as they ask questions that are not simply methodological, but rather are both personal and relational. This reflexive attention to experience requires deep engagement with the preconceptions that shape many of their ideas about both teaching and learning—such as success being determined by a grade, working hard enough will help you achieve, or teachers always having to be "on"-- preconceptions that may limit their ability to consider new ideas or concepts about the purposes and practices within education (Hammerness et al., 2005; Hammond & Bransford, 2005). It is an exploration that is multifaceted and complicated, calling for students and educators to identify and understand their own subjectivity within the space of learning. Parker Palmer (1998) considers this in relationship to an "un-divided self" where "... every major thread of one's life experience is honored, creating a weave of such coherence and strength that it can hold students and subjects as well as self"(p. 15). By engaging visually with the multiple layers and intersections of selves within teaching and learning, students may begin to reflect more deeply—to thoughtfully and actively gaze upon what shapes their



desires and informs their practice, as well as how this relates to those other than themselves, leading the students closer to awareness, possibility and hope within teaching and learning.

As educators, we seek to create learning communities grounded in care (Noddings, 2005), love (Freire, 1970), interaction (Dewey, 1980), and hope (hooks, 2003), as students reflect upon their individual and group notions of, and experiences with, the learning process. It is important to maintain these values in our classrooms as we work to extend this self-reflection into something collective, inviting multiple voices to enter into the creation of that which temporarily represents what it means to teach and learn. By providing students with focused opportunities to engage with the meaning of themselves in practice within the world, it is our goal that students might begin to root their experiences in ways that are informed by personal and communal acts of reflexivity, thereby leading to a greater sense of praxis as citizens, as well as in the future classrooms of those who choose to teach.

### **(In)Tangible Balance**

Traditionally, culturally, and historically, mandalas have been used as a form of meditation completed by members of a group. However, recently, educators have been using mandala making with their students as a teaching tool. Anderson (2002) describes his college art education majors engaging in mandala making with the theme “balance in the red hills of North Florida,” after observing a group of Tibetan Buddhist monks creating and dismantling their sand mandala, which focused on local balance and world peace. Marshall (2003) describes using mandalas with nursing majors to meet course objectives, as well as meet the learning needs of a new generation of students. When we originally discovered the philosophy of the mandala and began to explore the intricate images created within these visual circles, we sought a methodology that would create a space for a flexible epistemology, while also offering clarity regarding the steps and direction of process for students as they developed these representations of sel(f)ves in experience. This desire for a tangible and defined process is similar to that exhibited by the students who enter our classrooms, seeking the answers to their questions of practice. All students, to some degree or another, have been trained to seek the professor’s approval and ask for answers; however, as MacKenzie (2009) tells her students:

There is no possibility for prediction, there are no connections that might remain concrete; instead the nature of knowing is one that demands a sense of openness to the possibilities of the present and the fluid existence of the past. (p. 245)

This fluid (im)possibility exists also within the space of the mandala. The mandala is rooted in the chaotic processes of being self alive in the world in relation to many others who are both connected and separate from ourselves. The creation of the mandala requires a meditative presence that conflicts with our desire to know. While one might seek enlightenment, it is important to reflect on the spiritual qualities of (un)knowing. Trungpa (1991) challenges the seeking of absolute knowledge and methodology when he remarks, “The idea of enlightenment is born out of confusion. Because somebody is confused, there is the other aspect that contrasts with the confusion, which is

enlightenment. We have to approach this scientifically: “If confusion exists, then enlightenment exists, therefore confusion exists”(p.4). The spiritual quality of this polarity is that it requires one to stop thinking in the linear, instead becoming present to the sensible.

There are significant possibilities that arise when we begin to consider the process of mandala creation in relationship to Pinar’s (2004) method of *currere*, which “provides a strategy for students of curriculum to study the relations between academic knowledge and life history in the interest of self-understanding and social reconstruction”( p. 35). As Sameshima eloquently articulates: “The teaching profession is dramatically strengthened when teachers understand who they are, know their experiences have shaped their ideologies, and find and acknowledge their place of contribution in the broader context of the educational setting”(p.34). We assert that learning takes place outside the teaching profession or the context of the classroom as well, and it is therefore important to provide all students the opportunity for deep and critical reflection regarding their own subjectivities. From a critical and poststructuralist standpoint, it is important for all citizens to take the time to split open the entrails of their practices and beliefs, sensibly engaging with the muckiness of self, so that they might gain insight into what shapes them in relationship to the positions of others.

