Humanitarian Visual Culture Curriculum: An Action Research

Study Summary Report

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Facing world situations with an accelerating rate of violence and natural disaster, and living in an interdependent world that is deeply divided politically, economically, and culturally, this dissertation aims to find the most intellectually responsible way to address the idea of humanitarianism in/through art education.

I argue for creating a reverential condition in which to study atrocious images. I suggest that art education can have a unique role to address spectatorship of suffering in order to open humanitarian space in an educational setting. This research study is an educational action research initiative with a critical edge. The key implication is art education can be an important site for social justice, civic engagement, and world peace. Art educators can take the initiative to coalesce around pressing global issues through an integrated curriculum.

In this report, I highlight the research objectives, rationale, and significance of this research study.

Research objectives

This dissertation is situated in the context of art education curriculum development with the inclusion of social and cultural concerns as the core. It is an effort to reconceptualize art education. The significance has two aspects: to address one of the structural reasons that

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hinder the arts becoming a valuable part of integrated curriculum (Stuhr, 2003) and to foreground the shift of the field from traditional fine arts disciplines to visual culture (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004).

In addition, this dissertation aims to develop a model for humanitarian education that 1) reaches out to a significant number of undergraduate students coming from a variety of backgrounds with diverse academic interests, 2) engages visual culture that addresses the most pressing issues against humanity today, and 3) inquires into the complexities of the matters of life and death with humanitarian concerns.

This mission is guided by three interrelated reasons. First, it is a personal commitment to bring global disparity into sharp focus through education. Second, it is an art educator’s response to the anti-war photography of James Nachtwey. Nachtwey is a renowned contemporary photojournalist who positions himself as a mediator between those who are voiceless in this unjust world and those distant viewers who have the capacity to take action (Nachtwey, 2007). Third, it is a hands-on practice of a social reconstructionist multicultural curriculum, based on my five years of experience teaching Ethnic Arts: A Means of Intercultural Communication at The Ohio State University.

Drawing on the abovementioned conceptual and practical dimensions, my primary research question is:

How can I envision a visual culture curriculum that maximizes the positive educational value of Nachtwey’s anti-war photography in order to cultivate care ethics that may lead to the promotion of humanitarian education?

This research study is an educational action research initiative with a critical edge. I create a curriculum maximizing the positive educational value of spectatorship of suffering. My goal is to cultivate care ethics that will promote humanitarian education.

Rationale

The theoretical foundation of this curriculum has five dimensions: 1) identify with the victims (Nachtwey, 2007), 2) address that the lack of equity is a determined political choice (Orbinski, 2009), 3) create a reverential condition in which one looks at atrocious images
(Sontag, 2003), 4) cultivate relational ethic of caring (Noddings, 2010), and 5) support social reconstructionist multicultural art education (Ballengee Morris & Stuhr, 2001).

These five dimensions are drawn from: James Nachtwey’s photography, critical social theory, humanitarianism, general education, and art education. Nachtwey’s photography and critical social theory are discussed together. I first highlight three projects by Nachtwey: the aftermath of the Rwandan Genocide (1994), the displaced people of the Darfur conflict (2004), and extensively drug-resistant TB patients (2008). I then provide the theoretical frameworks that help unravel the political forces acting on the suffering human bodies, which are designated to be killed, displaced, and diseased. The critical social theories are employed by one clinician/ethnographer (Karnik, 1998), one anthropologist (Malkki, 1995), and two medical anthropologists (Nguyen & Peschard, 2003).

Humanitarianism is discussed in order to discern humanitarian action in the midst of the complicated nature of humanitarianism. The analytical frameworks that help unravel interrelated concepts such as compassion, solidarity, military humanitarianism, humanity, and human rights are employed by one humanitarian doctor (Orbinski, 2009), two political scientists (Barnett & Weiss, 2008b), and one law professor (Douzinas, 2007).

General education contributes to the practice of global justice. The analytical frameworks that help untangle interrelated concepts such as war, war photography, image-based culture, representation of suffering, spectatorship, sympathy, and moral identity are employed by author and activist (Sontag, 1977 & 2003) and educator and philosopher (Noddings, 2010 & 2007).

Art education can be an important site for social justice, civic engagement, and world peace. The pedagogical approaches that help develop a social reconstructionist multicultural curriculum in which war photographs are examined and care ethics are implemented are employed by four art educators (Knight, 2009; Barrett, 2010; Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001).

