

Intercultural Graphicacy: Art Educational Strategies for the Post-colonial Era

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Abstract

Connecting recent trends in art education to key issues in indigenous and intercultural education, I describe an emergent curricular approach I call *intercultural graphicacy*. This art educational model is intended to mediate the influence of globalization and encourage more critical engagement with the visual imagery that is circulating through contemporary society, even in geographically remote or isolated areas. After explaining the concept of and need for intercultural graphicacy, I illustrate its application through a brief discussion of a pilot study I conducted in an indigenous middle school located in the Huichol community of San Miguel Huaixtita, deep in the mountains north of Guadalajara, Mexico. I designed and taught two art lessons integrated with the locally authored culture/language text. From this experience, I derived valuable insights for further development and implementation of an intercultural graphicacy curriculum in this context.

Introduction

In the field of intercultural communication there seems to be a growing interest in issues related to the visual communication strategies developed and used by human beings all around the world. My own work begins and ends with art education: teaching children about visual and material culture and teaching teachers how to teach them. My passion is exploring and exposing the larger global dynamics and cross-cultural interactions that inform human cultural production, and finding ways to promote these understandings through art education.

Lately, I have been developing an approach I call “intercultural graphicacy” as an alternative visual communications curriculum and art educational paradigm. In this paper, I would like to offer a brief description and rationale for this approach and then illustrate it with a discussion of preliminary work that I have undertaken with a school in la Zona Huichola, the indigenous territory of the Wixaritari people of central Mexico.

What is graphicacy?

Put simply, graphicacy is one of the four modes of communication identified by Balchin and Coleman (1965) as educational essentials--literacy, numeracy, articulacy, and graphicacy--all of which include both internal and external processes, for example, reading and writing, listening and speaking, and solving and formulating numerical problems. In the same vein, graphicacy involves both comprehending and creating visual imagery. According to Poracsky, Young, and Patton (1999), “understanding when one mode is more appropriate

than another and how to use each mode effectively [are] essential knowledge-sets and skill-sets for all well-educated people” (p. 104). Yet, despite the importance, ubiquity, and universality of graphic images, in most countries neither formal school curricula nor individual teachers typically devote much attention to developing the skills and understandings of graphicacy (Poracsky, Young, and Patton, 1999; see also Kamens and Cha, 1992). This curricular cavity not only leaves most students under-skilled in communicating visually themselves, but also inadequately prepared for encounters with visual representations created by others. In a world of communication increasingly dependent upon highly visual media, such as television and the Internet, this is a glaring omission.

Although the term *graphicacy* did not originate within the specific domain of art education, the concept resonates with recent initiatives in this field. Many practitioners and theorists believe that art educators should take greater responsibility for cultivating these skills and understandings, under the banner of Visual Culture Art Education (VCAE.) This movement, and the even broader initiative of Material Culture Art Education, push teaching and learning about the visual world beyond that which has been officially designated “art” during various historical periods according to particular, culturally defined criteria. Art educators concerned with material and visual culture are more likely than others to spend class time examining such diverse contemporary content as advertising, comic books, packaging designs, and other material products of culture, and to structure art-making activities around these investigations.

Explaining Interculturality

The approach I call *intercultural graphicacy* also encourages the examination of visual and material products, but situates the development of skills related to critical viewing and producing within larger understandings of human cultural contact and idea diffusion throughout history. Feral (1996) stated that interculturalism deals with a “mutual friction of cultures, an interaction, an exchange” (p. 1) and explained that, although cultural borrowing is not new, the need to understand the processes and outcomes of these exchanges seems more pressing than ever. An intercultural approach to education draws attention to the fact that humans are a migratory species, and examines what happens when culture-sharing groups meet and interact. The visual record of human experience, including art, tells stories of migration and conflict, idea diffusion and borrowing, power and resistance, loss of tradition and cultural efflorescence. Studying this record can reveal the connections between micro and macro levels of cultural identity and connect what happens in the local community to the events playing out upon the international stage (see, for example: Cornwell & Stoddard, 1999; Freadman, 2001; Hatcher, 1985). Greater awareness of these processes and the interconnectedness of different cultural groups and their knowledges can also help distinct communities prepare for cultural contact and may make positive outcomes more likely.

