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**Empowerment through Artistic Voice:  
The role of education and the arts in raising global awareness and contemporary identity**

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I have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the need for self-empowerment of teachers, students, and artists through visual storytelling regardless of socioeconomic status, language, location, or race. The stories we tell are revealed through our research and thoughtful reflections and our stories become manifest through media and technique. For younger artists, these experiences must be student-centered and student-directed and should be found in every learning environment. When we develop a visual story, it gains momentum which directs its identity. The identity of the storyteller and story become entwined. As artists, students, teachers who are storytellers, we are composites of our complex histories, which provide the only lens we have to view the world, tell our visual stories, and develop our identities. It is important to know that each of us is a product of the totality of our experiences and that each experience represents only one tiny fiber in our life tapestry or one small reflective facet of our identity.

### **Developing identity**

We must strive to develop who we are to become comfortable with our social and communal identity, to reflect on our place in the global community regardless of socioeconomic status, language, location, or race. When we are comfortable with ourselves, we can start to understand and appreciate the beauty of humanity. This appreciation leads us to support others and not disparage them. This is why it is essential to discover our identity. Finding one's identity requires understanding oneself and finding one's story. Knowing one's identity develops connections that allow us to become better human beings and better citizens who seek local and global peace, tolerance, and justice for all. This is what must be taught to all students in all classes and at all levels of cognitive development.

To help our students develop their identities and voices, we must ask ourselves questions starting with what do we value as art educators? Where do we find our truth? What is missing in our pedagogy and curricula that our 21st-century learners seek? Teachers need to be aware of the stratification of truth as it is defined personally, artistically, professionally, and communally. Our perceptual truths are found in the large and small decisions we make every day. Those decisions may seem casual, but there are no small decisions. Every decision is important. How do we, as artists and educators, make thoughtful decisions?

We develop our identity visually in our questions and research. When this is shared with others, we can determine if our truths and identity are an acculturated understanding or most importantly, our individual, well-thought-through approach to experiencing ourselves. We must be willing to engage in internal and external debates to find the kernels of our truth. We must be willing to challenge, surrender, and celebrate ourselves, our processes, and our images while remembering that there is no single correct answer. It is personal. This is the beauty of art. We already know that we don't know. And, simultaneously, we also know that we are perpetually growing in understanding, confidence, and empowerment. This is particularly important for our students to know. We find our truths through our visual storytelling – through persistence and determination. We must trust ourselves

Are we aware of what Eisner (1994) defined as the null curriculum? What is missing in our pedagogy and curricula that our 21<sup>st</sup>-century learners seek? We know that truths are complex, circumstantial, and at times, prejudicial. What is evident in our daily pedagogical and curricular choices that reveal or conceal our values as artists and educators?

### **Individual truths**

One way that we can find our truths is through our visual storytelling. These truths are revealed through our research and thoughtful reflections as our stories become manifest through media and technique. Artists are storytellers. We must find, amplify, and tell our stories. We must. In our studios and classrooms, we must provide time to teach authentic and creative storytelling. If we choose this as a viable option, then we must expect that our students do have stories to tell. To do this, we must be willing to move beyond dictatorial pedagogy and prescriptive curricula and be receptive to our students' unique voices and inventions in their storytelling.

To support these personal narrations, we must provide quality time for our students to develop their visual stories in our pedagogy and curricula. As Gilbert (2015) pointed out in *Big Magic*, each of us has similar characteristics for personal creativity, which are courage, enchantment, permission, persistence, and trust. Can we provide the space, time, and supportive resources for our students to develop their images? In this type of classroom, we can all work hard, consistently doing our tasks—the tasks of telling our visual stories through practiced skills and intuitive applications. When we give our students the security and permission to be trusting and courageous, then they give us persistence and an insightful view of their enchantments in the magic of their stories.

We also need to develop the quiet spaces and meditative aspects of visual storytelling. Young artists may not know that societal distractions reduce creative, in-depth engagement that diminishes the persistence to complete the image. As supportive and empathetic teachers, we must develop a proactive environment designed to maximize the potential of each art student. As noted by Talbot-Zorn and Marz (2017):

Recent studies are showing that taking time for silence restores the nervous system, helps sustain energy, and conditions our minds to be more adaptive and responsive to the complex environments in which so many of us now live, work, and lead.

Since creating our visual story requires maximum focused attention, we must reduce as much as possible the social distractions in the classroom. We need to embrace the quiet, reflective, and creative spaces needed to complete the visual story. Maybe we don't need to be busy all the time in the classroom moving quickly from project to project to cover all the educational expectations. Instead, we can establish a calm and energized space for students' growth and empowerment while simultaneously quietly embedding the educational expectations needed. Educational spaces must be interactive and directed by a balance of teacher and student creative needs, personalities, and potentialities.

