

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

More than a Mural: The Intersection of Public Art, Immigrant Youth, and Human Rights

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Dedication: For Clare, for Michaela, and for all our students, in pursuit of a better future, for themselves, but also for all those that will come after them

What makes somebody an American is not just blood or birth, but allegiance to our founding principles and the faith in the idea that anyone from anywhere can write the next great chapter of our story. (U.S. President Barack Obama)

I would describe it as an unforgettable experience because I was never [before part of a] mural like we did....This will make me understand the position of immigrants here and I can teach others about human rights. (ARTE student participant, Franklin, 18)

Introduction

The disciplinary fields of the arts and human rights may seem disparate. For instance, at the university level, international human rights and fine arts are taught in distinct schools where students are traditionally awarded separate degrees. Yet, upon further examination, there are rich intersections between the two, particularly for adolescents. In many cases, this intersection causes a bold and powerful dialogue that enhances both fields allowing for growth and reflection, nurturing and providing differentiated modes of learning and expression, and increasing cultural tolerance in the classroom. Furthermore, critical democratic pedagogy, alongside the arts, provides students with an opportunity to “intellectually engage with the world so that they become less dependent on external authorities.” Critical pedagogy through the arts also promotes a “critical analysis and probing of diverse societal issues,” that includes a pursuit of social justice and an awareness of both human rights injustice and advocacy.¹ Or, as the “Voice Our Concern” curriculum of Amnesty International Ireland states, “Art affords the artist the unique ability to register the horror of an event, in a way that statistics cannot. Its function is to remain forever as a reminder that this inhumanity or injustice occurred.”²

On a very simple level, art has the capacity to touch the human spirit in an emotional, arguably spiritual, way, creating an opportunity to share stories of the full spectrum of human existence, including the upholding or denial of human rights. bell hooks describes this as “work ... not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of [one’s] students.”³ Through reflecting on art and the process of art-making, students are given the opportunity to be seen as “whole human beings with complex lives and experiences rather than simply as seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge,”⁴ making it easier for them to connect on a deeper level with individuals within and outside their community around human rights injustices.

This paper will focus on the work of Art and Resistance Through Education (ARTE), a non-profit organization founded in 2011 and based in New York City. ARTE “uses

art, design, and technology to empower young people to develop creative solutions and bring awareness to local and global human rights challenges, fostering leadership opportunities to train and organize other young people in their own communities.”⁵ ARTE works with diverse communities of color, including a large percentage of immigrant youth, providing them an education on human rights through an arts-based curriculum. Ranging between 15 and 18 years of age, the students are mainly Spanish speaking with varying skills of English. Among the human rights topics that we have explored are workers’ rights, children’s rights (focusing on the Convention on the Rights of the Child), immigrant rights, racial discrimination as a violation of rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, LGBTQ rights, the right to housing, and women’s rights.

The critical component to learning about human rights in our curriculum is the reflecting on and making of art that focuses on human rights. Students learn about human rights through the process of reflecting on artists who focus on human rights and through the process of their own art making on human rights issues. Students learn about and experiment with a wide variety of art media that include collages, mosaics, poetry, mask-making (and accompanying theatrical performance), sketching and basic architectural design, infographic creation, and comics. Art educator Claudia Angelica Narez states utilizing the arts gives students the opportunity to “dissect different forms of expression and analyze the different messages and effectiveness ... for each individual.”⁶ Her students, like ARTE students, focus on the human rights issue of immigration; students analyze the messages of different pieces of art and later create their own art. Narez’s students were able to connect the human rights issues to their own experiences. In this way art engages young people inspiring them to become critical thinkers, empowered creators, and democratic citizens.