The critical aspect of this curriculum is to open a humanitarian space through a spectatorship of suffering. It is an educational action research initiative with a critical edge. This position is drawn from six educators and researchers. The study itself is a social practice deriving from the critical view of participatory action research (Kemmis, 2005, 2006, & 2009;
McTaggart, 2005). It also relies on a practical assessment framework (Elliott, 2007) and a curriculum development model (Stringer, 2007; Henderson, Hawthorne, & Stollenwerk, 2000).

The practical application of this research study is to provide a feasible curriculum framework for future development. I break down my primary research question into four interrelated questions in order to lay out how this curriculum was designed, implemented, and evaluated. The four interrelated questions are:

- Question 1: What are the outcomes of the curriculum implementation?
- Question 2: How can the positive educational value of Nachtwey’s anti-war photography be maximized?
- Question 3: How is care ethics cultivated in this curriculum?
- Question 4: How can visual culture curriculum promote humanitarian education?

These four questions guide the data collection process based on three sets of data: 1) student assignments, 2) student course evaluation, and 3) James Nachtwey Survey.

**Significance of the Study**

This research study has reached several conclusions about the promise of a humanitarian visual culture curriculum.

The learning outcomes:

- Students appreciate the course as it covers controversial and important issues around the world, including themes such as war, violence, and peace and topics such as human rights, humanity, and global ethics.
- Students appreciate the knowledge gained and foresee the future applications of this knowledge, enabling them to act and think as global citizens.
- Students acquire an attitude change, being able to see things from other people’s perspectives, especially gaining knowledge of war while living in peace.

The positive educational value of Nachtwey’s anti-war photography:

- Students’ responses toward war photography are multi-faceted, falling within four categories: descriptive, explanatory, interpretative, and ethical evaluative.
- Atrocious images are less likely to be viewed as aesthetic objects if discussion is guided by a well-designed curriculum.
• Students do not realize that there are many sufferings happening in the world. They show an interest in knowing more and ask important questions when properly informed.
• Students acquire understanding and research skills to apply concepts such as differences, visibility, representation, humanity, human rights, and humanitarianism in their assignments.

Cultivating care ethics:

• Students are not familiar with topics such as war, violence, and peace. Yet, they deliver deep personal reflection if guided by a well-designed curriculum.
• Caring relations can be cultivated. Some cultural events provoke strong personal investment. Through cultural events such as an art exhibition addressing the traumatizing experiences from war veterans, students experience caring relations.
• Caring relations can be reinforced. Students tend to respond in caring ways if they have experienced caring relations, putting aside their own values and trying to understand the expressed needs of the cared-for.

Promoting humanitarian education:

• Students acquire in-depth inquiries of concepts such as rights, equity, and justice and recognize differences, defined as inequalities supporting the domination of some and subjection of others.
• Through studying visual culture such as a photo essay addressing the on-going medical harm to war victims due to chemical weapons, students engage intellectually with moral insights on how victims are politically marginalized.

Findings indicate that this curriculum is a challenging yet promising educational action research initiative. Creating spectatorship of suffering is intimately intertwined with the notion of opening humanitarian space.

In addition, this research study has suggested several directions for the future development of this curriculum. Findings indicate that both the student’s personal experiences and the contextual information presented by the instructor play critical roles in constructing a student’s understanding of humanitarian issues.

Students’ personal experiences:
• Personal experiences are deeply embedded in our ways of seeing.
• The extent to which students make the most meaningful response to certain humanitarian issues is closely related to how they can make the most personal moral connection to their own lives.

Contextual information presented by instructor:
• Assignment design and course structure play critical roles in expanding students’ capacity to explore ethical issues involved in humanitarian dilemmas.
• Students acquire the ability to develop an in-depth inquiry on the failure of humanity, including recognizing the limits of humanitarianism.
• Broader contextual information is needed in order to equip students to develop valid standpoints on humanitarian issues.
• Legal knowledge becomes a prominent component. Likewise, there is an increasing demand for knowledge of other disciplines including history, political science, international relations, sociology, religion, medicine, etc.

Art education can be an important site for social justice, civic engagement, and world peace by opening humanitarian space through creating spectatorship of suffering. In order to enable a sustainable growth of this humanitarian space, continued efforts to nurture spectatorship is critical. I propose three key directions for research and policy:

• Direction 1: Acknowledging our moral constitution as co-spectators of far away suffering
• Direction 2: Facilitating an in-depth inquiry on the failure of humanity
• Direction 3: Coalescing around global humanitarian issues through an interdisciplinary approach

This research study is one of the first to create a humanitarian space in/through art education. Art educators can take the initiative to coalesce around pressing global issues through an integrated curriculum. This research study is a modest attempt to take up the challenges and address the opportunities ahead.
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