As Fryer (2017) stated, “authentic teaching and learning are experimental activities because the environment of the classroom is inherently dynamical and chaotic...” Embracing dynamic creativity is important for every part of art education. The dynamic energy deepens the students' experiences through thoughtful, engaging moments linked together through quiet reflection and meaningful story development. To do this, we need to develop the quiet spaces and provide support for students' research and personal reflection needed for their wonderfully comprehensive stories. Visual storytelling is created in a personal context for a particular purpose.

### **Student-directed learning**

We can provide effective student-centered, student-directed learning spaces. We can grow this type of student self-empowered learning until it is quite common. All people can link personal moments of awareness and enlightenment together to construct their strings of experiential pearls to be proudly worn, appreciated, and celebrated.

These types of student-centered and student-directed experiences should be found in every learning environment. When we develop a visual story, it gains momentum which directs its identity. The identity of the storyteller and story become entwined. The image becomes a

representation of the mirror of self and story. Creative seeds of powerful student stories are propagated by the essential day-to-day experiential student understanding developed by sensitive teachers in a safe and supportive learning environment. This is what must be emphasized and sustained in the classroom. The progressive, student-centered learning environment may contradict school, district, regional and national expectations that may be steeped in histories of accepting out-of-date curricula. We must carefully focus our socio-cultural lenses to reveal the magnificent stories in our communities. We must teach our students to be attentive to their communities and their relationships in their communities. Then, knowing through the visual language becomes self-evident, culturally rich, and self-empowering.

We know that visual storytelling can be taught and experienced directly by anyone. It can be understood more comprehensively with each new experience, which may be represented as another perceptual fiber added to the weaving of our life-experience tapestry. The repetition of weaving each technical, conceptual, and cultural fiber is very important. Through repetition, we enable our acute potentiality of understanding. As Langer (1953) stated:

A work of art is far more symbolic than a word, which can be learned and even employed without any prior knowledge of its meaning; for a purely and wholly articulate symbol presents its import directly to any beholder who is sensitive enough at all to articulate forms in the given medium. (p. 59)

As experiences are acquired and woven together, the comprehensive dialogue about the visual story is enhanced and shared. The whole is greater than the sum. Contextual examination through visual research journaling is paramount in my classroom, as I feel it establishes the necessary foundation for the visual narrative. When students discover their contextual narrative through research and reflection, they are eager to tell their visual stories with many extraordinary and personally pleasing, divergent aesthetic approaches. The more success they feel, the more successes they have. It is wonderfully cyclical and amazing to witness their self-fulfilling prophecy. They develop the persistence and courage to strongly narrate the origin of their visual stories. They understand how to connect the context, narrative, media, and technique. They know that the narrative always originates from a specific place within themselves. It is their narrative. They have to find the kernel of their truth. It is the beginning seed to be germinated. From one seed, they grow a field of flowers.

Germinating understanding and interpreting the visual story are not passive acts, but require a circular transposition of culture, language, and location, all of which influence the process of developing the image, concept, and, most importantly, the individual. When viewing the visual narrative, it is important to realize that the image and viewer are bound together within each specific cultural context. Germinating understanding and trying to comprehend differences can be challenging, but rewarding. It is difficult to define himself. To have a deeper understanding of their experiences, everyone needs to engage in the storyteller's journey. The result is what I phrased as experiential commonality in xxx (2005). Of course, the experiential journey when viewing an image must consider age, gender, regionality, and more. A Grandmother from Cairo might see the same image quite differently than a teenager from London. Building personal, experiential, and communal bridges in the learning environment is paramount for an equitable and expansive experiential commonality.

When developing the experiential storytelling narrative and expanding the understanding of self and others, small steps make a long journey. Dewey (1934) reminds us that deep and durable learning comes from the ability to act, reflect, and react. Repetition and practice are strategies to develop similar, intended, and perceived experiences. These strategies would need to be developed by the wise teacher who introduces a dense and specific visual experience to promote the students' understanding of the visual language. Highly repetitive practices are not foreign to dance, music, or athletics. Repetition is a significant part of the learning process and we can embrace the meaningful parts of repetition in our art classrooms.

Focusing on the journey of the artistic processes may capture the complexity of the visual storytellers. It is important to understand that the story and the storyteller are connected through concept, narrative, and media/technique. Storytelling is woven between relationships of the artist, materials, environment, and culture. The visual story is complicated and layered with many fragments. The story and the storyteller could be represented as crystals with many facets reflecting the density of the storyteller's personal and communal perceptions. The technical and creative processes may allow the teacher a portal to capture the student's multidimensional perceptual layers and the process of creativity. Then, teachers must understand that these crystalline storytelling students are constantly reflecting and refracting each movement and moment in their environment (Congdon, 1989; Freedman, 1994; and Hicks, 1994).

