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ARTS-BASED EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Making Cultura Count Inside and Out of the Classroom: Public Art & Critical Pedagogy in South Central Los Angeles

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I introduce this paper first by including the context in which it was written. I was a former student of the high school where I currently teach, and have been a resident of its neighborhood since age fourteen. I am an artist, educator, and activist for the community in which this project was conducted. The “May Day service learning project” emerged from students’ interests: their ideas, concerns for their community, socio-political consciousness, and most importantly, their primary language, culture, and history as bilingual students. The project examines the historical and cultural experiences of Spanish-speaking students and demonstrates how culturally relevant and arts-based methods of critically exploring history, language, culture, politics and visual literacy impact the academic outcomes and political awareness of marginalized youth. Furthermore, this project brings attention to the importance of developing caring and relevant pedagogies within arts-based critical approaches to teaching students with immigrant backgrounds in Los Angeles.

In my work, I use the Spanish term “cultura” (culture) because it encompasses much more than the English word “culture.” “Cultura,” as opposed to culture, invites bilingual students to think about the overall experiences of their environment, whether at home, at school, on the streets, or within the working class. I use “cultura” to challenge the implied U.S. idea that cultures are reflected by foods, traditions, and month celebrations.

The concept for this project developed from an intense discussion with my students about the controversial Arizona law SB1070. The law requires police to demand “papers” from people who they suspect are “unlawfully present” in the United States. Students saw this law as a legalization of racial

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profiling, improper investigations, and detention in the state of Arizona. Reflecting upon the possibilities of a law like this passing in one state and giving momentum for other states to pass similar legislation, we discussed the idea of participating in a May Day protest. In this project, students channeled political thoughts into political actions through the visual arts. The visual and performing arts help students develop multiple forms of literacy, and it is thus important for students to be able to interpret, think, and communicate in multiple aspects of “visual literacy,” which I define as the ability to think and communicate visually. Visual literacy, according to California state standards, includes thinking and communicating. Visual thinking is the ability to transform thoughts and information into images; visual communication takes place when people are able to construct meanings from a visual image. I also consider art as a visual dialogue in which the interpretation of every observer will be different and unique. Visual dialogues, like student-teacher and teacher-student dialogues (Freire, 1993), emerge as artists and observers share perspectives and ideas with each other.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND BEYOND

With a growing number of culturally diverse students in U.S. public schools, some transitioning into a new culture and language, it is important to continue developing multiple (and often arts-based) forms of literacy through culturally relevant pedagogy (Frederickson, 1995; Gay, 2000). Discussing bicultural identity, Darder (1995) argues that to comprehend “our students as cultural beings requires that we understand the manner in which social power and control function to structure the world in which we exist and how it defines our place within that world” (p. 36). In a post-Civil Rights era of political actions targeting undocumented students and workers, laws such as SB 1070 affect students of immigrant backgrounds. Given that socio-economic challenges impact marginalized students both inside and outside of school (Kozol, 1991; Tierney, 1993), a critical pedagogy can amplify students’ political and social awareness and their ability to understand how societal and political structures function. Drawing from Freire’s (1993) problem-posing methodology, which recognizes the need for collaboration in the production of knowledge between teacher-as-learner and student-as-teacher, I have taken classroom time to introduce students to the possible challenges they face at home and the limiting factors in their community. Critical theorists understand the social implications of critical pedagogy for “marginalized communities and the schools that service those communities” (McLaren, 1994, p. 186) to transform existing social inequalities and injustices.

I also draw from the public art theory of Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros (1975). My focus on Siqueiros emerges from the socially conscious

public art he brought to Los Angeles during his exile from Mexico. In 1932, Siqueiros created a group of murals that portrayed the working conditions for people of color—most of the murals include images of the labor relationship between the United States and Mexico (see *America Tropical*, *Un Mitin Obrero*, and *Portrait of Mexico Today*). In his Los Angeles murals, Siqueiros reflects the social and economic implications for Mexican people and their connection to the United States. As demonstrated by Siqueiros' (1975) work, public art can “speak a different social language with a distinct style and form that can only be understood by those who are conscious of their own limitations” (p. 8). Students of color can be empowered through new forms of public art that are culturally relevant and that can be understood through their experiences in the working class.

