Using Arts-Based Identity Exploration Activities to Foster Students’ Increased Understanding of and Empathy for Self and Others

Kathleen McMichael Goodyear
Ohio State University, USA

ABSTRACT

In these divisive times, it is more important than ever that education provide holistic ways for students to increase their understanding of and empathy for both themselves and others. Arts-based identity exploration activities involving students’ creative expression and sharing with one another can serve as powerful pedagogical tools in many different types of educational programs at the elementary, secondary/high school, and college levels, including in general education social justice courses, student life programs, and teacher education, social work, counseling, premed, and other helping-profession programs. Engaging in these activities can promote students’ increased awareness, understanding, and empathy both within themselves and with students of similar and differing cultural groups. Students’ emerging sense of self-worth, belonging, and being heard can also foster a sense of community in the classroom.

In this article, I first discuss the in-class dissertation research project I conducted during my arts education PhD program at the Ohio State University during the spring 2016 semester. I then provide examples of how other educators have used arts-based inquiry in their teaching. In conclusion, I propose additional ways in which arts-based inquiry can be used to deepen and enhance students’ educational experiences.
Using Arts-Based Identity Exploration Activities to Foster Students’ Increased Understanding of and Empathy for Self and Others

Kathleen McMichael Goodyear

Using Arts-Based Inquiry Pedagogy in the Social Justice Classroom

I have witnessed how arts-based inquiry activities can serve as powerful pedagogical tools in the social justice classroom to facilitate students’ identity exploration. Not only do students gain greater insights into the multifold layers of their own identities, but in sharing what they learned, they feel heard and valued as members of the classroom community. I feel that that is a value in and of itself. But I have also seen that engaging in arts-based inquiry helps students open up and be willing to engage mentally and empathetically with the experiences of people unlike themselves, not only fellow students but also people in marginalized groups whose voices we hear in the curricular material and whose works of creative expression we study, who are striving for their rights, dignity, and ability to thrive in their families, cultural communities, and societies.

Indeed, the multicultural educators Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant in their book Making Choices for Multicultural Education: Five Approaches to Race, Class, and Gender describe their fifth and most advanced approach, multicultural social justice education, also known as critical social justice education, in this way:

- Multicultural Social Justice educators view learning as active, social, and inextricably entwined with identity development. . . . They see learning as a process of constructing knowledge through the interaction of mind and experience.

- Advocates of Multicultural Social Justice Education recommend that schooling help students analyze their own lives in order to develop their practical consciousness about real injustices in society and to develop constructive responses.

This is the framework underpinning the Ohio State undergraduate general education course “Visual Culture: Investigating Diversity and Social Justice,” which I taught for four semesters during my arts education PhD program. The course first leads students in exploring what culture is and in what ways various dimensions of culture—personal, family, relationships, school, larger cultural groups, and society—have influenced their own identity. Then we discuss dominant and non-dominant cultures, stereotypes, privilege, prejudice, and structural inequities. Next, students study the histories of civil and social rights struggles in the United States. Finally, students explore cultural stereotypes as expressed in movies, television, advertising, and social media.

As those of us in the US know well, today’s conservative attack on critical race theory and teaching so-called divisive concepts includes conservatives’ saying that they do not want students made to feel uncomfortable. This is code for not wanting students from dominant groups to feel uncomfortable—Whites, males, Protestants, middle- and upper-class students, et al. They ignore the fact that students from historically oppressed groups frequently do feel uncomfortable. And, frankly, studying accurate US history should make everyone feel uncomfortable. However, I have seen that students’ engaging in arts-based identity exploration activities can foster their sense of belonging and being respected, regardless of their cultural...
groups, and that they then are open to enlarging their understanding of and empathy for the experiences of others without feeling personally guilty for what they themselves did not cause. It is also my aim and hope that this two-pronged approach of experiential identity exploration and exploring history through the curricular material equips them with the knowledge and desire to take responsibility to become active citizens collaborating with others to help solve societal problems.

At the urging of the course supervisor, Dr. Christine Ballengee Morris, who also served as my advisor and dissertation committee chair, I conducted my arts-based inquiry dissertation research project in class during spring 2016, the last semester I taught the course. All fifty students chose to participate (two sections of twenty-five students). All were traditional-age undergraduates, that is, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. They included both American and international students of various racial and ethnic ancestries, and they included sophomores, juniors, and seniors from a wide range of majors across campus.