We live as layered and multi-dimensional beings, thus making it important that we engage with all these aspects of self. Leggo (2008) illustrates the value of introspection when he remarks, “I write my autobiographical narratives, first, for myself, not in some kind of egocentric, narcissistic self-obsession, but out of a conviction that by writing about myself in process ... I can enter into a dialogic conversation with others ...”(p. 12). By engaging students in collective acts of reflective creation, the dialogue begins to intertwine the individual with an other, providing new insights and perspectives that may significantly shift their own views about themselves in practice and in the world. As is the case for pre-service teachers in the Social Foundations course, for whom, as Hammerness et. al. (2005) propose, it is important to “...learn to teach in a community that enables them to develop a vision for their practice; a set of understandings about teaching, learning, and children; dispositions about how to use this knowledge; practices that allow them to act on their intentions and beliefs; and tools that support their efforts”(p. 385). This sense of community is of equal significance within any learning context (Marshall, 2003, Anderson, and Wenger,1998) and certainly proved to be valuable for those individuals enrolled in the course who were not certification students. There are many ways in which learning communities may enter into dialogic spaces; however, the arts generate an awareness, or *wide-awakeness*, that Eisner (2008) considers, reflecting on the work of Greene (2001), which offers individuals the opportunity to more fully immerse the intellectual as well as the sensible aspects of themselves into the process.

This immersion is important as it implies a deep presence within an experience or state of being. The unsettling nature of immersion within art creation requires one to explore all aspects as possibilities within a moment, allowing for openness. “Being open in the moment means listening intently, simultaneously seeking relationality, acknowledging connections and appreciating the fullness of presence in the present”(Sameshima, 2007, p. 35). Perhaps it is the case that openness can exist within our daily conversations about teaching and learning; however the nature of artistic

creation and engagement allows for a “continuous interchange and blending”(Dewey, 1980, p. 38), which unifies both the events and ideas shaping the experience as well as those individuals who are actively (re)creating what they know to be true. “... mandala making is instrumental. Is not art for art’s sake. Rather it is meant to achieve something in the world from an aesthetically framed perspective using aesthetic means as a tool”(Anderson, 2002, p. 34).

### **Writerly (De)Construction**

We are educators who believe strongly in the importance of constructivism and dialogue within our classrooms and that each individual brings unique experiences and perspectives, drawn from their membership across multiple discourses (Gee, 1987), which shape the ways in which learning may evolve in a particular context. This evolution, based on context and subjects, also holds great importance within our inquiry process. Coming from a poststructuralist perspective, we do not seek to claim knowing, but rather hope to acknowledge the influence and fragility of our own positions while creating spaces for multiple voices and interpretations to come together in dialogic inquiry, where participants, readers, and writers join together to (re)search and (re)write within the open spaces established within our text. This approach is reflective of Barthes’ (1974) notion of the “writerly text,” where readers are called to actively construct meaning as they interact with the text.

There are multiple research methodologies or processes that may support this intent; however, recognizing that inquiry, research, learning, creating and teaching are all deeply intertwined, we turn to those processes that might best reflect our pedagogical position. Therefore, we draw on an autoethnographic methodology (Ellis, 2004) through which we, as teachers, as along with our students, might begin to engage in the sharing of an experience, providing evocative interpretations that are informed by our work as artists, researchers, teachers, and learners. As Reed-Dunahay (1997) sees autoethnographers as boundary-crossers, we, too, traverse the landscapes as teacher and student, both guiding the process and learning from it. We, too, engage in this reflective inquiry. Like our classroom projects, we seek to approach the inquiry process in a communal way, recognizing that after all, “If culture circulates through all of us, then how can autoethnography not connect to a world beyond the self?”(Ellis, 2004, p. 34).

As such, we seek to share our story, our observations, and experience in a dialogic manner, letting go of attachment to absolutes. We hope to offer what we saw while creating space for multiple interpretations—all the while acknowledging our own interpretations and embracing the temporality of those interpretations. Our understanding of the experience is grounded in what we observed in the classroom. Drawing on the visual and verbal responses during our students’ inquiry and reflections upon the completion of each part of the inquiry, as well as our own reflections as scholars and teachers, we seek to identify and articulate the possibilities and tensions in relationship to how arts-informed practices, such as the mandala, may shape our own and students’ notions of teaching, learning and art, and how these forms of artful inquiry may affect one’s learning experience. However, like the mandala, our articulation does not end within the tangible space of the paper, but continues to live, to speak through the

experiences and interpretations of others, becoming something wholly new within the temporality of reflexive praxis.