MEANINGFUL STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

I combine public arts-based pedagogy with critical pedagogy in the form of participatory action research and service learning (Calderon, 2007; Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2005; Ochoa & Ochoa, 2004) for the purposes of empowering marginalized youth to embrace community resources and to challenge the oppressive factors that limit their educational and social opportunities. Additionally, I incorporate the act of love/affection, articulated by Duncan-Andrade (2006) as “cariño,” defined as the “relationships among the poor working classes” (p. 451). Cariño, like authentic caring (Valenzuela, 1999), creates personal, academic, and social relationships between student and teacher. Valenzuela writes that, “learning should be premised on relation with teachers and other school adults having as their chief concern their students’ entire well-being” (p. 342). Caring can make or break the outcome of student academic experience (Duncan-Andrade, 2006; Gay, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999). A meaningful relationship takes place not only inside the classroom. It must also pay attention to the needs of the student and community. According to Duncan-Andrade (2006), “rather than aiming to develop a model that can be laid on top of any school, this educational research approach focuses on forming relationships that pay attention to the special needs of a particular school” (p. 454).

SO WHY FOCUS ON USING PUBLIC ART IN THE CLASSROOM?

Using culturally relevant art instruction in ways that incorporate the historical and cultural experiences of socio-economically challenged students, while linking them to civic participation, can open opportunities for students to challenge the limitations they encounter in urban schools and communities.

Teachers must go beyond “teaching” in the art setting and move past showing students how to draw, paint, and perform. Authentic caring needs to be set in place for the best interest of students. This type of pedagogy will not present a solution to all the problems of inner-city education; however, it may open up new methods directed to close/minimize/reduce the achievement gap for inner-city students. In this sense, what Valenzuela (1999) calls “aesthetic caring” is transformed from a “surface level” or artificial caring to an “authentic caring” that deeply embeds our senses and our situated lived experiences within multiple literacy systems, giving voice to students outside mainstream and standard avenues for knowledge production. Furthermore, public art projects can address a community need as expressed by marginalized students (Becker, 2004). Muralist Judy Baca (2005) explains:

(P)ublic art is an antidote for the hatred and disconnectedness in society. It is a creative, participatory, critical, and analytical process of telling our stories as a people, and encourages others to do the same, in any language they speak. Through the very specificity of the human experience, we learn compassion. (p. 2)

In my classroom environment, antidotes to socio-political ignorance of the United States’ history of power, oppression, racism, and marginalization of particular groups include engaging in public art projects and sharing the stories of those who are often the victims of dominant political agendas. The May Day service-learning project that developed in my advanced painting class fulfilled a number of goals, including completing the students’ service learning requirement for high school graduation in California, addressing a community issue significant to students’ experiences, and establishing a connection between the classroom and students’ environment. As a former graduate of the same school, I experienced many of the limitations presented to students in this community and designed lessons focused around the city’s urban planning, gentrification, civil rights violations, and sociology through an artistic perspective. As teachers noticed increased student participation from this group of students and observed students’ enthusiasm and discussion about class assignments, I realized that this arts-based approach in the classroom might have farther-reaching implications for benefitting other marginalized students from similar communities.

MAY DAY MARCH 2010

On May 1st, 2010, 17 students from Eastside High School, all from immigrant families, participated in a protest for immigrant rights in downtown Los Angeles. May 1st, known as “International Workers Day,” has become a day of action for immigrant rights in the city of Los Angeles in recent years.



FIGURE 1 “Caution” sign, Interstate 5 Freeway, San Diego CA. (2009) (Color figure available online).

The students’ participation consisted of developing a public art project and partaking in a public protest along with thousands of other Los Angeles residents. Students created individual interpretations of the “Caution” (immigrant crossing) sign on the Interstate 5 Freeway near the Mexico-U.S. border in San Diego (Figure 1) to reveal and interpret the socio-political ramifications of anti-immigrant legislation and to tell their own socio-political stories and perspectives.

This idea to rework the “Caution” sign had come about during a discussion of possibilities for service learning projects for the upcoming May Day (2010), when one student asked if she could do something similar to the “Education” sign I displayed in class (Figure 2). I agreed, with the condition that students change the wording to their own interpretations.

I required students to research the history of the sign and the cultural stereotypes it (re)presents. I asked them to think for themselves and to share their thoughts about the silhouette of the immigrant family. Some saw this sign on their way to or from visiting families in Mexico. They were asked to re-define the stereotypical sign by replacing the word “Caution” with a word that would reflect their interpretation.