The course already included making a self-portrait and a personal cultural identity map and writing a personal cultural identity narrative (their life story from a cultural perspective). This time, I used eight arts-based activities. Some activities were done alone, while others were done with partners. Then, as time allowed, students shared with each other in class what they had written/created and what they had learned about themselves and other people in their lives. After each activity, students wrote reflections on their process and what they learned about themselves and others, and they also completed a short mixed-methods post-activity questionnaire assessing the effectiveness of the activity and providing suggestions for improvement. I also conducted ten follow-up interviews at the end of the semester.

First, students created self-portraits and wrote an accompanying artist’s statement (fig. 1). This activity helped them unpack how they themselves had already experienced dimensions of culture growing up.

4. For an in-depth discussion of the research project, see Goodyear, ch. 8 and appendix A, 170–362 and 418–49. For examples of students’ creative work, see appendix B, 450–93. For examples of students’ comments, see appendices C and D, 494–591.
Here are a couple of sample comments from the students’ post-activity questionnaires:

• “After seeing the whole collage together you realize how many different cultural groups you are a part of and how they have affected your life and shaping you as a person. This activity made you sit there and think of what things/people really reflect[ ] who/how you are.”

• “Where I come from, I feel like I wasn’t a very cultured individual, but comparing my lifestyle to others in my class, I can really tell that my life is completely different from others. The culture I grew up in may not have been as strong as the others, but I realize that I did grow up in a certain culture where we do things different than other cultures. We eat different foods, are interested in different things, and much more. This helped me understand myself as an individual in the way that I want to be perceived by my classmates.”

Second, students created a personal cultural identity map. This time, rather than drawing a simple diagram, I had them base their 2D maps and 3D mobiles (figs. 2 and 3) on the Model of
Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) formulated by Susan Jones, a prominent college-student identity development scholar. Students noted their personal core identities, cultural identities, factors in their immediate environment, and how they are viewed by the dominant society in terms of privilege and difference.

Here are two sample comments from their post-activity questionnaires:

• “The Phase 1 2D Identity Map made me think a little bit deeper about how I would categorize my culture. Initially, before I really understood what culture was, I would have probably said that I didn’t have much culture. Now I know that is far from true. On my Identity Map, I included 7 important [cultural] aspects of what makes me who I am today.”

• “I felt that I learned a great deal about myself through this activity because I had never really sat down and ranked the core values that are important to me. This activity allowed...
me to take time to sit down and think about what is really important to me. I also found it interesting to listen to what everyone else had placed close to their core and what they placed further away because everyone had different ways of ranking what is important to them. And some people ranked things I did not even think to rank.”

Third, each student created a “My Life’s Musical Playlist” of five to ten songs that had deeply impacted them, and then they wrote a reflection on the roles the songs had played in their lives, including as bonding agents with parents, siblings, friends, and school mates. This is an adaptation of an activity that the educator Steven Aragon discussed at the 2015 International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. Here are three particularly poignant excerpts from their reflections:

- “I played this song [Darius Rucker’s “It Won’t Be Like This for Long’] for my senior year slideshow at my graduation party and it brought tears to my eyes. After I made my slideshow and was listening to the lyrics, it made me step back and look at my life. I realized in that moment that I was graduating, moving away from home and never seeing my childhood friends again. This one hit home for me and I thought about my parents and how much they did for me growing up. I definitely would not be where I am in life if it wasn’t for them.”

- “‘You Should Be Here’ by Cole Swindell . . . describes my life quite perfectly lately. This summer I lost my best friend to Leukemia. It is hard going on each day and not having her there to share life experiences with. It does not seem fair and sometimes makes me feel guilty. I connect perfectly with this song and it evokes how I feel on a day-to-day basis.”

- A Sri Lankan American student wrote: “I came to America when I was at the very young age of 5. It wasn’t an easy transition for me at first. Songs 8-9 [‘No Way Out’ and ‘Nothing Stopping Me,’ both by Vicetone] kind of represent that time period in my life for me. Song 8 is more of the sadder version where I felt kind of trapped and that I wouldn’t be able to make it, but I eventually got stronger and built up a ‘persevering’ attitude to push through, which song 9 represents. This never-give-up mentality is something that is still instilled in me to this very day. Being able to come to America I believe is one of the best things to ever happen to me in my very short life because all my accomplishments and achievements would all be null and void if I didn’t have the chance to come here. With that being said, not being back to my roots in so long has me kind of missing home. Especially when I hear about how all my cousins and family have all gone back and visited, yet I still haven’t. Songs 1-3 [‘Time’ by Mikky Ekko, ‘Bloodstream’ by Stateless, and ‘Come Home’ by OneRepublic] kind of capture this kind of sad, homesick feeling I sometimes get.”