#### **Communal Context**

We believe it is important to share with you a better image of the participants and context of the community we describe within our story of arts-informed epistemology, which unfolds within the context of a Social Foundations of Education course. Building on this initial introduction, the course takes place at a highly selective liberal arts institution in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. While, traditionally, the enrollment at the university has been Caucasian, upper-middle to upper socio-economic status, the population is changing. The enrollment in this social foundations course was reflective of this change, and was in fact quite diverse—with a range from the white upper-class student who attended prestigious private schools all her life, to a Latino student who attended school in the inner city, having arrived in the country as an adolescent. Along with the cultural and economic diversity, a certain amount of diversity also existed with regard to students' intentions in terms of what they hoped might learn by taking the class. Generally, students who take this course are enrolled to meet either a university requirement or a degree/certification requirement, which means that roughly 25 % of the students enrolled in the course are education majors, while the rest are exploring a wide array of disciplines outside the department.

Ultimately, the purpose of this course is to provide the opportunity for students to become familiar with the theories, ideologies, and practices that shape education in the past and present, examine their own experiences within that context, and begin to question how they and others have been positioned in certain ways. As students explore these concepts, our hope is that they might begin to develop a sense of praxis in relationship to education, becoming informed members of the educational community—whether that be as educators, administrators, parents, politicians, school board members, or simply voters. This course is taught in a variety of ways within the department, including both constructivist and more traditional, lecture oriented pedagogical approaches. Often, students admit that they originally signed up with the desire for a particular format and then find themselves struggling with more unconventional approaches, especially those that draw on arts-informed epistemologies. However, despite the initial struggle, many students discover unknown aspects about themselves as learners and are able to make deeper connections with their peers as a result of the “forced” vulnerability that occurs when students are asked to engage in the work of making meaning through often risky endeavors, such as art-making.

#### **And So the Circle Begins**

The initial mandala making activity took place at the very beginning of the semester, starting on the first day, after the syllabus had been introduced. Students broke up into six groups of six each and were directed to read the following handout:

**Assignment Information:** Mandala is a Sanskrit term meaning sacred circle. Tibetan monks have created mandalas for centuries with the purposes of mental focus, meditation, centering, and education. Carl Gustav Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist and his patients represented self, personality, natural urge to live to full potential, and fulfill patterns of wholeness called it "individuation" and used symbols of the unconscious toward personal growth urge to "become what one is". For our purposes in this assignment we will begin to address the topic of education as we interact and grow through reflection, engagement, and artmaking.

**Requirements:** Respect and Open-mindedness. During this assignment you will need to convey respect for everyone in the class including yourself, peers, and the instructor. Others may have different experiences and perspectives that challenge your own. It is your challenge to share, listen, and respectfully engage in critical, respectful dialogue and artmaking. This course is founded in the notion of constructivism; meaning that knowledge is constructed socially and there are many "teachers" who contribute to our learning and growth as individuals.

***So what is the value of a circle?***

**Assignment:** In this assignment you will reflect upon your own and others' beliefs and experiences about the nature of education. You will begin by reflecting upon and responding in a free writing style to the following questions/prompts;

- Describe your educational experiences.
- How do you define education?
- Do you think all people can learn and achieve? If so, how? If not, why?
- Are there obstacles you feel you may have to overcome in this class? If so describe them.
- How do you think education is "social"?
- What led you to take this course?
- What expectations do you have for yourself and this class?
  1. Share and discuss your responses with members of your small group.  
Note how everyone's experiences and perspectives are unique, how some are similar, how some are difficult, and what you can learn from others, as well as what you can teach others.
  2. Together you will create a mandala-like visual representation of your groups' experiences, perspectives, and expectations. Be sure all voices are heard, acknowledge, and incorporated. Consider how lines, colors, balance, etc. can be used to enhance your visual message.
  3. Enjoy and reflect upon the process of making a visual message with your group members.
  4. Your small group will share your mandala with the class so be prepared to explain your artistic choices, and personal/group perspectives.