THE UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE OF METAPHOR TELLS A STORY

Student projects were exhibited in 2011 as “Border Inspections: Art-Based Encounters with Language, Identity, Culture and Power” at California State University Fullerton. This project’s dialogue thus continued beyond the goals

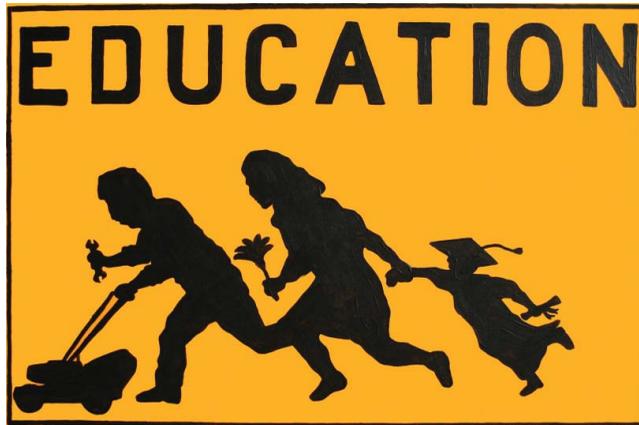


FIGURE 2 “With Liberty and Education for All,” Luis G. Garcia (2009) (Color figure available online).

of participating in a protest; it became part of an exhibition, was shared with a broader audience, and was woven into a wider socio-political narrative about power, oppression, and policy in Los Angeles.

In Boal’s (2006) concept of “metaphor as translation” (p. 26) a metaphor is inclusive of all symbolic languages; the word, the parable, and the allegory. The word, in Spanish or English, can possess a directional meaning in the way that it can be included in an image for the purpose of thinking



FIGURE 3 Students’ interpretations of the immigrant crossing sign at the May Day March in Downtown Los Angeles. Photo Credit: Luis G. Garcia (2010) (Color figure available online).

about that term. Art as a parable can have two meanings. First, it can be a short allegorical story designed to illustrate or teach a truth. Second, parable acts as a statement or comment that conveys a meaning indirectly by the use of comparison, or analogy. The students' use of the running family silhouette can reflect the first—the allegorical story of a Spanish-speaking student translated into a factual truth, or the second—making a statement that is visually translated into what that sign means to them. Last, art as an allegory serves as a symbolic narrative in which students communicate realities through their own symbolism. When students think visually, they are able to turn their thoughts into visual images and communicate their ideas metaphorically first, and then verbally through their own bilingual dialogue. Most importantly they are telling their own stories, aware of how immigrants have been targeted past and present. If the complete history of all ethnic groups were part of their history book instead of a mere two or three pages, students would be more conscious about how their histories have contributed to the United States' development. Developing authentic caring relationships with students does not only happen within classroom spaces. When teaching opportunities take place outside of the classroom, like in this May Day project, students see the teacher as more credible (or authentic) than other teachers who do not take the curriculum outside of the school setting. Building caring relationships can take place within a school year or within years of teaching the same students in different courses or environments.

“La Flaca” (Class of 2011): “After being part of the May Day Project, I saw how Mr. Garcia truly cared about us. He helped me through a lot, when I needed someone’s advice he was there for me. He has inspired me to become a teacher because he is an alumni from the school I went to, and I want to give back to the community as he has. Even now that I attend college, he has helped me. He never gave up on me and without his support I feel like I would have dropped out of college. I consider him as part of my family; he has been like a father, brother, and an awesome teacher. I will always be thankful to him for being there for me when I needed someone the most.”

“The Valedictorian” (Class of 2010): “Projects in Mr. Garcia’s class required more than just merely painting an image. Every painting was required to tell a story, bring out an injustice, highlight a problem, and to go above and beyond just making a pretty assortment of images. With all of the research that had to be made prior to starting a painting, we would connect with the problems we were addressing and we would begin to change the way we thought. Making us research in order to create our projects and then making us explain the meaning of it, allowed us to grow academically. We would have to talk to each other in order to successfully complete the project; I didn’t talk much and I had to. Together, we were able to learn about many issues; what caused them and how to solve them. In most cases, the issues

we saw were political, so our political awareness increased. Because Mr. Garcia shared his personal experiences as a former student, he became a person I could turn to for advice. He was always there for any reason, not just a project related to his class. Most students that had his class at one point would say the same, because Mr. Garcia went beyond just being a teacher, he tried to influence people and through that he became a friend, a mentor, and a role model.”

