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Culturally Responsive Teaching with Visual Art in the Social Studies

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A cultural carrier, art shapes our understanding of the past and present. Art addresses complex social issues, including equity, community, and individual identity (Boughton, 2004). In the social studies, only interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning can begin to render integrated knowledge, yet arts integration has not been fully explored. Paulo Freire (1993) observed, “Knowledge emerges only through intervention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (p. 53).

In order to be culturally competent, students require effective instruction based on high-quality content that includes the contributions and experiences of diverse ethnic groups (Gay, 2010). In her writings on culturally relevant teaching, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995; Cf. 1992) advocates for expansive instructional models to promote students’ academic development, cultural understanding, and critical consciousness. A responsive, congruent curriculum has the potential to empower and motivate students (Gay, 2010; Hollie, 2012).

This article is based on a program evaluation that was undertaken in a public school in Detroit to assess high school students’ perceptions of culturally responsive arts integration in the social studies. The authors sought answers to essential questions: Does the use of art in the social studies increase students’ interest in learning? Do students perceive arts integration as deepening their understanding of culture and history? As individuals, how important is learning about art and culture to them?

Special lessons were introduced in a social studies classroom on a monthly basis during the 2012-2013 academic year. Because all of the students in the program were African American young men, the lives and works of African American, male artists were emphasized. The students also studied the works of the Mexican painter, Diego Rivera, whose masterpiece, *Detroit Industry*, is in the Detroit Institute of Arts. Described herein, this first-year program evaluation suggests that culturally responsive teaching with visual art is a promising practice in the social studies.

The school and the students

Located in the City of Detroit, the Title I Priority School serves both middle and high school students, all of whom are male. Over 98% of the students at the school and 100% of the students in the program were African American during the 2012-2013 academic year. Seventy-

seven percent of the student body qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. Visual art was introduced to a social studies class that began with 13 and grew to 16 students, when additional students asked to participate. The program was established with the support of a veteran administrator whom had been recently appointed to the position of principal.

The students' prior knowledge

On the first day of the program, only one student was able to name an African American painter and to cite a work of art by an African American. The students were also unfamiliar with well-known works of art in the city's largest art museum, the Detroit Institute of Arts. Although they had limited prior knowledge of African American artists and local masterpieces, the students' comments suggested that they recognized the importance of art and culture in the social studies.

Open-ended questions were posed in writing on the first day to assess the students' understandings of the purposes of art and the role of art in society. Most of the students wrote that people create art in order to express their feelings. They viewed art as a means of communicating sentiments, emotions, and thoughts. Art was conceived as an integral, inextricable part of everyday life and the human experience. One student wrote, "...it is important because art is life." Similarly, another affirmed, "Art is important because it's our everyday life. Art gives a clear understanding of what people think."

Several students observed that art illustrates history. "People create art either to illustrate some experiences they've had or to give others a clear picture of a certain history," commented one young man. Another student stated that art is important because "...it tells what happened at the time." Artists indeed create art to express feelings and thoughts, to convey experiences, to tell stories, and to relate history. Artistic works are valuable sources when students are constructing narratives of the past in social studies courses.

The program

The program took an interdisciplinary approach by interweaving cultural and historical topics. The students participated in interactive lectures about the works of 20th-century artists Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, and William H. Johnson. In addition, they studied works by Diego Rivera. The works of these artists are part of the patrimony that shapes public memory and cultural consciousness. Both Bearden and Lawrence received the U.S. National Medal of Arts. Works by Bearden, Lawrence, and Johnson have been reproduced and circulated by the U.S. Postal Service on stamps. Chosen from the collections of the Smithsonian by First Lady Michelle Obama, several serigraphs by Johnson currently hang in the White House. In Mexico, Rivera, a leading figure in the Mexican Mural Renaissance, was given the National Award for Plastic Arts (Lozano & Rivera, 2008). Displayed in museums throughout the world, the creations of these artists shed light on historical and cultural topics.