### **Storytelling assessment**

Storytelling is neither simple nor easy. As these student reflections constantly shift so does the relationship of the image to the complexity and value of the story. What is the value of the image and how is it critiqued? Many scholars have debated and proposed different strategies of art assessment and methods for critiques. Teachers must use strategies that reflect the specifics of their classroom and the students' stories. It is ill-advised for teachers to use a one-size-fits-all assessment system. Each classroom is dynamically different and the assessment should reflect that. Let's not use what doesn't support student learning. We must consider that the crystalline storyteller is an organic and complex entity, which is constantly reshaping and redefining itself by its reaction to the environment. It may be narrow-sighted to employ an assessment method foreign to the process and visual story that the students create. We should use assessment techniques that enhance the students' creative futures. As teachers, we also have to ask ourselves, "What do we value?" Do we value the grade, the process, the product, the competition, or the compassion? These are very important considerations as we help students develop their voice and visual narrative. Instead of high-stakes summative assessments, perhaps a focused, formative dialog with the student in an open and authentic conversation in the classroom may produce better results. Can we satisfy the external agencies, our student's needs, and our relationship in the learning environment? I believe we can. If an assessment is a required part of the educational process, then we must teach our students how to use multiple assessment experiences to develop their understanding beyond external expectations. If more formative than summative assessment experiences expand the storyteller's abilities, then perhaps this develops more crystalline reflections of understanding and self-empowerment. Then, as suggested by Eisner's (1994) connoisseurship, a more complex and sophisticated level of assessment understanding is made clear. Each experience is layered and develops a dense tapestry of individuality or a new facet on the crystal. As artists and teachers, we are an accumulation of all

our experiences, those remembered and forgotten, and those that are negative or positive. This is what we bring to the classroom.

Since we are sensory beings, we must grapple with the positive and negative experiences we bring to the act of creation, the act of finding our voice and identity. During the act of creation, the artist determines the story. However, it is the society-at-large and the external agencies, influenced by the language of art assessment, that reflect the perceived value. It is within the acculturated assessment language, and consequently the communal language, that we learn to believe how art is to be valued. The value of the students' voices and identities are found in the multidimensional reflections from one individual to another, and from the individual to the community. As each moment of the environment is reflected on another, so is the assessment of what is valuable. It is important for every artist, from novice to professional, to understand that each person is a composite of their remembered and forgotten emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual experiences. The multifaceted environment cannot be avoided; it is ubiquitous. Because of this, each learner, who is ultimately the best visual storyteller, must reflect their personal experiences and biases against the fluidity of textual, oral, and visual languages, societal influences, and cultural and historical truisms, all of which are mercurial. Let's not repeat what we no longer need. The reality of the act of developing our visual identity is that it will change, reflecting every new facet of the communal sphere. Since we do live in an environment with constantly changing cultural codes each person is influenced educationally, financially, socially, historically, and more. As Bullivant (2011) pointed out, "'culture' is not a set of artifacts or tangible objects, but the very way that the members of a particular group interpret, use, and perceive them" (p. 7). As artists and teachers, we must embrace deciphering socio-cultural codes by focusing our perceptual lens to identify the similarities and differences we find in our classrooms and help our learners do the same.

As we embrace the needs of 21st-century learners, we must determine what is useful and valued to move beyond parroting the histories of education that no longer meet the conditions we find in our classroom and society. Educational understanding must be comprehensive and concise. Knowledge, histories, and cultures must be rethought to determine and define our contemporary values. It is through the educational interactions in our classrooms, school, communities, and professional organizations that experiences are shared and employed.

## **Conclusion**

We are storytellers with multiple dimensions. Through developing our stories, identities, beliefs, preferences, and perceptions, we are revealed. Anais Nin reminds us that we don't see things as they are; we see them as we are. As I wrote in XXXXX, that by

Shifting focus from how we see the world or how others see us to how we see the world together requires an awakening of empathy; empathetic instincts are brought to consciousness through attention to resonate thoughts and feelings of others. (p. 83)

We are all composites of our complex histories, which provide the only lens we have to view the world, tell our visual stories, and develop our identities. It is important to know that each of us is a product of our experiences and that each experience represents only one tiny fiber in our life tapestry or one small reflective facet of our identity. We must know that our tapestry captures each moment, both positive and negative, which represents very private, particular, delicate, and

complex issues. Not only are we the woven colors and patterns, but we are the tensions that move throughout the tapestry. These fibers represent each moment of acceptance or rejection, success or failure, understanding or misunderstanding. All of this is consciously and subconsciously entangled in our identities and our visual storytelling. Visual research and focused investigations of self, environment, identity, family, community, language, and culture reveal each contribution to our tapestry. We cannot un-ring our experiential bells. We cannot outrun ourselves. We are artists. We become empowered through our artistic voice in the role of education and the arts in raising global awareness and contemporary identity

**Author's note:**

This paper is loosely based on the book

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