Background on Immigration and Immigrant Rights in New York City

[Because of ARTE] I got a scholarship that will help me in college. I thank you for giving me a scholarship and giving me an opportunity of painting the mural. It was a great experience for me. (ARTE participant and scholarship recipient, Miram, 17)

Immigration is one of the most complex and important human rights issues that affect millions of lives in the United States, significantly in New York City. In 2013, the immigrant population of the United States was estimated to be at 41.3 million, or 13% of the country’s population of 316.1 million. New York City has around 4.4 million immigrants⁷ and over 3 million foreign-born immigrants, more than any other city in the world, and larger than the entire population of the city of Chicago.⁸ For many immigrants, especially those who are undocumented, their human rights are at risk; according to Amnesty International USA, over 30,000 immigrants are in detention

on any given day in the U.S.⁹ Undocumented students face a wide variety of problems, including lack of access to resources to pursue higher education. For instance, once undocumented immigrant youth graduate from high school, they find themselves without the financial means to pursue further studies, even though they may have excelled in their academic courses in high school and have expressed an interest in continuing their education.

Despite the challenges that immigrant youths face in the United States, their role, outside of economic contributions, is a valuable one. According to Krzysztof Wodiczko, the immigrant is an “unintentional prophet,” or rather “someone who has a vision of a better world.”¹⁰ Artist Marc James Leger believes that “Immigrants, like the homeless, are agents who spread the visibility of the condition of democracy.”¹¹ How individuals within a nation treat their immigrants is telling of the larger national narrative around democracy, social justice, and human rights.

Teatro Campesino originated by performing short skits on the picket lines of the Delano Grape Workers Strike to demonstrate the injustice suffered by the workers.

For these reasons ARTE remains committed to partnering with organizations and institutions that support immigrant youth, both documented and undocumented. Pan American High School (PanAm) in Flushing, Queens, New York City, describes itself as “a diverse learning community of recently-immigrated English Language Learners (ELLs) that is committed to creating an environment that values students’ cultures, native languages and individual differences, while preparing them for success as they navigate a changing world.”¹² Housed in a building with two other schools, the PanAm school has about 350 students; 99.9% of its students are Hispanic, and 88% of these students are considered English Language Learners, individuals who are in pursuit of learning English along with their native language(s).¹³

ARTE understands that its students have a wealth of knowledge and personal experiences to bring to the program and are able to relate to the human rights topics presented. As Jody Sokolower, who teaches globalization and migration, states, “I believed that starting with my students’ own immigration experiences would push them to a deeper emotional level. In my experience, deep emotions lead to deep learning.”¹⁴ In her curriculum, there are no better experts on immigration than the students who conduct interviews with their parents and collect massive amounts “of experience and knowledge.”¹⁵ This knowledge collected by the students pushed “class discussions to a deeper level,” which combined with the course material, helped “build class community.”¹⁶

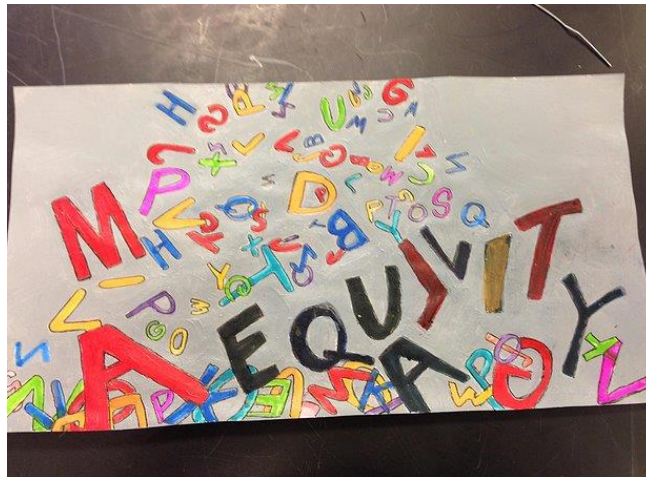
In ARTE we also want to cultivate an authentic class community by creating a space where youth feel comfortable talking about relevant human rights issues and by using art to create what bell hooks refers to as

“knowledge that is meaningful.”¹⁷ We remain dedicated to providing students with information that is directly connected to “what they are learning and their overall life experiences.”¹⁸ Such an example of “knowledge that is meaningful”¹⁹ is our introduction to the work of Latino migrant communities involved in *Teatro Campesino*.