The young men viewed, analyzed, and discussed 76 images of art, and they wrote about individuals pieces. The lives of the artists and the historical contexts of their works were discussed in interactive lectures. Visual thinking strategies (Yenawine, 2013) and primary-source analysis methods developed by the Library of Congress (2012) were employed to promote close observation and evidence-based interpretation. The Visual Thinking Strategies center on three questions: *What is going on in this picture?; What do you see that makes you say that?; and What more can you find?.*

Engaged in the process of inquiry, the students were asked to evaluate the images as sources of historical information. *The college, career, and civic life (C3) framework for social studies state standards* calls for inquiry-based approaches to learning, including the evaluation and use of evidence by students. When analyzing art, the young men addressed these questions of the Library of Congress: *What was happening during this time period?; What does the creator do to get his point across?; Who was the source's audience?; What powerful words and ideas are expressed?; and What questions does it raise?*

In addition to viewing and interpreting art within the context of social studies, the youths completed artistic projects with a range of media, including acrylic paints, markers, pencils, and mosaic tiles. Supplies were given to the students who wished to continue projects at home. Engaging in studio art projects helped the students appreciate how artists render and relate ideas, concepts, and values. They became cognizant of viewpoints and of the choices that artists make with regard to colors, designs, and compositions. Their creative artwork was digitally photographed for inclusion in the culminating project, a collaborative e-portfolio. For the e-portfolio, each student also selected two works of art by the artists whom he had studied. In writing, the students reflected on each piece.

Methods of program evaluation

Mixed methods were employed in the process of inquiry. Both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered in this IRB-approved study to gain insights into the students' views of arts integration in the social studies. The authors of this article began with the essential research questions, and they designed the surveys in order to generate understanding. Mixed methods are ideal when seeking to capture different perspectives within a social context, and they are particularly well suited for interdisciplinary investigations (Greene, 2007; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In *Mixed methods in social inquiry*, Jennifer Greene (2007) wrote, "A mixed methods way of thinking involves an openness to multiple ways of seeing and hearing, multiple ways of making sense of the social world, and multiple standpoints on what is important and to be valued and cherished...multiple approaches can generate more complete and meaningful understanding of complex human phenomena" (p. xii).

To evaluate the program, hard copies of two optional and anonymous surveys were administered during the second semester of the academic year. Fifteen students choose to take the first survey, and eleven students took the second one. The first survey was designed to assess the students' perceptions of the impact of studying art. On five-point Likert scales, they indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that studying art increases their interest in learning. They considered whether or not studying art helps them understand other cultures, their own culture, and history. Administered at the conclusion of the program, the second survey had two closed-ended, Likert-scale items; one open-ended question; and one multiple-choice question. The students were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that the use of art in social studies increases their interest in the subject. They also responded to the statement, "Learning about African American artists is important to me." The open-ended question asked the students to explain their responses to this statement. Lastly, the students were queried as to how often they thought that art should be used in social studies class. Both the qualitative and quantitative data were entered into Survey Monkey where they were analyzed by the researchers. While acknowledging the small size of the sample, the researchers concluded that the findings of

this first-year program evaluation were noteworthy and would be of interest to social studies educators. The surveys have been included in the appendix to this article.

In *Educating culturally responsive teachers*, Ana María Villegas and Tamara Lucas (2002) emphasize the value of authentic assessments, such as portfolios. Culturally responsive teaching involves the use of strategies that require students to engage in inquiry, analysis, and evaluation (Gay, 2010). The authors of this study realized that the e-portfolio, as a form of assessment, would be beneficial to the students, and it would offer programmatic insights. To give students the opportunity to reflect on what they had learned and to determine which artists and works of art had particular appeal, the class developed a collaborative, digital portfolio using Google Sites near the end of the academic year. The students were provided with color images of the works of art that they had studied, and they were asked to select their two favorite pieces. In writing, they explained their choices. Photographs of their own work were also included in the e-portfolio. In addition to the surveys, the students' contributions to the e-portfolio project were examined for this study.

The program's impact: Survey findings

According to the results of the first survey, arts integration in the social studies has positive effects on students' interest in learning. The majority of the students (73%) agreed or strongly agreed that studying art increases their interest in learning. The students also reported that studying art enhances their understandings of culture and history. The vast majority of the participants (86%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "Studying art helps me understand other cultures." Eighty percent affirmed that studying art helps them understand their own culture. The same percentage of the students (80%) concurred with the statement that studying art helps them understand history.

On the second survey, at the conclusion of the academic year, the majority of the students (72%) agreed or strongly agreed that the use of art increases their interest in social studies. When asked how often art should be used in social studies class, most (54%) supported using art often. Thirty-six percent thought that art should sometimes be integrated. Only 9% believed that art should rarely be integrated. In a comment's box, one student wrote, "I love art, and this class interests (me) more."