**Goals:**

1. To provide you with the opportunity to use a less traditional form of "textual" processing to reflect upon and discuss your and others' beliefs about education - allowing for multiple perspectives to guide the verbal and visual aspect of this project.
2. To reflect upon your own biases, beliefs, and expectations about education, learning, students, and culture as you engage in critical discussion with peers about the goals and purposes of education
3. To engage in a less traditional "textual" process, to help better understand the nature of text and the possibilities that arise when you move "outside the box" of communication and reflection; increasing your ability to observe, analyze,

- interpret, create, evaluate from a more informed critical point of view.
4. To move outside comfort zones, so that you might feel more comfortable taking risks.  
To create a sense of community among peers that will enhance future discussions and activities.

*Figure 1.* Mandala activity handout

Following a thorough reading of the handout, students were invited to look at example Mandalas, created by students in Mary Wolf's (2008) Introduction to Art course, before they began the process of engaging in artful inquiry.



Figure 2. Art mandala 1



Figure 3. Art mandala 2



Figure 4. Art mandala 3

The purpose of this was to provide them with multiple models that were consistent with what other non art major college students might produce, helping to clarify expectations, while also limiting some of the initial anxiety that might exist when one is given a “perfect” model. They were then asked to work with their peers to share their personal

responses in relationship to the guiding questions as they moved to a more collaborative response to the overarching focus question: “What are the purposes, possibilities, and practices of education?” As students talked in their groups, they were able to take their time to reflect, more fully engaging in the process, with the knowledge that they had more than one day to work on the “final” product. These discussions continued as students began to consider how they might best demonstrate the work from their groups, with a variety of materials to inquire artfully into what it means to teach and learn, considering the meanings behind their ideas around the purpose and realities of education, their beliefs about what good teaching is, and the choices that they make in relationship to students as well as others in the field of education.

As students worked in their groups, discussion remained focused on the questions, but also reflected a sense of timidity in relationship to the aesthetic process and anxiety regarding the quality of workmanship and entering into relationships with unfamiliar individuals. Within this space, as students shared their own education experiences, opinions, and beliefs regarding the nature of teaching and learning, what works and what doesn’t, an interesting rhythm ensued, where slowly, what started as anxiety grew into an appreciation for diversity—both in terms of talent as well as experience. Along with that appreciation, assumptions were uncovered. For instance, the one all-male group felt that they should have a female in the group to help them draw better. Along with the recognition that there could be different ways to communicate ideas came the recognition that they might be in words, but that symbols, too, could serve to answer the question(s) being considered.



Figure 5. Group 1 mandala 1

As students worked to create their mandalas, they took ownership of the image as well as their individual and collective roles within the classroom community. Already, students and teachers were forming into a working group--individuals coming together to create knowledge--and the art-making process was proving to be an excellent vehicle to facilitate this creation.



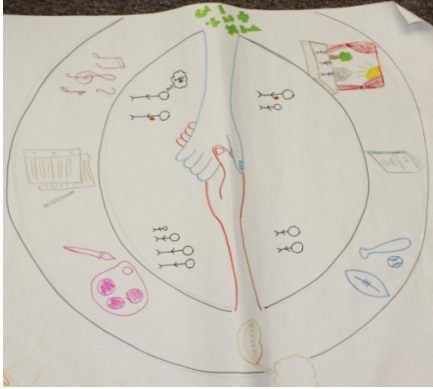


Figure 6. Group 2 mandala 1



Figure 7. Group 3 mandala 1



Figure 8. Group 4 mandala 1

Students did not simply embrace the experience, with both resistance and anxiety strong. This was demonstrated, to a degree, in the images. For instance, the group who chose simply to incorporate words into their mandala felt very uncomfortable with the idea of using images and believed that words would better clarify their message. It was also demonstrated in the “what I want you to know” section of their information cards that were passed back at the end of the first day. There were multiple comments, such as “I am not good at art, I am not sure I will do well in (or like) this class.” However, within a

constructivist pedagogy, knowledge lives in a space of discursive multiplicities, and, as such, we believe it is important to verbally acknowledge and embrace those multiplicities. Students were informed of the value of different approaches to meaning making, and it was made clear that no single approach was considered more worthwhile than another, nor could one image be considered better than another, if the image led to deeper understanding on the part of the creator and/or viewer. This allowed students to feel safer in their risk taking, with the knowledge that, as long as they were engaged in process, their work would be accepted. This level of acceptance and willingness to take risks, digging beyond the obvious to tap into the multifaceted nature of knowledge and experience, was maintained throughout the course of the semester. We believe that the mandala making activity played a significant role in establishing such an inclusive and reflective landscape for learning.