Fourth, students wrote their personal cultural identity narratives expressing their life’s story. Students really put their hearts into these narratives, and I found them quite moving. Here is an excerpt from an African American student’s narrative, which he entitled “My Journey to 20”:

“I am who I am today because a 32-year-old single mother of three did not give up. To begin to describe what makes me, me, I have to start with who has inspired me since day one. My mother had her first child at the age of 20. Being 20 currently I could not fathom raising a child and then having another child a year later. Fast forward ten years to her final son being born, me. To say the least, the odds were not in our favor. Now I must
answer the question, How [has] my mother inspired me? My mother never allowed my brothers or me to feel we were at a disadvantage. She allowed us to play all sports, attended all of our games, and put us in a great school district. Her inspiration does not stop there. While also working full time at the age of 40 she graduated from the University of Cincinnati with a master’s in criminal justice. Her three sons would all go onto college with academic scholarships. One son having already achieved his master’s in education. To answer the question of who I am or who I want to be, I would be lucky to be a fraction of the person my mom is. She has put me in the position I am today to be successful[,] the least I can do is give my children the same opportunity. I begin with this because I feel the cultures that have become a part of my life would not be there if not for the foundation my mother laid. . . .

Success in my eye is not viewed [as] a monetary or materialistic accomplishment. Success for me comes from accomplishing academically all that I strive to do. I view success as putting those around me in the position to reach the goals they desire. Who am I? I am the youngest son of a single mother of three. I am an academic scholar. I am the president of my fraternity. I am a person who is not perfect but seeks to better himself with the mindset that my goals are possible.

Students’ comments on the post-activity questionnaire included:

• “It made me think through the experiences of my whole life to sift my experiences into three pages, which was extremely hard. It made me think about my core life experiences to share with others.”

• “This activity definitely made think about where I stand in the certain groups I am in. It opened my eyes to my past and how over time my experiences in these similar groups shifted, some more drastically and others gradual. . . . I honestly enjoyed writing this paper a lot.”

• “I really enjoyed this assignment. I enjoyed how I could express my feelings on a subject that I never have spoken about before [being harassed growing up for attending a Catholic school]. I was able to understand why I was different, instead of always categorizing myself as ordinary or basic. Culture is all around us and it is not just defined as skin color. This assignment helped me to see that.”

Fifth, students had a choice of writing a poem, a short story (fiction or nonfiction), or song lyrics. While some students were unfamiliar with doing creative writing and expressed some uncertainty, they gave it their best effort, and I found many of their works moving and even stunning. Here is an example short story by a Syrian American student:

A young girl wakes up, wide-eyed and ready for the day. She looks outside, greeted by the blue sky and the sounds of yogurt carts. This girl is my mother, the woman I look up to; the one who I call my best friend. This girl wakes up 30 years ago, to the light-hearted mornings of her Syrian town. The aroma of fresh hummus and Moroccan tea, encasing her home, filling her senses. Her father calls to her, she runs to him, greeted with good-morning kisses. This is my mother’s bliss.

25 years later, this girl, now woman, wakes up. She looks to her window and sees destruction—gone are the bustling food carts and bright smiles. Gone is the scent of Arabian culture. My mother looks to her window and sees her home, her childhood memories—all disintegrated. Her family scattered across the globe, her father's
My mother wakes up in the United States—lively and safe, but far from bliss. Torn apart by revolution, her heart and soul.

10 years ago, I look over at my window, greeted by the sun and a traffic-stricken road. I walk downstairs and run to my dad, the house smelling of warm pancakes and fresh coffee. I look to my sisters and we begin to dance around the house. This was my bliss.

Hoping my own country does not betray me like hers did.

