

The cover features a woman with long dark hair and red face paint on her right side, looking towards the camera. To her right is a vertical strip of a stone relief sculpture. The background is white with several red dots scattered on the left side.

Arts Education

in a

Postnational State

Guest Edited by
Madhavi Peters

UNESCO Observatory
Multi-disciplinary Journal in the Arts
Volume 6 | Issue 2 | 2020

UNESCO Observatory

Multi-Disciplinary eJournal in the Arts

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Madhavi Peters

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ABOUT THE E-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal that promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence. Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

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Edited and published by Lindy Joubert

Founding Director of the inaugural
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Email: lindyaj@unimelb.edu.au
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COVER IMAGE

'Apitaw-Picikwas' (half apple).

Artist / model:
Lana Whiskeyjack,

Photo:
Rebecca Lippiatt
2014

This was a collaboration between
Edmonton-based photographer
Rebecca Lippiatt and
art actionist / educator
Lana Whiskeyjack's alter-ego,
'Apple', in Cree, 'Picikwas'.

Cover page design:
Seraphina Nicholls

Speaking Up, Speaking Out

Julieanne Sloman
Monika Wenzel-Curtis

BIOGRAPHY

When they were fortunate enough to become colleagues in an arts-based public school, Julieanne Sloman and Monika Wenzel-Curtis realised they shared a common goal: to collaborate with one another and with artists to infuse the arts into the existing curriculum in their classrooms. Their passion for this work has heightened their love of teaching, which continues to this day. They have witnessed firsthand how regular school environments, rich in the arts, impact student's motivation, engagement and understanding. Monika comes from a family of teachers, artists and musicians, and has observed the changing and challenging dynamic of her hometown of Calgary. After pursuing a love of theatre and adventure in the Maritimes, Julieanne found her way to Calgary. She believes that educators play a vital role in supporting the development of critical and creative thinkers. Both Julieanne and Monika are classroom teachers. Currently, they teach at different schools, Julieanne in a Grade 5/6 classroom and Monika in a Grade 6 classroom. Previous to their current positions they taught Grade 5/6 together. They have worked with various artists on many occasions, creating everything from visual art to dance to songs to spoken word. Together, they model what it means to be part of a community of inquirers who construct their understanding together. This occurs not only as a class, but also with the world at large, in which the arts play a significant role.

Arts-centred learning in the classroom has the power to build the ability of students to think both critically and creatively. These experiences improve their capacity to handle complexity and think flexibly, skills they will need in order to better understand a complex world and become leaders in shaping that world.

Some people may not associate the arts with rigorous thinking. We are aware of the product — the song, the painting, the dance — but we may not be as aware of the process that goes into that product. The creative output of students in collaboration with artists is a result of their capacity for creative thinking, problem solving and critical judgment.

Young children can handle intellectual rigour. They can make connections, draw conclusions and think of solutions. They are definitely capable of complex thought, especially when they are part of a stimulating, caring environment. When real-life artists come into the classroom, they become an important part of that environment. They bring the outside world in with them. They also bring in their unique talents and perspectives.

To build a generation of architects, artists, poets and playwrights to uphold our cultural identities, we need to go back to the basics — and art is one of those basics. Moreover, to communicate our ideas to the world is a fundamental right of Canadians of all ages. When exposed to creative opportunities in their school years, students see that self-expression has many outlets. They are also able to access multiple entry points for learning and developing their appreciation of aesthetics.

What can we do as teachers to further educate our students in the arts? We can seek out arts experiences in our own professional development; we can make connections between core subjects and the ways they can be taught through art; and we can work with artists in our communities. Bringing artists into our classrooms creates lasting experiences and in-depth learning for teacher and student.

We are fortunate that in Calgary's public schools, education in the arts is provided for via a combination of casino funds and fundraising by parents who value artistic learning and want to see their children communicating their understanding of the world in which they live in unique and creative ways.

In-Classroom Collaborations with Artists

As educators, we have worked with Calgary-based songwriter, poet, theatre and film artist Kris Demeanor in our classrooms on many occasions. While Mr. Demeanor's music has taken him around the world, he is an essential part of Calgary's spoken word, theatre and music communities, creating music and words for numerous award-winning projects. The expertise and inspiration he has provided for students and teachers over the years is highly valued.