Introducing Teatro Campesino: Mask-Making and Theater Performances

ARTE worked with a PanAm class of 25 students during the first semester, supported by an in-class teacher from the school, and two ARTE facilitators. (In the second semester, due to school scheduling changes, the class was reduced to 8 students who had not been involved in the previous semester). Class was held five days a week for 45 minutes; at least twice a week two ARTE facilitators would support a full-time teacher. Class visits were supplemented with guest speakers and occasional field trips. Each ARTE program, including the PanAm class, involves a basic introduction to human rights. This introduction includes an in-depth exploration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Following these introductory weeks, students are exposed to a variety of different human rights issues and different art forms and artists from around the world.

Teatro Campesino, a dramatic performance group



founded in 1965 and based in San Juan Batista, California, served as the basis for one of the first ARTE lessons. *Teatro Campesino* originated by performing short skits on the picket lines of the Delano Grape Workers Strike to demonstrate the injustice suffered by the workers.²⁰ ARTE facilitators crafted a curriculum based on their work including a slideshow, a handout, and brief YouTube clips on the puppetry of the theater group. After learning about the human rights issues of workers’ and immigrant rights, students were given guidelines to create their own masks, using various art supplies such as tissue paper, paper mache, glue, feathers, construction paper, and paint. In addition, students were given a human rights scenario, or an example of a human rights violation, that they had to perform in a theatrical skit. One example was the following:

Each and every day, you pass by a big factory on your way to school. You have never seen anyone come in or come out of the building. One day, on the news, you learn that that same factory actually uses child labor. Police investigators have found out that the factory employed children as young as 7 years old to make clothing for a famous sports company.

Students were then assigned to a team, and using the masks they had created, performed a role as part of a skit. Once the skits were created, each group shared them with the class, and their peers provide feedback on the performances of their fellow students.

The facilitators noticed that students were hesitant to perform in front of their peers. A few students, who were more comfortable with performance, acted as leaders encouraging their group members to move to the front of the class to perform. We quickly realized, however, that students were very interested in the background of *Teatro Campesino*, given that they were founded by a group of Mexican immigrants and that their name was Spanish. In subsequent lessons, we found that while students were interested in learning about cultures that were different from their own, many gravitated toward artists or issues that directly affected Latin America or were Spanish. Examples were when the ARTE curriculum exposed students to the issue of women's rights and focused on Spanish hip-hop artist *La Mala Rodriguez* or the Puerto-Rican hip-hop duo, *Calle 13*. Arguably, students' interest may have been piqued due to the artistic medium involved (i.e. hip-hop), but we also believe that they felt most comfortable being exposed to artists that shared their common language.



Lesson plans that we had originally developed took much longer than we had anticipated. This can partially be attributed to a large class and some behavioral issues (mostly over-talking) that had arisen but also to the fact that most students were English Language Learners. It took longer than the curriculum had allowed to expose students to basic human rights language. For instance, while students might fully understand the concept of what a "sweatshop" is, they might not know the word in English. Thus, facilitators would make a point of breaking down the word by using simpler language terms, i.e. "a place with

poor working conditions," and showing pictures of sweatshops and the children who work in them. While these techniques increased the amount of time that a lesson took, facilitators felt it necessary in order to create a valuable and rich learning environment.

During this process ARTE asked students to share the knowledge they had on the human rights issue under discussion. Thus, the educators were forced to reevaluate the language that they use in describing key human rights issues, places, stakeholders, and violations. This exercise created a more level playing field, where the adult facilitators became students in the process of introducing material to their students in the truest Freirean sense. In this way, Arte educators engaged in what Claudia Angelica Narez considers "a cultivation of culturally relevant ideas, conversations, and critical thinking about the way we live and experience culture in our communities."²¹ There were two cultures explored in depth throughout the program: one was the exploration of immigrant culture and another the development of a culture around human rights as it revolved around immigrant and racial discrimination as intersecting oppressions.

Examples of Racism, Global Understanding, and the Use of Art

*I will see art differently and so will others.
(Iveion, 13)*

*It is a great experience. I have never done
anything like this before. (Nalah, 16)*

As immigrant youth of color, ARTE students have experienced a variety of different oppressions in the United States. Understanding the oppressions of others or the intersectionality between different oppressions manifests itself in different ways. One way is school segregation, as an omnipresent reminder of institutional racism. UCLA's Civil Rights Project has found that New York City is "home to the largest and one of the most segregated public school systems in the nation."²² Furthermore, as evidence of the injustice of the United States education system, "40% of students expelled each year are Black,"²³ a reality that perpetuates the school-to-prison pipeline. This creates not only an unfair educational system for youth of color but also creates institutional barriers to success.