### **The (Un)Ending Circle**

While the impact of the mandala making experience at the beginning of the semester set the foundation for epistemological experiences across the course of the semester, it was especially evident at the end of the semester. On the last two days of the course, students were asked to reflect carefully on those ideas and practices that they believed were most important to take into consideration in relationship to education. The process began, first, with an all-group discussion in response to Greene's (1987) statement:

For me, the child is a veritable image of becoming, of possibility, poised to reach towards what is not yet, towards a growing that cannot be predetermined or prescribed. I see her and I fill the space with others like her, risking, straining, wanting to find out, to ask their own questions, to experience a world that is shared.

From this quote, students were asked to think about the following questions:

1. What comes to your mind in terms of what we have read and discussed this semester, in relationship to this quote?
2. What is important to think about when reflecting on the nature of schools in the US today?
3. What should educators and citizens be aware of, what types of questions should they ask? (Who are our students? Who determines policies? How has education changed? What policies and practices influence student's lives in and out of schools?)

Throughout, I added comments to a graphic organizer, outlining the big ideas and connections that students were articulating during the discussion. The purpose of this was to offer an opportunity for (pre)planning before they moved to the next step in the activity.

For the next step, students were asked to create a series of "I believe" statements in relationship to the question: "What do you believe about education in the United States

regarding purpose, practice, and possibilities?” Initially, this reflection was done independently, but following the opportunity for independent reflection students were directed to return to their original mandala groups to share their reflections, coming up with a collaborative list of “we believe” statements that reflected collaboration and compromise. Upon the completion of their statements, they posted them for their peers to review and give feedback on, as they moved around the room identifying connections, contradictions, questions, and new ideas, before proceeding to the next step.

From these statements, students were then asked to return to their original mandalas, examining how their views have evolved over the course of the semester. Groups received another copy of the handout that had been distributed at the beginning of the semester, as well as the original mandala that they had created. Reflecting carefully upon the evolution, considering where the “we believe” statements might fit, as well as anything else they felt was important to include, students were invited to disrupt their original mandalas. The disruption meant to be a practical way to (re)create a representation of their understanding in relationship to education, but also served as a metaphor to illustrate the fluid nature of experience and knowing. Students were given an option with regard to how they disrupted the mandala. for instance adding images to the original, throwing away the original, cutting or ripping the original and (re)piecing, as they added new images and words to the present creation. Given the materials that were available and the nature of our classroom community, there was flexibility in terms of the way the mandala was developed—while the aim was the circle, how the circle actually looked was not limited to an exact circle.