A typical collaboration with Mr. Demeanor is structured as follows:

- We plan our project in September, at the start of the school year. This allows us to lay the groundwork with the students before the artist comes to the classroom. This can include reading a novel, writing down responses to the novel, in-class discussion and concept-building lessons (e.g., what influences decision making, injustice, equity and equality, etc.), as well as inquiring into various stories and events that make up history, and finally, helping students with their own research and pieces of writing.
- Mr. Demeanor will plan to spend about six hours in the classroom on six different occasions over the course of several weeks. He will also collaborate with the students in putting together an exhibition of their work, if one is planned.
- When in the classroom, Mr. Demeanor will share his own work, i.e. various spoken word pieces and songs. He will work directly with students to gather their ideas, and then he and the students will turn it into a spoken word piece. He will also work with smaller groups of students and individual students as needed. At the end of the collaboration, we will put it all together into a showcase with group spoken word pieces and individual student work.

We concede that working with artists in the classroom disrupts the flow of teaching, albeit in the right direction. We have always felt the need to move away from too many disconnected, contradictory and hit-and-miss approaches to educational reform, towards a more committed approach to something in which we truly believe. The process of infusing the curriculum with the spirit of the arts changes both what we study in school and how we study it. As teachers we seek not to train but to educate, to produce young people who ask questions and who can continue to learn throughout life.

For our most recent collaboration with Mr. Demeanor, he worked directly with students to gather their ideas and turn them into three different spoken word pieces based on significant stories in Canada's history: the Underground Railway, the internment of Japanese Canadians and the evacuation of children from England to Canada during World War II.

In conjunction with this artistic collaboration, students examined the impact of certain historical events in Canada on their understanding of their individual and collective lives. Some of the essential questions that they wrestled with include:

- What makes us unique?
- What does it mean to be truly Canadian?
- What are the truths in our history, and how does that impact us today?
- What do we have to say about what we know?

The Importance of Voice

It has been suggested that Canada as a postnational state can be understood as one where we move away from the history of Canada's French and British colonial contributions in favour of acknowledging and valuing immigration and diversity. This leads to another question: Can we affirm cultural diversity while still valuing Canada's history, traditions, and principles?

Should our history and traditions occupy a central role in defining who we are? Or, should our focus be on what our current prime minister thinks are core values that all Canadians share: openness, respect, compassion, a willingness to work hard, to be there for each other and a quest for equality and justice?

Maybe, what is most important is that all Canadians have a voice in how we see ourselves and what we want to become. With mounting problems in our country and in our world, and the growing sense that we need to innovate in order to address both human needs and the future of our planet, students need opportunities to discover their own voices, to develop their passions and to become collaborative creators ready to tackle the world's most complex challenges.

The arts can develop that voice.

Art is innovation. Artists have something to say, whether it is in relationship to culture, politics, identity or beauty. Some artists see themselves as activists, with a message to society, thinking about how their work will influence certain changes.

As part of the work in a combined Grade 5/6 classroom, students had much to say on the topic of sharing one's voice. What follows is a sampling of their responses:

- When a voice is not heard, what happens is a possibly important or impactful idea may go to waste.
- We share our voice because we want to share our emotions and opinions. It is important to do that because that feat helps us shape a better world.
- If we don't share our voice, we can't make an impact.
- When you hear other people's voices, you can hear other people's opinions on things.
- It's important to share your voice because it may offer a solution.
- When a person's voice is heard, it can start a debate.

Students also commented on what happens when voices are not heard: 'Sadly, not being heard happens on a daily basis ... [I]t has happened to everyone ... [T]his can cause anger ...'

Voice, Art and Postnationalism

The importance of understanding ourselves by examining our history is an anchoring belief of many Canadians. Those who espouse this point of view suggest that one way we can understand our nation's diverse past is by telling stories that illuminate the people, places and events that define us as Canadians. Others suggest that it is more important to look to the future, to define what it is we want to become.

When presented with the statement, 'It is necessary to study the past in order to understand what it means to be Canadian today', student ideas also reflected on different points of view:

- We can be Canadian without sameness. We value diversity. Maybe we don't have to study the past to know who we are today. What we do now is who we are.
- Studying the past shapes what it means to be Canadian. We can learn from the past in order to be a different country today. History helps us understand our collective identity.