PanAm has an exceptionally well-trained administration and staff that help support its Latino students with whatever challenges emerge for them such as having to take on after-school jobs to support their families, interruptions to formal education in their native countries, and lack of family resources to excel. In their home and academic life students may have limited interactions with community members outside of their own culture. For instance, they may rarely interact with other communities of color, including Black youth. Unfortunately, these limited interactions may further perpetuate stereotypes around Black youth and internalized racism toward other people of color.

An example of these stereotypes occurred during a lesson focusing on child soldiers. Students were asked to watch a short YouTube video clip, *Soldiers of Peace*, documenting the lives of former child soldier Ishmael Beah of Sierra Leone and former gang member Dashaun "Jiwe" Morris of Newark, New Jersey, both introduced to war as soldiers at an early age. After viewing the video clip of the two black men, one student from Colombia asked, "Why are all black people in gangs?" The facilitators took this as a teachable moment, understanding that the students did not yet understand the nuances of systematic racism and the role of the media in perpetuating racist stereotypes of people of color, particularly black men, within the United States. The facilitators asked the student and the rest of the class to discuss why they believed this to be true and to think of instances where this might not be true (i.e. the fact that gangs come from all racial, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds). They also asked students to consider how and why these stereotypes are perpetuated in the media.

This example highlights the racial stereotypes at play, but also demonstrates how the ARTE curriculum can be used to further understanding between different groups of individuals. Immigrant youth often see themselves as individuals whose rights have been violated, but they may not understand that the rights of others are violated as well, or may not see the connections between the two groups. Throughout our curriculum, students were invited to discuss their experience of racism, institutional racism, and racism in the context of the #blacklivesmatters, #blackspring, and other valuable social movements spreading across the country.

Constructing More Democratic Spaces for Human Rights Through Mural-Making

It was a great experience in learning about discrimination and human rights. I learned a lot of things and doing the mural was good because we are giving a message to people and I feel proud of it The mural will always be there where people could use and reflect about the meaning of the mural.... (Miriam R., 18)

My experience with ARTE class was very exciting because I had never painted a mural before – it was a great experience. (Miriam, 17)

It was an awesome opportunity that I had. I would choose to do another mural because you get to experience how people paint them. This is a great opportunity of showing people what you can do. (Miran, 17)

The highlight of the ARTE school program took place during the months of January – June, when facilitators and the in-class teacher worked with eight students to complete a mural on the outdoor wall of the PanAm building. Each day, the 350 PanAm students, their teachers and the school administration, and the students in the two other schools that occupied the building passed by the mural. Given that we wanted students to have a sense of ownership over the mural and that it was also easier to prepare for painting outside, the ARTE facilitators and in-class teacher thought it was valuable to have the painting in an area where students would pass by each day.



Between March and April 2015, the students chose a human rights issue that most resonated with them and that they felt that would engage the community. Based on the personal experiences of the students and the human rights education they had learned in class, they decided to focus on the intersection of Racial Discrimination and Immigrant Rights. Leading up to late May and early June 2015, ARTE facilitators created guided research opportunities for students on the selected topics and in the process helped students design and paint the mural.

Through a series of classroom sessions with the ARTE facilitators and under the artistic vision and leadership of the full-time teacher as the final mural designer, students worked to find a design that best visually interpreted the chosen human rights issues. After a series of sketches and student discussions, the group decided that their mural design would be a series of geometric triangles. These triangles took the shape of a flock of white birds, escaping jail-like bars, flying towards the Statue of Liberty, near the sun, or "freedom." Students decided that the only words on the mural would be "Freedom," "Equality," and "Justice." Students worked with the teacher to design the mural to include these images of birds to represent immigrants, who have escaped the cage or jail bars (representing various challenges, detainment, racism), in order to fly towards the sunlight and Statue of Liberty. These images represented their journey towards justice and equality and all of the rights guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to human beings.

