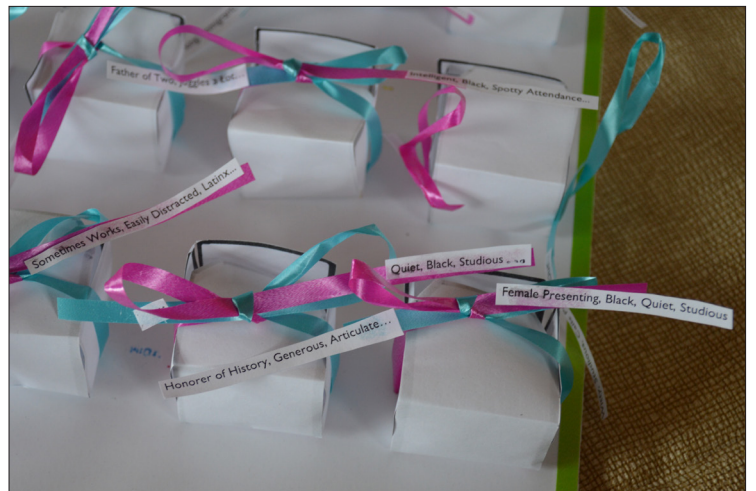
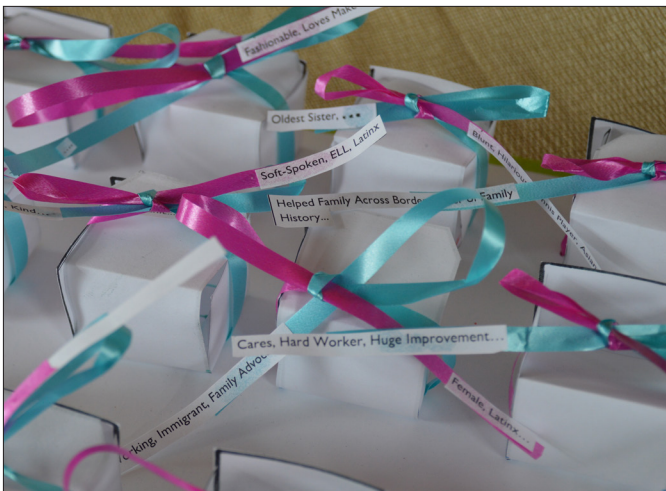
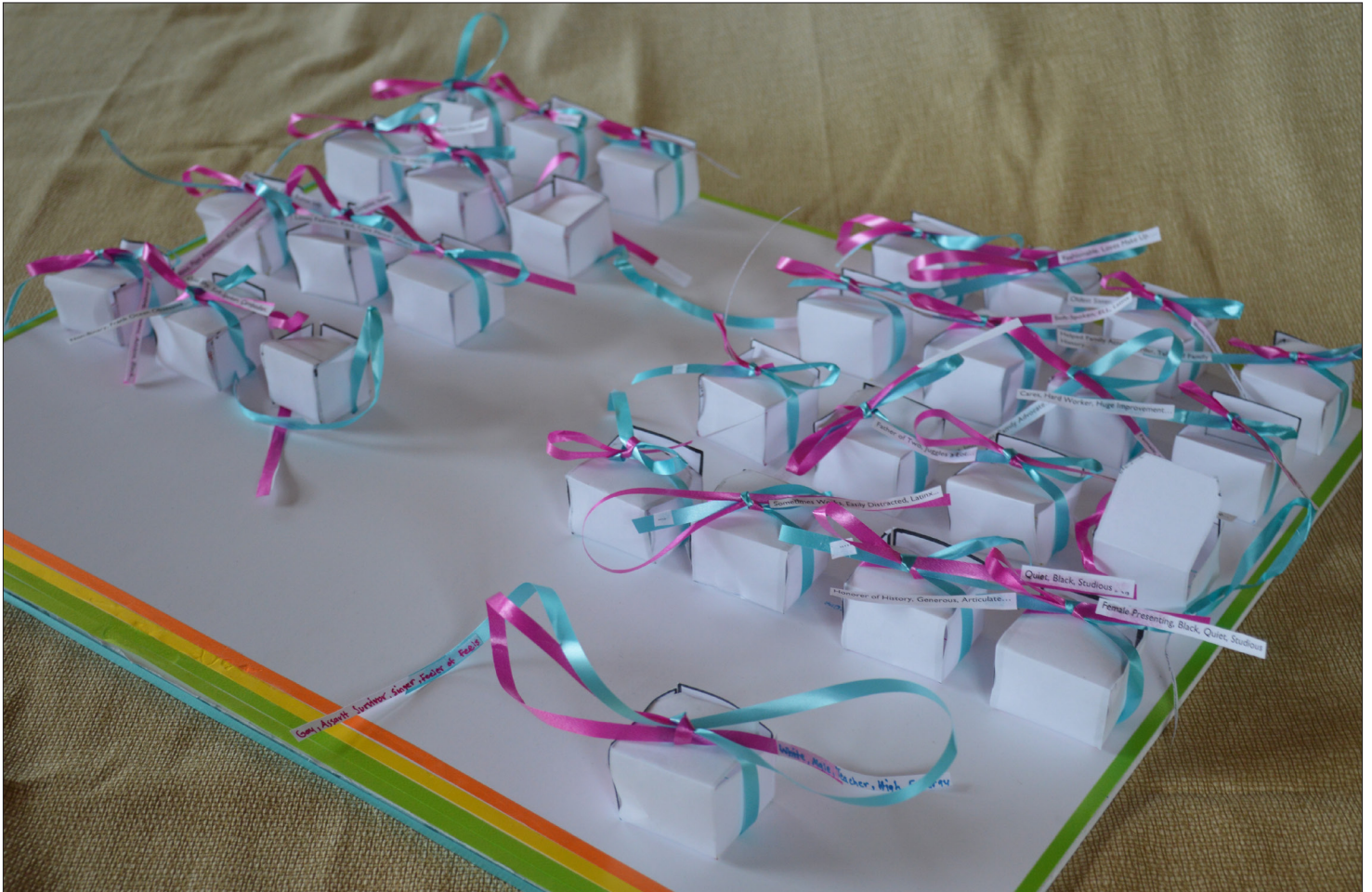


