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“Because Your Voice Matters...”: Student Voice and the Art of Story

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Sunnyside/McLane High Schools

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Abstract

This paper provides a description of an art academy situated within an inner-city high school and its use of project-based learning to develop multi-disciplinary curriculum plans in support of student learning, student voice, and literacies across the disciplines. In specific, this paper describes a recent academy project which began with one student’s voice and resulted in an art exhibit which debuted at a local cultural event, was presented at several professional conferences, and eventually travelled to Washington DC for public exhibition.

Key Words: Project-based learning, interdisciplinary curriculum design, student voice, community partnerships, career pathways, 21st-century skills, arts-integrated instruction

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Introduction

It’s Friday afternoon. Most students and teachers have headed home for the weekend. The campus has been vacated except for the occasional janitor, a security guard patrolling on a golf cart, and a few football players on their way to practice. In room T-7, however, the conversations on “The Bus” have just begun:

“I think it’s a good project. It will bring positive energy to the African American community because their image isn’t very positive right now.”

“I think it’s a great idea because I want to know more about my culture. Our culture is depressed and this is a way of presenting to the African American community.”

“The project will help me understand my history. In school, you have to learn it on your own; a lot of students don’t learn on their own – they’re on their phones. I learn at home. When we were reading about the Civil Rights Movement, I read on my own because I wanted to learn more about myself, but the AP class pace was too fast to complete study guides and read on my own so I had to quit.”

The art academy, a California Partnership Academy, is beginning its ninth year with a project commemorating the 50th anniversary of Freedom Summer, 1964. Three academy students are sharing their thoughts on the 3-D mock-up of a bus which will be built to scale and serve as a metaphor for the physical movement of those who participated in Freedom Summer. Five teachers, two local artists, and three community partners listen and learn.

A School within a School: An Arts-Integrated Education

The academy, which began in 2006, is a small learning community composed of approximately 200 students in grades 10-12. It embraces and provides classes for all students interested in the visual and performing arts at the high school. Over the past eight years, the

academy has struggled with many of the issues which beset the community in which it exists. According to a 2008 report by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), the congressional district, in which the inner-city high school of approximately 2000 students lies, was ranked the poorest in the nation in terms of poverty, graduation rates, health, and welfare (2008, p. 8). Approximately 43% of parents have not completed high school (p. 8), and all students receive free breakfast and lunch. Its demographic make-up is composed of 61% Hispanic, 24% Asian, 8% African American, 6% Caucasian, and 1% Pacific Islander. The students in the art academy reflect these demographics and live daily with many of the issues which accompany inner city life such as poverty, crime, drug and alcohol abuse, and transiency. Given these disadvantages, the academy is designed to foster project-based learning inviting students to meet real-world goals and objectives while meeting high school graduation and college entrance requirements. The academy branches off into three career pathways which seek to engage and support student learning and literacies: art, theater, and digital media. Each pathway entails a three-year plan which includes English, science, history, and a core elective in addition to other required classes outside the academy. Advanced Placement and Regional Occupation Program (ROP) classes in the arts and digital media are available to students who wish to engage in internships and a mentoring experience. The *Understanding by design* (McTighe & Wiggins, 2005) curriculum model and *Studio thinking* (Hetland, 2007) guide instruction and planning. Teachers in the academy work collaboratively, meeting every Friday afternoon for two to three hours and some weekends, to work with students and design projects “relevant to students by establishing connections to life outside the classroom and by addressing real world issues” (National Education Association, 2002-2014, para. 3) in addition to meeting standards within each core discipline.

As students work collaboratively with teachers and community partners to meet real-world deadlines, meaningful mentor relationships develop in the rich and highly creative learning environment. Academy students receive training and develop communication and presentation skills through interviews with local media. With the support of an active advisory board and community partners, they have served as docents at local art museums hosting academy exhibits as well as ArtHop events and presented at professional conferences and for Rotary clubs. They have learned to work collaboratively with peers as well as adults and to think creatively and critically about their core academic experiences, their art and performance, as well as to develop their communication skills. Although many “teachers tend to find it difficult to implement [project-based learning] with low-performing students and may lack supporting technology” (David, 2008, p. 80), academy teachers believe that the increased time demands and background research necessary for successful projects pay off in student ownership and student retention of information learned.

Academy Projects: Process and Product

The academy’s current project, *Freedom Summer: Mississippi, 1964*, was born of a series of other projects selected to juxtapose current events with student voice. *Whispers From the Streets* and *Vida en las Sombras/Living in the Shadows* showcased stories of the homeless and the plight of the undocumented immigrant as revealed through the stories of students and school faculty and staff as well as members of the local community. The academy’s capstone project to date has been *Stories of Home: The Southeast Asian Story Project*. This exhibit was a multi-disciplinary project which sought to give voice to the stories of the refugee immigrants of Southeast Asia and was the direct result of several Hmong students who, while working on the *Vida* project, voiced a desire to tell their own family stories. Thus began a collaborative effort between English, Art,

and Video Production teachers who initiated their own research into the Southeast Asian experience by reading Kao Kalia Yang’s memoir, *The Latehomecomer*. The resulting exhibit debuted at Hmong International New Year 2014 and included 30 4x4 story panels, a 3-dimensional reproduction of a Mekong River crossing, a film, an anthology of student art and writing, art work in mixed media, and numerous films documenting the process including a public relations video of testimonials.