Comments on the post-activity questionnaires included:

• “This activity had me writing the first poem that I have written since somewhere around the eighth grade. . . . It helped me better understand myself as an individual as I don’t normally take time to evaluate my emotions very often. This allowed me to take time to write down those feelings. . . . I liked the activity, specifically the options given to us.”

• “I think it made me think more deeply about being a sister and what type of words or phrases reflect our relationship. . . . I liked the openness of this activity and the multiple routes you could take with it.”

• “This activity allowed me to reflect on how I have changed due to being a part of an unfamiliar culture.”

• “Writing this poem really hits me hard. . . . I realized that I’m a lot angrier about this when writing this. It really helped me blow off some steam and think of this situation in a sort of different perspective. . . . This activity definitely helped me have better understanding of myself in a bad situation that I am in with my boyfriend right now. It helped me realize how I deeply feel about what is going on between us two. . . . This paper was a great assignment!”

In addition, two people in follow-up interviews shared with me that their experience writing poetry showed them how powerful a healing tool poetry writing can be and that they continued writing poetry on their own after completing the assignment. In fact, one said that she shared the assignment instructions with a friend who was going through a challenging time and said, “Here, do this—it helped me!”

Sixth, each student, with a partner, created and performed reader’s-theater style, sitting on bar stools in front of the class, a duoethnographic script in which they explored the similarities and differences in their life experiences from cultural standpoints. Even though this was late in the semester, by which point students felt they knew each another pretty well, they learned a lot more about their classmates through this activity. In class and in their post-activity questionnaires, they expressed surprise and delight to discover that some students with seemingly different backgrounds shared experiences in common, and those with seemingly similar backgrounds had some distinctively different motivations and experiences. Other comments included:

• “Overall, I think this activity probably best helped me understand my classmates out of any of the activities we have done thus far. I really enjoyed listening to the different topics and
backgrounds of where each student came from and what influenced them most.”

- “For me, this exercise stressed the importance of taking the time to find out about other people’s backgrounds and cultures. While everyone came from different areas, especially the international students, everyone was able to find commonalities. This ability to empathize with other people and where they are coming from helps us to see the humanity in others, when otherwise we might have categorized them as different from us. Talking about similarities and differences between cultures also helped me to further examine my own identity, because I had to identify the certain aspects of my background that I found important enough to share. . . . In addition, performing the duoethnography was a beneficial experience, because it is enjoyable to share with other people where you come from and what has made you who you are today, because that type of sharing situation is a rare occurrence.”

Seventh, students in pairs first participated in a warm-up activity and then in a “Body as Metaphor” body-sculpting activity in which they sculpted a metaphor for themselves (“I am a _____”) using their partner’s body as clay. I had previously participated in this activity at a 2015 International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry workshop led by theater educator and arts-based researcher Tamy Spry. This activity was not successful overall with my undergraduate students; many had never participated in a somatic activity like this and became silly and unfocused. Still, several students reported gaining personal insights from it, including one with whom I worked individually after he had had to miss class that day. One student commented on the post-activity questionnaire:

- “It was definitely very interesting because there was so much grey area when it came to molding the body. It could appear as anything! But I learned a lot as I put a water bottle under [his partner] and created a bridge. It was different but it worked! . . . Upon my reflection, I have never done something like this before so it was very cool and unique to have participated in this activity. We warmed up which really got me a lot more engaged and it was fun to try and guess what I was sculpted into as well as how I was going to make my sculpture. I had a hard time choosing three things which was very surprising, when I had to think on the spot I could not! But eventually the ideas came to me and I was able to think of something that I thought I was and used, which was a bridge. Connecting people and ideas, as well as a sign of hope and something more!”

Based on my own experience with body-sculpting and similar activities, I know how powerful they can be. I would do this activity again with students, but I would make a point of discussing it more fully beforehand, and I would also ask a friend or two to help facilitate the activity with me to help students remain focused.