Figure 9. Group 2 mandala 2

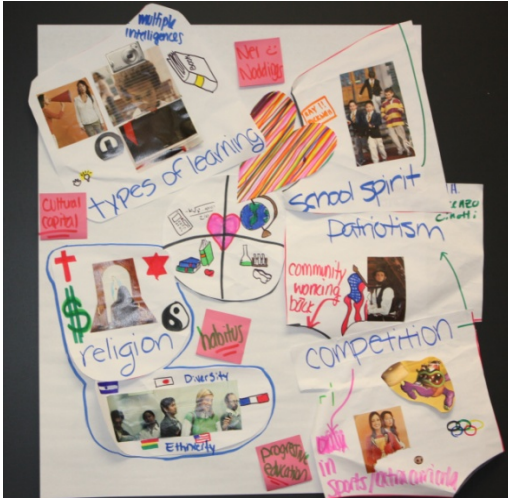


Figure 10. Group 3 mandala 2

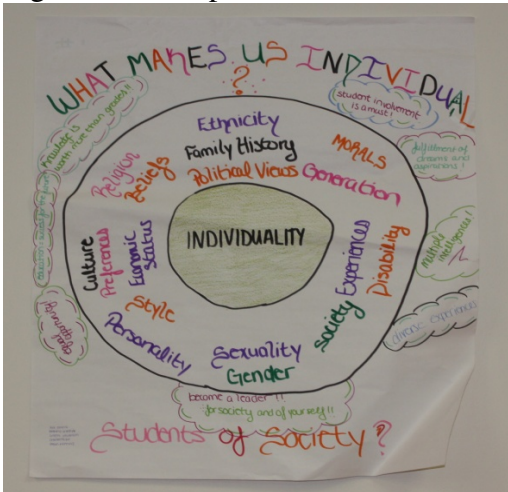


Figure 11. Group 4 mandala 2

While the images students (re)created had not necessarily grown in terms of aesthetic value, and some students, such as Group 1, chose to remain with their initial image, the overall depth of the understanding in relationship to the course question had indeed increased. This was evident in relationship to the inclusion of new terms, images, phrases, the rearrangement, and the layering of images and words, but also, and even more important, in the discussion that occurred throughout the art-making process. Students easily made comments about how their initial focus had been on their own experience, or that they had made comments about things like learning styles, etc. that they hadn't really understood, but now they had a better idea of what that meant both for themselves as well as society as a whole. Basically, they recognized that they were beginning to identify themselves as members of a whole, which functions somewhat chaotically, but always in relationship, positioned historically and socially within contexts. Along with this recognition, the reflections indicated that the students believed in their ability to better establish connections between theory and practice and articulated a strong sense of responsibility for praxis as they became agents of change within and outside the field of education.

### **Purposeful Movement**

The purpose of the mandala projects, as well as the reflections that followed, was to encourage students to reflect upon their own biases, beliefs, and expectations in relationship to the general question, “What are the purposes, problems, possibilities and challenges affecting education today,” and to engage in critical discussion with peers about the goals and purposes of their work. In addition, it was our hope that, by engaging students in the artmaking process, they might better understand the conceptual and technical challenge of process (whether that be related to teaching, learning, or artmaking); increase their ability to observe, analyze, interpret, create, evaluate from a more informed critical point of view; and increase knowledge of deeply complex subject matter. We sought to facilitate the creation of a sense of community among peers that might enhance future learning experiences.

For the Social Foundations of Education students, the mandala project proved to be a challenge as they initially struggled with its relevance, as well as the relevance of the activity in relationship to the course and their position as students. Many of these students also felt challenged by being asked to use an artful form of text to explore the question. They recognized what they were doing as something that was risky, and might, in their eyes, ultimately lead to failure. However, through guided reflection, students began to engage more actively in the process, offering a variety of powerful insights and further questions. These insights and questions continued to grow as students were able to more thoughtfully meditate on their identities in relation to educational practice and ideology and how their actions did indeed impact their perceptions of self and other. As the course progressed, it became clear that a number of the students were continuing to return to the mandala creation, and the reflection that followed, as they examined various educational topics over the course of the semester. Along with the impact the mandala project had on the pedagogical thinking of students, it was evident that by sharing a risky adventure of personal and public relationships, students were able to open up to their peers and really support one another during the significant transition of moving from student to teacher.

While students were initially resistant to the mandala project, over time they grew to enjoy the process and their growing relationships with their peers – as well as themselves. In addition, they showed evidence of personal growth in their ability to recognize how multiple factors influence perceptions and the ways in which they engage with others. This mandala project supported the claims made by Anderson (2002) and Marshall (2003) in that students did not simply seek and gain answers, but used the self reflection and group dynamics to learn to traverse the messiness that is teaching and learning.

### **In/Conclusion**

Arts-informed practices serve as powerful tools that may draw individuals to step away from positions of complacency moving into spaces of discomfort or tension. It is through these tensions that students often would like to escape; however, as they seek to relieve their discomfort, inquiry, while temporal, is the only relief (Eisner, 2008). It is important that students recognize learning is an ongoing process of personal and social development. The mandala project provided students with the opportunity to artfully

engage with the central questions of the Social Foundations of Education course, through a form of reflection that encouraged relationships with others. These opportunities help students develop a greater sense of who they are in relation to the world while establishing new lenses through which they might engage with what they believe they know. It is our hope that by providing students with tools that engage both the aesthetic and intellectual/emotional aspects within learning, they may better respond and grow during those times when they find themselves lost amidst pressure to conform or to present themselves as finished. When they find themselves in these situations in the future, they may be better equipped with skills to be thoughtful and innovative lifelong learners (Hammerness et. al, 2005) who work among a community that approaches the complexity of living together.

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