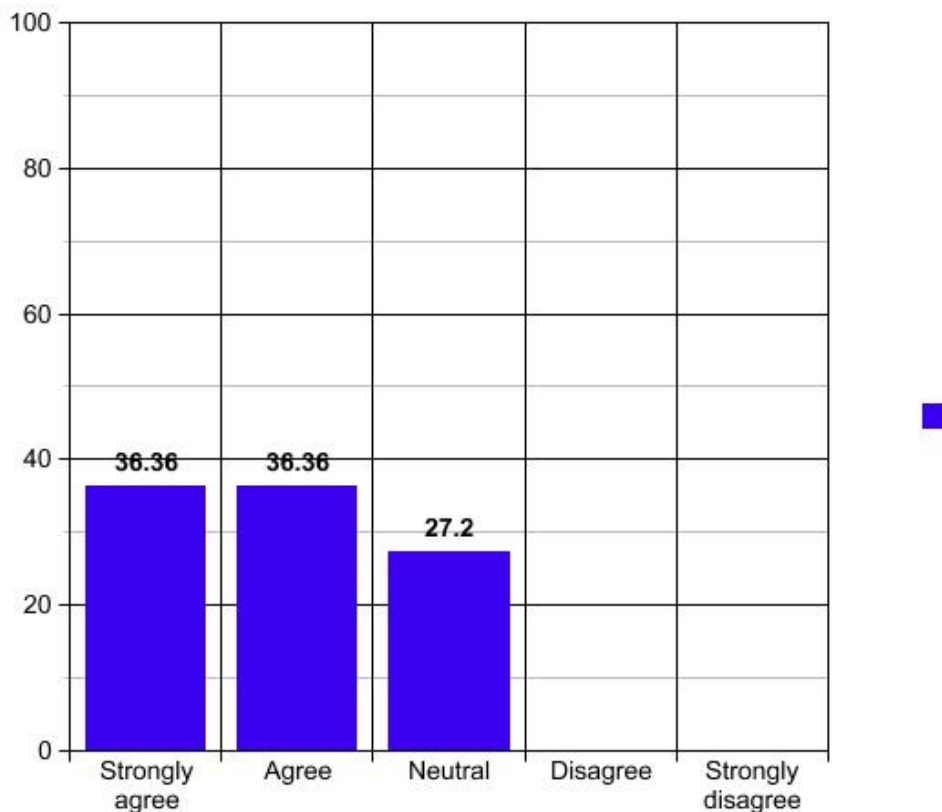


Figure 1. The use of art in social studies increases my interest in the subject.

Learning about the art of African Americans was important to the vast majority (81%) of the students. Over half (54%) strongly agreed and 27% agreed that learning about African American artists was important to them. In explaining their responses, the students wrote about the value of learning about their own culture and history. “With African American art, I can relate to my cultural background. It is great and helps to inspire me,” wrote one student. “It teaches us more about our history,” commented another young man.

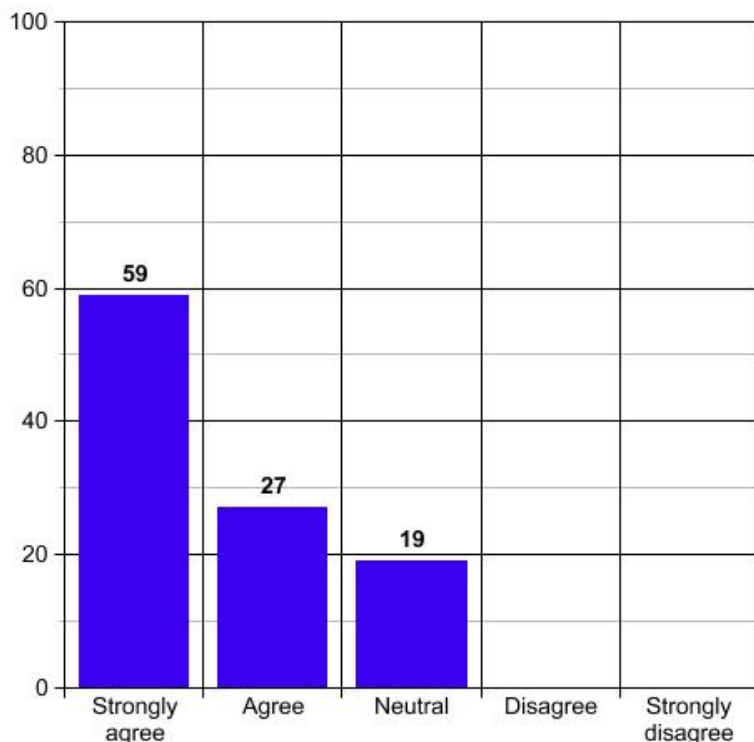


Figure 2. Learning about African American artists is important to me.