# HIDDEN AND OVERT: EXPLORING RACE AND OTHER IDENTITIES IN THE CLASSROOM

*Interactive Classroom Sculpture by Colin Kelly  
High School History*



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## COLIN KELLY ARTIST STATEMENT

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“The human brain is primed for emotional bonding, which supports learning. The brain is tuned to experience empathy, which intimately connects individuals to one another’s experiences”<sup>1</sup>

This artistic project allowed me to process and reflect on my teaching practice in order to become more actively anti-racist and culturally competent. I started my project by analyzing a series of individual notes I wrote to each of my students following a rough day of classes. As I analyzed the notes, I started to notice a pattern regarding not just race, but other identities as well that had large consequences for how I built relationships with my students. It was essential to me to examine these consequences carefully since relationship building, or emotional bonding, is critical to creating an equitable and safe learning environment.

One of my students, Taylor<sup>2</sup>, had come out to me as non-binary, and my note to Taylor reflected this close relationship: “I really appreciate how you are present everyday and are your authentic self. Sometimes the most radical thing we can do is be ourselves and your bravery inspires me”. In contrast, my note to a student named Bobby reflected our minimal relationship, “Bobby I really appreciate the energy you bring to class and the fact that you are here everyday trying. I wish in the future that you would more carefully consider how you behave in class, you are a leader and others will look to you to see how they should behave”. While I knew about the identities Taylor negotiated, my note to Bobby demonstrated that I did not know much, if anything about the identities he was negotiating.

I attempted to differentiate between the two different categories of identities that I was discovering by labeling them “Hidden”; and “Overt.” Hidden identities refer to those that are not readily visible. These hidden identities would include categories such as sexuality and familial relationships. Overt identities refer to those identities that are readily visible, such as race and apparent gender.

I found my framework for identity to be quite impactful in making me reflect on how we build relationships with students. When I knew more about a student’s identities, especially their hidden ones such as with Taylor, I had a stronger relationship with them. However, I ran into another layer of complexity when I reflected on my student Sarah who is biracial. She had shared with me that she was ostracized from the black community for being light skinned and from the white community for “being too black”. The pain that she was experiencing was not readily visible, and her sharing that with me deepened my relationship with her. In this way, I discovered that race, which had seemed like an overt identity, could have layers of hidden depth and experiences unique to each individual.

For the artistic representation of my framework regarding identity, I used two ribbons to tie and shut a box that represented each student. The color of the ribbon corresponded to the identity it represented: Overt identities were written on red and hidden identities were written on blue. For each box, I wrote the name of one of my students inside and then wrote what I knew about their hidden and overt identities on the respective ribbons. At the end of each list of identities I put an ellipse to represent how their is always more to learn about our students. For those students who I did not have a strong relationship with, I often wrote an ellipse for their hidden identities. This depicts how having knowledge of both identities is critical to relationship building, one of the conclusions of my work.

Pulling on both identity strings undoes the knot, opening the box and revealing the name of the student whose identities they belong to inside. Each name was drawn to attempt a 3-D effect, again representing that there is always more depth to these identities. Lastly, a final conclusion I came to is that having knowledge of a student’s hidden or overt identities does not equal building a relationship. While students belonging to the same cultural groups can indicate commonalities in experience, I must always treat each student as an individual and endeavor to learn how their unique combinations of identities has defined their experience. In doing this, I will build stronger and more authentic relationships with my students.

<sup>1</sup>Fischer, Kurt W., Glennon, Catherine and Hinton, Christina (2012). Chapter 6: Applying the Science of How We Learn. In N. Hoffman, A. Steinberg, and R. Wolfe (Eds.), *Anytime, Anywhere: Student Centered Learning for Schools and Teachers* (p. 167). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

<sup>2</sup>All student names are pseudonyms