From this project, students learned about the Southeast Asian experience in English classes by reading portions of Yang’s memoir in addition to stories, poetry, and informative text. They viewed videos and documentaries showing historical footage as well as interviews of those who had experienced the Secret War, the name which the Hmong use to describe their fight in the Vietnam War. Students interviewed a Southeast Asian staff, community, family member, or friend regarding their experiences. A Speakers’ Bureau was established which brought guest speakers to the campus, including Yang, to share their stories and perspectives on the Southeast Asian experience. After multiple exposures to the history, stories, and culture, students engaged in creative writing through vignettes, poetry, and short stories which focused on the five time periods categorizing, specifically, the Hmong experience: Life in China, Life in the Mountains, Life in the Jungle, Life in the Refugee Camps, and Life in the United States.

Student artists learned how to translate student interviews and creative writing into thirty panels of paintings, drafts of a graphic novel, an anthology, film, and a variety of other art work, some of which won awards at the local fair. They learned technique as they worked with mixed media, combining painting, collage, assemblage, applique, acrylic, spray paint, oil paint, and stencils. Students worked both individually and in groups on various panels and on smaller works. Because so many of the stories written by students made reference to the Mekong River,

student artists built a boat with life-sized figures escaping to Thailand. Sculpted hands protruded out of the tableau symbolizing those lost in the river and those reaching for a new life. Beyond the academic experience, many Southeast Asian students were able to give voice to stories that had never been documented before while Latino, African American, and Caucasian populations discovered stories and histories they knew nothing about.

In addition to Hmong International New Year, *Stories of Home: The Southeast Asian Story Project* showcased at both the Asian Fest hosted by the community college and the local fair. Both students and teachers presented the project at the California Partnership Academy Conference in Sacramento as well as the Whole Language Umbrella Conference in Pasadena. Due to the advocacy of a Hmong student attending UC Berkeley and interning at the White House, the Department of the Interior hosted the *Stories of Home* exhibit in May 2014 and showcased four panels of student art and a selection of student poetry in the White House. In November, teachers shared the project at the 2014 Annual Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English.

Embracing 21st-Century Skills and the Common Core

As projects such as *Stories of Home* illustrate, the art academy strongly believes in 21st-Century Skills and seeks to embrace them in both short- and long-term planning in order to enhance student motivation, involvement, and learning. The product and process involved in producing artwork and exhibitions like these involve critical thinking and problem solving, communication and collaboration, and creativity and innovation. 21st-Century Skills, in conjunction with project-based learning, directly support the Common Core Standards in their goal to “prepare students for deeper thinking” and engage in activities “in which students demonstrate and share what they know or can do through performance assessments” (Boss,

2013, Introduction, Section, 13, Para 3). In addition, these multi-disciplinary projects provide interaction with the community and support the goals and objectives of the academy:

1. To provide a rich and highly creative learning environment for students.
2. To support a rigorous academic curriculum facilitated by the visual and performing arts, leading to a post-secondary education or entry level career opportunity.
3. To expose students to careers in the arts, including ROP classes and arts-related job mentoring in the local area.
4. To explore the world through diverse and meaningful curriculum, multimedia, field trips, and professional experiences.
5. To develop positive and meaningful student-to-student, student-to-teacher, teacher-to-teacher, teacher-to-school site/district, and academy-to-community relationships through project-based learning.
6. To create and utilize partnerships with local organizations and businesses to promote student achievement and academy projects.
7. To encourage student involvement in the community through art projects, exhibits, presentations, and performances.
8. To offer students opportunities to participate in an annual art gala showcasing student work and performances.

As students observe and apply these skills in a variety of learning situations both in and out of the classroom, with public and private audiences, they become advocates not only for their art but for themselves. Student leaders within the academy demonstrate critical thinking and communication skills by posing questions and suggesting topics which inform future projects, continuing to promote and network as they move into their college and career experiences. Academy students are provided with a rich visual and performing arts experience which offers them not only academic skills which will translate into college and career, but also public relations skills and the means to a creative inner life.

Back to “the Bus”...

So why are projects like *Freedom Summer: Mississippi, 1964* important?

“Because, I feel like everything has been ‘ripped’ from us. We don’t have our own language, our own land, our own country. We don’t have anything that we ‘own.’”

“Because Black youth need to learn to set goals and respect themselves.”

“Because Black people’s thoughts matter.”

The Kennedy Center defines arts-integrated education as “an approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form. Students engage in a creative process which connects an art form and another subject area and meets evolving objectives in both” (Silverstein & Layne, 2010, p. 1). As students in the art academy explore and construct meaning through multiple literacies, they find that assessment moves far beyond the individual teacher and classroom context. Community members, artists, media, parents, peers, and, most importantly, students themselves evaluate, reflect, and respond to their work. Process becomes just as important as product as students see their art, writing, and performance through the lenses of others. Whether the metaphor is an artist’s reproduction of a homeless shanty, the border fence, a Mekong River boat, or a bus, students begin to understand that there are many stories to be told and that all voices need to be heard if a story is to be told well.

So why are projects like these important?

“Because you have a voice and your voice matters.”

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