Recently, in another one of our classroom exercises, students began their journey to find their voice by looking at photographs printed from the Internet, photographs that reflected the hardships that Canadians of Japanese descent faced after the bombing of Pearl Harbour in 1941. Much speculation took place as to who these unknown people were and how they fit into Canadian history. Students then read the novel *Heart of a Champion* by Ellen Schwartz (2016), about a young Japanese boy whose life changes drastically when war comes to his Vancouver community: schools are closed, businesses are confiscated, fathers are arrested and sent to work camps, and mothers and children are relocated to internment camps.

It was very clear that the students who had read this novel had something to say about this event in Canadian history. Students easily identified significant moments within the narrative, as well as suggesting various perspectives, which all came together in a powerful spoken word piece about the internment of Japanese Canadians.

Students also investigated other stories in Canadian history that they thought needed telling in addition to the one they had encountered as a class. Their challenge was twofold: to decide what significant story they wanted to tell and then figure out how they wanted to tell it. Many decided to take on the challenge of spoken word, inspired by some of Mr. Demeanor's own pieces that he shared with the class. Others decided to write a script or a poem, or to represent their ideas through visual art. All of their work culminated in a final sharing with the school community via an evening performance for parents and families.

Mr. Demeanor speaks about the work:

"I've been writing poems and songs with children in Calgary's public schools for twenty five years, and as an artist it's been one of the most rewarding parts of my career. I am always being plunged back into a realm of pure imagination and abandon that the young mind is so attuned to. The humour, earnestness and hopefulness always on display is nourishing to me, and I always feel as though they are learning and exploring their creative instincts in a way that only art can manifest. I enjoy the partnerships with teachers - helping to realize ideas and blend fact and fun with important themes of living ethically and compassionately. I hope to always have opportunities to bring creative language and music to schools that value the arts."
(2020, pers. comm.)

Working with Mr. Demeanor has had a profound effect on student thinking. They have learned how to make a story interesting by focusing on a significant moment and adding detail and emotion. They have also learned about expressing their own ideas and opinions so that others can hear what they have to say, because that is what Mr. Demeanor does. As one student reflected:

“His point of view is to help us understand and learn about Canada’s history and important stories, landmarks and things. His piece about Crowfoot showed the injustice and unfair treatment of the people here before us. And even though it’s not a good part, it is part of our history as Canadians.”

As part of their journey to find and share their voice, the same group of Grade 5/6 students who commented on the internment of Japanese Canadians in the past commented on their vision of what Canada should be moving forward. The following are some aspects of that vision:

- Not relying on oil so much
- Giving people more help
- Keeping our free health care
- Protecting our environment and wildlife
- Diversity
- The right to have an opinion
- A safe environment for people who have had a hard life
- A strong community
- I hope that people can change for our country — that racism stops
- Canada is and always will be a happy, joyful place. In the future I think it will be too. We all need to be grateful for everything we have.
- I think that Canada should be a country that looks into the past to learn from previous missteps to become a better place. Canada should be a safe place, a place that people come to because it’s safe. A place where everyone gets a fair chance at life.
- Canada should allow rights and freedoms and equality, no matter what gender or race or religion you are. We should value the fact that we are diverse. In 100 years, I hope that doesn’t change. We should be proud to call ourselves Canadians.

Their ideas reflect the theme of the core values that Canadians share, but also reflect a need to know our country’s history.

In Canada, some artists’ work goes beyond borders and is universal, but also represents us as a society of questioning, vital people. History has proven that such societies bloom into centers of creative art. These are the freethinking places with an acceptance of immigrants and minorities. It is only when ideas can flow freely across racial and religious lines that connections can be fostered and not suppressed.

The goal of our work with Mr. Demeanor was for students to find and share their unique voice: to choose to communicate from their personal experience or the experiences of others, and to recognize and appreciate the role of story, narrative and oral tradition in expressing perspectives, values, beliefs and points of view.

The exploration of text and story has deepened our understanding of diverse, complex ideas about identity, both individual and collective. We understand that language and art shape ideas and influence others. They give us a voice. Let's use that voice to decide who we are now and who we want to be.