The mural was a public way to engage members of the students' community to learn about an issue together, especially one that directly affects many of the students and their families.

It is important to note that images were selected after students had been exposed to several artists who have used art not only to increase awareness but also to mobilize political change around human rights issues. One such artist is Favianna Rodriguez, a self-described transnational interdisciplinary artist and cultural organizer, most famous for her "Migration is Beautiful" project. Using imagery of butterflies, Favianna Rodriguez focuses on immigration, given her desire to "humanize and empower communities who are impacted by inequality and racism."²⁴ As an organizer, Favianna Rodriguez's work was also especially key in mobilizing communities in Arizona against SB 1070 in 2012.²⁵ Ana Teresa Fernández, who launched an artistic project with 30 volunteers to "erase" a stretch of the Mexico-United States border near Nogales, Sonora,²⁶ is another artist introduced to the students. At various parts of the border, Fernández painted the fence "a light blue hue to camouflage it against the sky." Both artists raise important questions on the subject of immigration as a human rights issue.

These two examples of the "artist as activist" reminded students and educators that while the mural was

a critical component of the ARTE program, it is only one aspect of a larger human rights awareness campaign that directly affects the community. On June 10, 2015, when the mural was finally completed, ARTE, through the support of the PanAm Parent Coordinator and the rest of the Pan Am administration, organized a community unveiling during a parent meeting day. Students educated their family, friends, and teachers about the human rights issue they had chosen and shared poetry, dance, and musical performances around their topic. Involving human rights organizers at Amnesty International – USA, at the event, the ARTE class introduced a campaign advocating against the use of detention against families fleeing violence in Central America. This action was critical: both ARTE students and educators considered it important to use art to educate their community on the ways that individuals can take action to achieve human rights. The mural was a public way to engage members of the students' community to learn about an issue together, especially one that directly affects many of the students and their families. In addition, the mural was a celebration in which families could honor the work of their children that they may not have been aware of.

Constructing More Democratic Spaces for Human Rights Through Digital Media

One aspect of ARTE's mission remains a work in process, as the organization seeks to develop its own praxis, or theory in action, as popularized by philosopher and educator Paulo Freire. "Critical reflection and action" is not only for the sake of "a better learning environment but also for a better world."²⁷ Part of this *praxis* was demonstrated at the community mural unveiling, where students mobilized around the arbitrary detention of families fleeing violence in Central America. ARTE hopes to further train young people, especially those who have already been through the program and have completed a mural, in digital media organizing. ARTE is interested in learning how to better equip young people to use digital media tools (e.g. social media) in order to organize far-reaching and important advocacy campaigns that would engage members of their own communities to create democratic spaces where youth have a voice with the power and potential to connect with other youth across the globe.

Conclusions

When the artwork was presented to the community at the mural unveiling, two students who had demonstrated active involvement in the ARTE program and had completed an application detailing what they had learned about human rights and how they would use it to make positive social change, received an educational scholarship. The award was named in honor of the immigrant rights activist and acclaimed artist, Favianna Rodriguez. During the painting of the mural, one of the students, usually very shy and reserved, reflected on her experience as an undocumented immigrant traveling to the United States. She turned to one of the ARTE facilitators and shared the

story that she remembered of crossing the border: the difficulty of the journey, the courage of her family, and her future aspirations as an immigrant living within the United States. Her story was incredibly powerful and gave ARTE facilitators the opportunity to better understand the world of the students involved in the creation of the mural. In other words, it brought the mural to life. In bell hooks' words, our student helped create a "place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process."²⁸ This could not have happened if the facilitators "refuse[d] to be vulnerable while encouraging [our own] students to take risks."²⁹

Such a student is just one example of other students who have similar stories to share. Through this transformative experience of art and art-making, ARTE views this as an opportunity to invite students to share their own stories about human rights. Through the work that ARTE engages in, we hope to create a culture where students do not feel that they need an invitation to speak, but realize it is their own space to share their stories as frequently as they wish. In this space, students and teachers are partners, utilizing the arts for reflection and growth to foster authentic expression. At this intersection of critical pedagogy and the arts ARTE believes a democratic space can and will exist.

Notes

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