The collaborative e-portfolio

The students’ reflective writings for the digital portfolio demonstrate that their understandings of the cultural and historical contributions of African Americans deepened as a result of the program. For the project, they chose their favorite pieces, and they explained in writing their selections both in terms of content and style. When they began working on the portfolio, they had studied the works of Lawrence, Bearden and Johnson, but they had yet to study Rivera’s artwork. The students’ selections suggest that artworks depicting African Americans in historical and familial settings had particular appeal.

Although their comments in class clearly indicated that they admired Johnson, all of the students chose pieces by either Lawrence or Bearden for the portfolio. A number of paintings from Lawrence’s *War Series* were selected by multiple students, including *Beachhead*, *The Letter*, and *Another Patrol*. Lawrence served as a combat artist in the Coast Guard during World War II. Through his paintings, Lawrence chronicled the experiences of African Americans during the war as well as other periods in United States history. Lawrence is well known for his *Migration Series*, a series of 60 panels that depict the migration of African Americans from the agricultural South to the industrialized North (Bearden, 1993). The *Migration Series* was examined closely in the program, but the e-portfolio and class discussions suggest that the *War Series* most appealed to the students.



Figure 3. Jacob Lawrence, *War Series: Beachhead* (1947)

Tempera on composition board

Whitney Museum of American Art

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger

Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Art © Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation

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Figure 4. Jacob Lawrence, *War Series: The Letter* (1946)
Tempera on composition board
Whitney Museum of American Art
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger
Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
Art © Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation
Licensed by the Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Figure 5. Jacob Lawrence, *War Series: Another Patrol* (1946)

Tempera on composition board

Whitney Museum of American Art

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger

Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Art © Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation

Licensed by the Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

In explaining his choices of two pieces from the *War Series* for the class portfolio, one student wrote about Lawrence's ability to convey emotions as well as action. Reflecting on *The Letter*, the student wrote, "I know exactly what the artist portrayed in this picture...I can understand what the artist is picturing...he's done a great job showing the wartime feel and showing personal human emotions..." The same student was impressed by Lawrence's ability to capture the complexities of combat in a single painting. About *Beachhead*, he wrote, "It shows what happens on the field. The tanks charging in, the men running out, the medivacs carrying out injured soldiers; it shows everything."

Images of families were chosen for the portfolio project; Bearden's *The Family* and *Quilting Time* were selected by multiple students. Cityscapes were also popular, especially Bearden's *Pittsburgh Memory*. Explaining his selection of *The Family*, one student, an admirer of Bearden's work, wrote, "I love how a family is represented through their trials. Bearden uses the color scheme to express the emotions of the family." In reflecting on *Pittsburgh Memory*, the same

student commented on Bearden's use of a gray color scheme to depict two men in the city that was, at the time, the epicenter of the steel industry. He appreciated Bearden's technique and style. He affirmed, "Romare Bearden is actually my favorite artist. I love his art...Bearden's collage style interests me greatly."



Figure 6. Romare Bearden, *The Family* (1941)
Gouache with ink and graphite on brown paper
Digital image © National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Art © Romare Bearden Foundation
Licensed by VAGA, New York



Figure 7. Romare Bearden, *Pittsburgh Memory* (1964)
Printed papers with graphite on cardboard
Digital image © National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Art © Romare Bearden Foundation
Licensed by VAGA, New York

Discussion

Student engagement and diverse perspectives in inquiry-based learning

“The most important attitude that can be formed is that of a desire to go on learning,” wrote John Dewey in *Experience & education* (1938, p. 48). The finding of this program evaluation that studying art increases students’ interest in learning is significant. Curiosity and engagement precede learning, knowledge, and understanding (Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison, 2011). Art appeals to children, youths, and adults because of its beauty and compelling subjects. Culturally responsive instruction takes students’ learning propensities into account (Hollins & Oliver, 1999).

“Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden tell history with their art, and it’s informative,” wrote one student in his contribution to the e-portfolio. Bearden depicted, in his meticulously constructed collages, life in rural North Carolina, Pittsburgh, and New York. When Bearden was 16, the age of several students in the program, he worked the night shift at U.S. Steel in Pittsburgh during the summer. Living in an industrialized city, the young men identified with Bearden’s personal story. His art offers “...visual discourses on African American identity and mythos...” (Powell, Di Giulio, Garcia, Trout, & Wang, 2006, p. 13).