Eighth and last, each student created a shadow box diorama expressing their hopes and dreams (fig. 4). My advisor dubbed them “dream boxes.” I was inspired to create this activity by the shadow boxes of the artist Joseph Cornell. It was amazing to watch students in both classes go into “the zone,” “the flow,” while making their boxes. On the post-activity questionnaires, this activity, “My Life’s Musical Playlist,” and the duoethnographic reader’s-theater activity received the most votes as students’ favorites.
Sample comments from their questionnaires:

• This comment was from the student who created the top-left box above—he was studying accounting and dreamed of working in London: “This activity was an opportunity for me to think about where I see myself in the next five to ten years. The hands on learning aspect made the project more enjoyable versus having to write a paper on where I see myself in the future. Having to create something forced me to think a little more of what my dreams truly were and how could I illustrate those dreams with this box. It forced me to really think and when I put those dreams in the box it brought some realness and possibility to the dreams. In my mind I have had the thought that I one day want to work and live in London one day. So for the box I looked up a picture of the city and placed it as part of my background. This allowed me to sort of see myself in the city. Thinking about dreams such as these is a surreal experience because it is actually possible that they could happen.” (Since this course, not only did he graduate with his BA in accounting, but he subsequently completed his accounting MA, both at Ohio State.)

• A student who wanted to become a physician wrote: “I thoroughly enjoyed this activity, as I created my dream desk tag, labeled ‘Dr. [his last name].’ I am an aspiring physician, but have never done something like this. It was unique because for a little while I got to envision myself as successful, feel what it was like to have that nametag. I actually felt proud for a brief bit, but then I had to come back to reality. It actually served a motivation however, that day I studied very hard! I really believe that in order to achieve your dream and be successful, it is first important to envision yourself as successful. Take a step back and dream about yourself being in the spot that you are striving for. That is exactly what this project was and it was fantastic!” (This student is now completing his medical residency at the Cleveland Clinic.)

At the end of the semester, I asked students to complete the end-of-semester questionnaire,
which entailed responding to the same two-part question they had responded to in the beginning-of-semester questionnaire:

Do you feel that arts activities (including narrative and creative writing) can help you and other 18- to 24-year-old undergraduates further understand and develop your identities? If so, what activities do you think would be helpful and in what ways?

Not surprisingly, they had a lot more to say about this after having completed the activities. For example:

• “Arts activities . . . are an important experience for an undergraduate. We need to understand who we are before we decide what we are going to be doing for the rest of our lives. Our minds are at a fragile state and not many people truly understand who they are. They think that stereotypes define them and in this class they will learn that this is not true.”

• “The ages of 18 to 24 is a very important age range where students are still figuring out what they want to do and what their passions are. Up until college students are living with their parents in most situations and have a very structured schedule. In addition to this, many of the activities we do are influenced by our parents. When this age range leaves home and starts to be on their own they have the freedom to develop their own schedules and do activities that are of their own choosing. This is often the first time where some people really truly have their own choice in doing what they want to do. Experiencing a variety of activities is important to developing who we are and understanding who we are.

• “The art activities that w[ere] done in this course helped me understand that even though it looks like I belong in certain culture groups that I am not defined by these groups. I can be parts of certain groups and then be parts of completely different groups at the sa[me] time. The activities also showed that looking at someone and making assumptions about them based on a stereotype often does not actuall[y] reflect who they are. Just because they fit a certain stereotype does not mean they represent the values that stereotype has.”

After the course was over, I analyzed the qualitative and quantitative data from students’ written output, post-activity questionnaires, and follow-up interviews thematically and by student demographics and majors. Of the fifty students, one dropped the course part-way through, so forty-nine completed the full set of activities; an average of forty-seven students completed each post-activity questionnaire. The median on the five-point Likert scale responses to “I learned a lot about myself” was a 4 (“Agree”) on seven out of the eight activities, with the outlier being the body-sculpting activity. The median for “I learned a lot about being a member of various cultural groups” for all but body-sculpting was a 3.5 (between “Neutral” and “Agree”); I expected this to be a bit lower because for the poem/short story/song lyrics activity, I gave students the option to focus on whatever they felt the need to focus on, whether or not it involved cultural groups.

I was surprised to discover that the medians on both questions for students not majoring in the arts or humanities—STEM, business, health care, forestry, etc. (n=42 after the one student dropped out)—was consistently higher than the medians on both questions for the arts and humanities students (n=7). Several students in these non-arts/humanities majors shared with me
that prior to this course, they had been given no opportunities whatsoever in college to reflect on who they were as people and what their aspirations were in life. I suspect that that was because they were in vocationally oriented majors. They expressed gratitude that they finally had a chance to do this.

