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JUSTICE BY DESIGN

Art and Imagination as a Bridge to Justice Education

By Mary Beth Akre

It takes only one step to start on the path to justice. In the Images to Social Justice project, students in design classes are asked to create a visual image that reflects an issue of social justice. It engages students in both a reflective and an active way. “What is justice?” and “What matters to you?” become questions of discernment. Research and development of a visual idea challenge students who may never have been involved with service. They also help students understand the world beyond their immediate community. This study will show how a single visual arts project can inspire students to understand and advocate for justice in the world.

The project is called “Images of Social Justice.” The media are collage from magazines, printed images from the internet, ink, markers, paint, glue. For the content students in two dimensional design class are given this project midway through a semester. At Loyola Maryland, 2D is a fine arts core offering with a wide range of classes and majors. Some students have never participated in service; others are vibrant members of the Center for Community Service and Justice. The technique of collage unites all differences in abilities and experience.

The Images of Social Justice project begins with the design concept of unity. To a designer, unity means arranging all of the elements into a harmonious whole. The design has to look like all the parts belong together. To achieve unity, designers use the gestalt grouping principles of visual organization: proximity, similarity, closure, and line of direction. Students must meet the formal parameters of the project: use one or more grouping principles to create a unified and balanced collage that centers on an idea of social justice. Interestingly, the gestalt theory of visual organization says that humans perceive the whole before they see parts, an idea that reinforces itself in the content of the project. We are all humans first, and we see differences only after understanding our similarities. By learning, reflecting, and finally advocating about an issue in social justice, students see their connections to others in the world.

The more difficult part of the project is content. Coming up with the idea that they want to consider very difficult. I

ask my students, “What matters to you?” To help them further with discernment, I ask them to define *justice*. I assure them that I will support their idea, no matter what it is. They have absolute freedom in terms of content, which is absolutely essential to the project. I feel that many of them do not even know what matters to them yet or do not understand things outside their immediate world at Loyola or at their homes. Being attentive to issues in their local, national, or world community is a major step in the path to advocacy. Students can choose to see issues in social justice that they have not noticed before. For students to take the step towards justice, they have to trust that their ideas will matter and that what they want to express is important.

Students collect images first and then begin to edit and arrange them. As they work, I continue to challenge them to speak clearly and with passions. I ask them to define what *advocate* means and to imagine how they might be able to advocate with their artwork. Students take breaks to walk around the room and look at what others are doing; this leads to discussion and a sense of collaboration. I encourage students to support each other's work; this creates more trust and enables them to speak freely. Once the collages are finished, I ask the students

to write up a reflection on their social justice issue. We post all of the work on the wall and discuss each piece in terms of technical issues of design and in terms of content. Each student has a chance to describe one's thought process and one's work.

Finally, I show their work in public. The collages appear in display cases outside the art gallery or on the walls of campus ministry, the academic advising office, or any other venue that engages viewers in visual dialog.

Being attentive, being reflective, and engaging in a dialog with viewers create a beginning for students to follow in service and to be men and women for and with others. It is a simple but crucial step that creates a sense of ease with advocacy and with serving others. ■

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Loyola University Maryland student Brittanie Sibilly.