According to the research of Roy Rosenweig and David Thelen (1998), the past is important to individuals in that it helps them understand themselves and forge connections to others. Knowledge is constructed, and people of different cultures have differing ideas of what is historically important (Rosenweig & Thelen, 1998; Banks, 1993). Ethnic, racial, religious, and familial factors influence how people view and interpret the past (Wineburg, 2000). The consideration of diverse perspectives is critical to historical investigations and culturally responsive teaching (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013; Epstein, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

In the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (2013), culture is the first of 10 themes. Developing cultural competence and “grounding” students in their cultures are, according to the research of Gloria Ladson-Billings, essential practices (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Culturally responsive pedagogy is inherently based on respect and regard for students’ identities and communities (Nieto, 2013; McKinley, 2010). Geneva Gay (2010, p. 31) wrote that culturally responsive teaching, “...acknowledges the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups...It builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities.”

In the enrichment program on which this article is based, the students reported that the study of African American art was important to them. Their surveys indicate that the inclusion of works of art by African Americans rendered the social studies content more meaningful. “I like finding out great things about African America. It’s also interesting,” wrote a student in the program.

In their establishment of relationships between artists and viewers, artistic works are vehicles for cultural transmission (Freedman, 2003). Students learn about themselves and other people by studying art because, as the Greek philosopher Aristotle observed with regard to poetry and drama, art imitates life (Aristotle, 2002). “Culture is created every day in countless enactments between generations, among peers, in groups, and by courageous individuals,” wrote James Bau Graves (2005, p. 13) in his book, *Cultural democracy: The arts, community & the public purpose*.

In addition to fostering cultural understanding, arts integration cultivates historical habits of mind (Bradley Commission on History in Schools, 1989). In *The big six historical thinking concepts*, Peter Seixas and Tom Morton (2013) posit that the examination of art can lead to historical insights. In the high school program on which this article is based, the paintings, along with pictures and documents, illustrated how historical developments, such as the Great Migration, the Depression, and World War II, impacted individuals, the African American community, and the country. Visual arts integration supported all four dimensions of the Inquiry Arc of the *College, career, and civic life (C3) framework* (2013), particularly dimension three: Evaluating sources and using evidence.

Implications of interdisciplinary approaches and this study

Interdisciplinary knowledge is required to address contemporary challenges and problems (Freedman, 2003). In alignment with standards for teaching social studies and other content areas, culturally responsive arts integration develops 21st-century skills. (Saifer, Edwards, Ellis, Ko, & Stuczynski, 2011). Living in a world that is highly visual, students must be able to analyze and interpret images (Freedman, 2003; Desai, Hamlin, & Mattson, 2010; Messaris, 1994; Rickard-Weinholtz, 2011). When they study art, students begin to discern intent, and they make

inferences. “Art is an essential form of expression and communication, an expansive and diverse language fundamentally connected to experiencing and engaging in the world around us,” wrote Laurie Polster (2010, p. 19; Cf. Jackson, 1998, p. 40).

Arts integration in the social studies supports the development of traditional and new literacy skills (McDonald, 2010). The construction of knowledge becomes an intertextual process; art is studied in conjunction with written and other types of sources. Students develop an appreciation for multiple perspectives because viewers interpret art differently. Human experiences are represented in a multitude of ways (Eisner & Day, 2004). Writing about and discussing art teaches students that they should question what they see (Sayre, 2009).

The findings of this first-year evaluation supported the continuation of the enrichment program. As of 2015, the program’s core group has doubled. In special projects, many more students are involved through their social studies classes. Students are studying works by female and male artists of diverse cultural backgrounds. In person, the students are also viewing original works in the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts. The authors intend to continue to conduct program evaluations and action research.



Figure 8. A student views a panel of Diego Rivera’s *Detroit Industry* at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Conclusion

Student populations in the United States are culturally dynamic, highly interconnected, and visual. This study suggests that arts integration fosters students’ understanding of history and culture by engaging them in inquiry-based approaches to learning. In addition to offering digital

images of artistic works on their websites, many museums have designed high-quality, art-based lessons for use in the social studies (Powell, 2012). Educators and students may employ visual thinking strategies and source-analysis techniques to interpret and evaluate art. A promising practice, culturally responsive arts integration merits consideration by social studies educators.

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Appendix A

Survey I

1. Studying art increases my interest in learning.

strongly agree agree neutral disagree strongly disagree

2. Studying art helps me understand other cultures.

strongly agree agree neutral disagree strongly disagree

3. Studying art helps me understand my own culture.

strongly agree agree neutral disagree strongly disagree

4. Studying art helps me understand history.

strongly agree agree neutral disagree strongly disagree

Appendix B

Survey II

1. The use of art in social studies instruction increases my interest in the subject.
 strongly agree agree neutral disagree strongly disagree

2. Learning about African American artists is important to me.
 strongly agree agree neutral disagree strongly disagree

3. Why? Please explain your answer to question two.

4. How often do you think that art should be used in social studies class?
 often sometimes rarely never