I analyzed the qualitative data using various college student development, transformative learning, and multicultural social justice education theories. Their written reflections evidenced many instances of developmental growth, transformative learning, and increased self-awareness and cultural sensitivity. One student, who is currently finishing up his dentistry program at Ohio State, told me that the course and the activities were a "life-changer." I was particularly gratified that he said this—he is an American of South Asian ancestry, and even though he was born and raised in the US, he has long had to deal with being "othered." Even though coming into the course he was already sensitized to issues of identity, he still found the course and further exploring his and others' identities transformational.

Other Examples of Pedagogical Uses of Arts-Based Inquiry

Other educators are also using these types of activities with their students. For example, in a workshop I attended during the 2016 Original Lilly Conference on College Teaching at Miami University of Ohio, graduate students involved in the Miami teacher education program demonstrated how they use Augusto Boal’s Image Theatre activities from his Theatre of the Oppressed participatory inquiry techniques to foster students’ exploration and sharing of their experiences growing up in the educational system. One of the graduate students also proudly showed us a large piece of kraft paper on which she had artistically depicted her personal journey into teaching.

At the Pennsylvania State University, Lisa La Jevic and Stephanie Springgay use visual journaling with their preservice elementary education students. They explain that “we introduced visual journals into this course as a way for students to engage in living research and to develop an embodied and relational understanding between self and other.”

Also at Penn State, Kimberly Powell has used Boal’s Image Theatre exercises with her graduate students to facilitate explorations of their conceptions of democracy. Her students then recreated their image tableaux in public areas on campus and engaged undergraduate students passing by in exploring their conceptions of democracy as well.

Joe Norris, who is a Canadian arts-based researcher who has taught theater in education at the University of Alberta and Brock University in Ontario, has developed an interactive method called playbuilding, based in part on Boal’s interactive Theatre of the Oppressed techniques. Through engaging in the playbuilding process, university students, members of his troupe, and others collaboratively devise vignettes exploring the various aspects of community issues; they then present the scenes to audiences, inviting audience members to actively participate as well.

Norris explains:

Mirror Theatre, throughout its 25-year history, primarily in Alberta and Ontario, has devised dialogic participatory performance/workshops for community development and educational purposes. Casts,

11. La Jevic and Springgay, 73.


13. Joe Norris, Playbuilding as Qualitative Research: A Participatory Arts-Based Approach (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2009 (2nd ed. to be published in April 2024).

14. Mirror Theatre, last modified 2023. The site includes an explanation of the playbuilding process and videos of performances, including as part of school classwork.


17. Grugel, 51, emphasis in original.

consisting of university students, faculty and staff and members of the wider community, have addressed a range of social justice topics, including person-centred care, implicit bias, homelessness, safe and caring schools, early warning signs of heart disease, interpersonal challenge[s] in practicum placements, academic integrity and mental health.15

In 2008, Ann Grugel of the University of Wisconsin Madison conducted a photo-elicitation project in Milwaukee with urban elementary-age children who were participating in a summer children’s community garden project.16 Grugel invited the children to take photos documenting their gardening experiences. She then met with the children individually and invited them to choose a few photos that really meant a lot to them and to tell her about what was happening in the photos and how they found them meaningful. With regard to Tamika [pseudonym], Grugel states:

It was not until after a series of photo elicitation interviews that I realized the deep connection between her self and the natural environment. Through her photographs and our conversations, Tamika was exploring her personal self as linked within the broader context of the natural world. She in fact was constructing an ecological identity. . . . Photo elicitation helped me unearth and explore the dominant social and environmental practices that support the development of a child’s ecological identity within the social context of a community garden.17

In a photo-elicitation project, Gary Knowles and Suzanne Thomas of Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, asked photography and visual arts students at a local high school to explore their “sense-of-place, locatedness, or placelessness” in school through taking and discussing photos.18 Knowles and Thomas state that this participatory inquiry project was “significant since little educational research directly involves students in the gathering, arranging, analyzing, or representing of information related to schools, curriculum, or pedagogy from their perspectives.”19 During the study, the students responded to these prompts:

Tell us about your experiences of school. Tell us about your place in school. Tell us about a significant place within or immediately outside the school building. Convey to us how you see yourself in this place. Tell us what you think about school as a place to be.20

They each created a “self-portrait, memory map, photo of place, narrative, photo of self-in-place, found object, and a two- or three-dimensional artwork.”21 Knowles and Thomas then met with students individually to discuss the artworks, what they meant to them, and their inquiry processes. The students’ comments included the following:

“I feel that I am not noticed at school.” “I do not look into the camera lens because I don’t let people see me at school. I am scared of being criticized.” . . . “My portrait is cropped closely around my face to represent the lack of freedom I feel at school.” “I double-exposed the portrait of me in the foreground to emphasize how my place in school is vague and uncertain.”22

The students overall expressed a strong disconnect with school as place and a strong sense of not belonging. These results appear to have surprised Knowles and Thomas, although in their discussion they mention the upheavals that had been occurring in Ontario schools. What remains unclear to me is whether the students’ feelings of not belonging reflected those specific tensions or the longer-term structural issues of schools’ being impersonal, institutionalized environments.
In South Africa, Shan Simmonds and Cornelia Roux of North-West University, together with Ina ter Avest, a Dutch researcher, conducted a photo-elicitation project with South African schoolgirls focusing on gender equity/inequity, gender-based violence, poverty, and HIV/AIDS. The researchers comment that such an approach "has proved particularly useful in research involving schoolgirls, who are vulnerable and often under-acknowledged research participants." In this study, the girls were asked to "take photographs of landscapes/objects/people/situations/symbols anywhere in your school and home environment to express what you perceive and experience as gender equity." Each participant then chose five of her photos and discussed with a researcher what each photo represented to her. Afterward, they wrote reflections concerning their experiences of gender equity as well as what they experienced taking the photos. Then in a focus group the girls discussed their photos and stories and identified overarching themes that arose. The researchers reported that by participating in the project, the girls became consciously aware of the psychological and tangible effects that societal power differentials had on their lives in terms of gender inequities and violence and socioeconomic and health injustices.

Other Potential Pedagogical Uses of Arts-Based Inquiry

These are but a few examples of the ways in which educators have used arts-based inquiry with elementary, secondary/high school, and college students. I now consider arts-based identity exploration activities to be indispensable pedagogical tools in teaching general education social justice and civics courses. I also wholeheartedly champion their use not only in teacher education programs, but in all helping-profession educational programs, including in social work, counseling, and premed programs and in medical school. In my dissertation, I also strongly advocate their use in student life extra-/co-curricular programs and in college career centers. Indeed, when I presented conference sessions and a workshop on my research, several college student affairs practitioners told me about how they are using these types of activities with their students. I also discuss in my dissertation potential uses in college high-impact programs such as first- and second-year seminars and first-generation, service- and community-based learning, study abroad, undergraduate qualitative research, and internship programs.

I hope this has given you some ideas as to how you might use these types of activities both inside and outside the classroom! Additionally, please do take a look my dissertation's chapter 4, "Arts-Based Inquiry," chapter 5, "Artistic Modalities in Arts-Based Inquiry," and chapter 9, "Potential Uses of Arts-Based Identity Exploration Activities in Undergraduate Education," including that chapter's section on issues regarding facilitating arts-based activities. I wrote these chapters with educators in mind in the hope that the discussions would spur yet more ideas about how such activities can be used as effective pedagogical tools.

20. Knowles and Thomas, 125.
22. Knowles and Thomas, 127.
24. Simmonds, Roux, and Avest, 35.
25. Simmonds, Roux, and Avest, 38.
AUTHOR BIO

Kathleen McMichael Goodyear has a PhD in arts education from the Ohio State University (2018) as well as master’s degrees in library science (2013) and American studies (2023) from PennWest Clarion and Northeastern State University (Oklahoma), respectively. She obtained her BA in psychology, with minors in literature and public administration, from Metropolitan State University of Denver in 2001. She is currently working on a graduate history certificate from Pittsburg State University (Kansas). She and her husband, Dennis, currently live in Cedar Falls, Iowa. Kathleen taught at Ohio State for two years, and now, post-pandemic, she looks forward to getting back into the college classroom teaching American studies through a social justice lens. She can be reached at goodyear.24@osu.edu. She wants to hear how others are using arts-based inquiry activities in their pedagogy! Her ORCID®: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2932-4135.

OPEN ACCESS

© 2024 by the author. Licensee H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. This review is an open access review distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)

HOW TO CITE


Proceedings of the H-Net Teaching Conference is an open access journal from H-Teach, a network of H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online, and is published annually through the H-Net Journals initiative. It can be found online at https://journals.h-net.org/phtc.