In order for me to authenticate my role as a teacher, my students need to know that I, too, came from the same neighborhood in which they now live. In questioning his credibility with his students, Freire (2001) states, “I cannot be a teacher without exposing who I am” (p. 87). I am no expert of the neighborhood, but am given credibility as I share my socio-political experiences with my students and learn from their own experiences. Teachers might not be comfortable sharing their personal space and experiences with their students in the way that I describe, but for me, it is the bridge to building “cariño” and authenticating my role as a credible teacher and artist beyond the classroom.

FURTHER IMPLICATIONS

In reflecting with colleagues about my projects and curriculum, I was made aware that some of the students who were enrolled in my advanced painting course were taking leadership roles in classroom discussions and were much more opinionated than some of their peers. Some students were chosen to be part of the school’s debate team while others became much more active in their courses after taking my class. Is it possible that students’ increased interest toward school could be related to their participation in arts-based culturally relevant service-learning projects? In the three years that students and I have taken on these types of projects, there have been no means to measure the role that “cultura” might play in improving school performance. Do data need to be presented in order to improve school culture? Should we start documenting the types of relationships we have with our own students to prove that using “cariño” in the classroom can actually improve their performance inside and outside of the classroom? We might begin by considering the experiences of teachers who share the “cultura” of their students (Garcia & Castro, 2011; Ochoa, 2007). If we really want to see the effects of using “cultura” in the classroom we need also to steer research in the direction of the home cultures of our students.

We often make the mistake of defining culture as the set traditions of an ethnic group. We dismiss the language of culture (music, slang, expression, communication, or an act of love). This mistake often prevents teachers from being culturally fluent in order to connect effectively and productively with students. Through caring and arts-based student-centered experiences, we

can identify and connect to the “cultura” that students understand. We need to recognize that culture may take many forms, and that it can be expressed through social practices and symbols (McLaren, 1994), “such as those found in music, dress, food, religion, dance, and education which have developed from the efforts of groups to shape the lives out of their surrounding material and political environment” (p. 202). We must use students’ own social practices and symbols in the classroom if we want them to learn effectively. How can we claim to teach students if we do not take the time to get to know them first? Most importantly, a culturally relevant curriculum directly connected to the community, history, and culture of the students it serves can influence other needs to address the community and its well-being. This, however, cannot happen without the element of meaningful or authentic caring relationships.

CONCLUSION

In a time when students are taught about the Civil Rights movement only because they will be tested on it, are we also teaching them to look beyond their histories and understand that civil rights violations still exist today? Do we allow and encourage them to see themselves as active agents in the creation of their own histories? And what happens if we do not? What are we really teaching them if we do not show them how current policies limit their socioeconomic status or that of their communities? We will be teaching them to be tolerant of injustice rather than to find solutions. We need to address social and political principles in our teaching in order for students to become aware of the limiting factors in their schools and in their environment. In a desire for social change Siqueiros (1975) advocates for a “fighting, educative art for all” (p. 25). In my own experiences as a student I recall being told what to draw when assigned the task of drawing still-lives. I remember being asked to duplicate a picture from a magazine without even using real objects. Siqueiros (1975) criticizes the act of replicating by stating,

Artistic theories whose sole aim is to paint light, i.e. *copy* or interpret luminosity . . . are lacking in that creativity which is the objective of art . . . these are discredited theories which we in America have been enthusiastic about for the last few years . . . (p. 22)

Developing a student’s ability to duplicate an object through drawing or painting is just not enough. Any subject should develop and challenge students to look at problems in their environment, and show them how to resolve those problems creatively. Any subject should develop student voice through written, visual, and performance-based forms of expression. It is through students’ critical experiences that they will learn how to free

themselves from social deprivation, using their experiences, their community, and art as contemporary pedagogical strategies. Teachers and students can work together in any multitude of subjects, raising awareness about issues surrounding their environment. Social change must begin in the classroom and make the connection to the streets where students live. If what we teach does not connect to the living environment of students, then that material will stay in the classroom as soon as the bell rings.

CONTRIBUTOR

Luis-Genaro Garcia is an artist and high school art teacher in South Los Angeles, currently pursuing a doctorate at Claremont Graduate University's School of Educational Studies. He teaches through public art-based methods of civic engagement and critical pedagogy to address issues affecting students in urban schools.

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