



ACTIVIST ART IN SOCIAL JUSTICE PEDAGOGY

Engaging Students in Global Issues through the Arts

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Introduction

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I am watching a video of a group of young Afro-Brazilian girls, perhaps second or third graders, on a rooftop of a *favela* dwelling in Rio de Janeiro, arguably one of the most violent places on earth. They are playing violins—slowly, note-by-note—bowing the tune of John Lennon’s “Imagine.” With them, drummers from AfroReggae’s troupe, a group made up largely of former or would-be drug traffickers from the *favela*, are setting the beat and singing the vocals in English. The tempo shifts, the drummers accelerate, the lyrics become Portuguese rap, and the message of hope and peace explodes from this rooftop through a most unlikely juxtaposition of sounds and images. Embodying the meaning of “glocalization,” global themes are transmuted by local contexts to make meaning relevant to the lives of these diverse community members. Traditional African drumming, classic European violin, hip-hop beats, London-based Beatles lyrics, and samba rhythms combine to form a powerful synergy of creative expression in this moving piece, reflecting the hybridity of our times (*Nenhum Motivo Explica a Guerra*, 2006). These participants are members of one of AfroReggae’s 60 programs in Rio’s *favelas*, aimed at bringing about social change through community-based arts and activism.

Communicating with people around the world and sharing dreams and visions for a better tomorrow is in some ways easier than ever before. The Internet, as well as ease of travel, creates spaces for us to learn from and build upon each other’s work. Consider a couple of examples. On YouTube you can see and hear musicians

from around the world collaborating to perform in *Playing for Change, Song around the World* (Mama, 2010; Playing for Change, 2010). Visual artists can collaborate to produce a mural supported by Judith Baca and the Social and Public Arts Resource Center (SPARC) called *World Wall: A Vision of the Future Without Fear*, which can be viewed virtually, and is now traveling as an exhibition throughout the world (<http://www.sparcmurals.org>).

Yet the potential to misunderstand, misinterpret, and be misinformed is also great. Wars proliferate; poverty is widespread; and racism, sexism, and other forms of social injustice continue to exist. In an era of new, multimedia, and web-based learning, critical viewing is becoming increasingly important as a basis for K–16 instruction. Books abound demonstrating the importance of including the arts, and critical media literacy, in K–12 teaching (Davis, 2008; Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sheridan, 2007; Macedo & Steinberg, 2007).

Nevertheless, in many school contexts, particularly in financially strapped urban and rural settings, art educator positions are being eliminated as part of a back-to-basics movement. A recent RAND study on arts learning and state policies (Zakaras & Lowell, 2008) found that arts are experienced by a small, wealthy segment of the population that is aging, and that a small percentage of funding goes to arts learning. Yet the arts have a documented history of engaging marginalized youth in learning and social change. Artists have always had a role in imagining a more socially just, inclusive world—many have devoted their lives to realizing this possibility. In a culture ever more embedded in performance and the visual, examining the role of arts in multicultural teaching for social justice is a timely focus. In this work, authors describe a number of models for integrating the arts in K–16 teaching for social justice. Chapters by various activist artists/educators will describe successful activist artist movements contributing to social change in the United States and around the world. They share the knowledge gained from these movements and document how they have changed both participants and social contexts. Approaches to using activist art to learn and to teach a richer, multicultural curriculum are examined and critiqued. These examples of activist artists and their strategies illustrate how study of and engagement in activist art processes can deepen both critical literacy and commitment to social justice.

In Chapter 1, I draw from my own experiences as a painter, teacher educator, and activist for social change to describe how art helps me think more deeply about social issues. I examine research on and describe strategies and approaches to social justice through the arts, laying a framework for the rest of the book. Chapters 2 and 3 examine artist activist movements by visual artists and musicians in rural and urban contexts in both Brazil and the United States. In Chapter 2, Tania Ramalho and Leah Russell examine the role of visual artists in the Landless Movement in Brazil as well as the Farmworker Movement in the United States, illustrating how

artists can play a pivotal role in social change, and how engaging learners in the arts can further their understanding of the world. In Chapter 3, Leah Russell examines the role of AfroReggae in the lives of *favela* residents in Rio de Janeiro, drawing comparisons with the hip-hop movement in the United States.

In Chapter 4, Jacquelyn Kibbey, an artist and art educator, draws from educational theorists as she describes how essential art is in helping learners critically analyze and understand media representations of the world around them. She grounds her work in the collaboration she has with an area high school committed to social justice through the arts. In Chapter 5, teacher educator Mary Harrell draws from analytical psychology to describe learning processes and outcomes of her preservice and practicing teachers in her “Imagination Through the Curriculum” approach. Chapter 6 extends the focus on critical literacy as Dennis Parsons, a literacy educator, describes the photo-documentary work and reflections of preservice teachers in a two-week immersion course in New York City schools. In Chapter 7, Jane Winslow, a filmmaker and professor, describes undergraduate students’ documentary film work in social justice-oriented projects in her course on film editing.

Chapter 8 focuses on the work of elementary educator Chris Capella, Native American art teacher at the Onondaga Nation School, as documented and interpreted by literacy educator Jennifer Kagan. Chapter 9 continues a critical analysis of Native American Art and Artists, by art historian Lisa Roberts Seppi, who provides a detailed analysis of two artists’ work, illustrating the social justice issues raised. Chapters 10 and 11 both focus on the role of feminist artists and processes in social change. In Chapter 10, Carrie Nordlund, Peg Speirs, Marilyn Stewart, and Judy Chicago collaborate to describe development and impacts of the K-12 curriculum developed for Judy Chicago’s seminal feminist contribution, *The Dinner Party*. In Chapter 11, art historian Lisa Langlois examines learning of undergraduates in a general education visual literacy course that focuses on gender as a lens for analyzing visual and performance arts, and that engages learners in activist art projects to enhance their understanding of and commitment to social change.

The authors of Chapter 12, who are English and Communications Studies professors and their students, continue to examine pedagogies for engaging undergraduates in provocative art experiences that impact their understanding of social issues. In this chapter, Patricia Clark, Ulises Mejias, Peter Cavana, Sharon M. Strong, and Daniel Herson collaborate to describe and analyze the impact of a computer simulation in which they participated on understanding of and commitment to eradicating racism. In Chapter 13, visual artist Barbara Stout describes how issues of race, gender, and sexuality are explored and examined through her portraiture work. In Chapter 14, we again broaden the lens to global issues as visual artist activist Suzanne Bellamy describes her role in the Transition Towns move-

ment for social change. Chapter 15 synthesizes themes from prior chapters and shares additional K–16 resources for social justice through the arts.

This collection of work contributes to the local U.S. multicultural education movement, opening doors to global forces for change, as we become strong allies of progressive movements within and outside our borders. The chapters address global movements through the arts in critical multicultural education. Some provide theoretical grounding, examining contested definitions of artist, activist, spectator, and social justice. Others provide rich examples of curriculum framed around activist art pedagogy. This book is relevant to those (1) interested in learning and teaching more about artist/activist social movements around the globe; (2) involved in preparing preservice teachers to teach for equity and social justice; (3) concerned about learning how to engage diverse learners through the arts; and (4) teaching courses related to arts-based multicultural and global education, critical literacy, and culturally relevant teaching. We aim to inspire educators K–16 to think about how to integrate arts for social justice across the curriculum.

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