The post-colonial era has seen school systems struggle to balance the inherited texts of colonialism with reclaimed local knowledges rarely represented in formal school curricula (Benavot et al, 1991; Kamens & Cha, 1992). The issue is not to contest the inclusion of Western or imported understandings, but to protest the exclusion of more localized traditions. Reclaiming and reinserting “indigenous knowledge as a public good” (Jones & Hunter, 2004, p. 25) into school curricula is a key strategy in the struggle to preserve alternative ways of living in the world. It stems from recognition that humanity does not benefit from a lack of diversity, and indeed admits the possibility that “indigenous concepts and values [may]

provide solutions to complex and compounding world problems” (Harmsworth, 2002, cited in Jones & Hunter, 2004, p. 15). Wangboje (1995) asserted that art educators should take the lead in revitalizing the “vintage” cultural identity of their home countries, to enrich contemporary society and contribute to cultural articulation in an era of increasing homogenization. Too often, however, art education programs fail to problematize the functions of visual imagery within different societies, to acknowledge local traditions, or to consider connections to larger global phenomena. Intercultural graphicacy is an attempt to address these inadequacies.

Intercultural Graphicacy

To encourage an intercultural teaching model for art education, I have developed and implemented pedagogical strategies such as simulations, object lessons, and community-based research. Most recently, though, I have been working on designing a curriculum for intercultural graphicacy for implementation within a school serving a particular indigenous population. In this context, intercultural graphicacy seems to take on more urgency.

La Secundaria Tatutsi Maxakwari

In the fall of 2003, I had an opportunity to visit the village of San Miguel Huaixtita in the Zona Huichola, a remote mountainous area northwest of Guadalajara. This community is home to a government-sponsored elementary-level boarding school, but the Huicholes there understood education as empowerment and sought further opportunities. With the assistance of various non-governmental organizations and urban university faculty, a bilingual middle school was established, under the direction of Dra. Rocio Aguinaga (of ITESO, in Guadalajara). La escuela secundaria Tatutsi Maxakwari, known in Spanish as Nuestro Abuelo Cola de Venado (or, Our Grandfather Deertail) has been the subject of several studies and has been recognized by UNESCO as an exceptional example of indigenous education (Martin, 2004).

Like other art teachers in the US, I had acquired a faint awareness of Huichol culture through my experience with popular classroom art activities that mimicked their yarn-painting techniques. However, I realized that I had little understanding of the traditions of this indigenous culture. After my first visit to Mexico in 2002, I began reading more about the Huicholes and some of the contemporary issues they face. I discovered an article about a fascinating photography project undertaken at this Huichol middle school, and I decided to contact the author, Dr. Sarah Corona Berkin, Professor of Communications at the University of Guadalajara. A true intercultural educator, she opened the doors for me to learn first-hand about Huicholes from Huicholes themselves. Dr. Corona has worked for several years with the faculty at la secundaria Tatutsi Maxakwari, developing a culture and communications textbook that records oral histories shared by a local shaman/teacher. She introduced me to Dr. Aguinaga, so that I might request an opportunity to visit the school and learn more about the visual traditions and educational goals of this community. The director replied, “These people have been studied enough. What can you do for them?” Her potent response to my request compelled me to offer some of my own expertise to the school.

In our conversation, Rocio explained that the Huicholes had an interest in learning about design, so that they could improve the marketability of their handicrafts. I also learned that the town of San Miguel had recently seen the arrival of solar-powered television sets and internet-connected computers. The time seemed right to propose a curriculum for building

intercultural graphicacy. In the next section, I describe the process and outcomes of my first efforts to work with the Huichol school curriculum. I considered this endeavor a pilot study undertaken to lay the groundwork for further development of this research project.

Proposal for an Intercultural Graphicacy Curriculum

When I departed Guadalajara after that first meeting, I carried with me a copy of the culture and communications textbook that Sarah Corona had helped develop for the school. Dictated by shaman/teacher Agustin Salvador Martinez, with translations and pedagogical strategies for teaching communications added by Dr. Corona and her team, the text is titled *Nuestro Libro de la Memoria y la Escritura: Apuntes para la Enseñanza de la Cultura Wixarika*. (English: *Our Book of Memory and Writing: Notes for Teaching Huichol Culture*.) In it are 25 lessons for each of the three years of middle school. The text is presented first in Wixarika, followed by a translation and communication activities in Spanish.

Huichol children learn to speak Wixaritari at home, and then attend elementary school in order to learn to read and write, but in the language of the dominant society, Spanish. In middle school, their ability to read and write Spanish becomes the basis for learning to read and write Wixaritari. This politically-charged text importantly places the indigenous language and stories on a more even status with those of the Mexican state, encouraging not only the acquisition of communication skills to deal with the influences of the outside world, but also the maintenance and transmission of culturally-specific know-ledges.

Because this existing teaching resource embodied the values of intercultural education, it seemed intuitive to link learning activities for intercultural graphicacy to the content therein. Extending the suggested pedagogical strategies to support the development of graphicacy might provide students with the skills, understanding, and insights to critique global visual culture and resist or respond creatively to cultural colonialism, by asserting their own ideas and evolving identities visually in powerful, effective ways. Developing such lessons depended upon identifying intersections between the content of the bi-lingual textbook and content drawn from the visual world, locally and from the larger society. Upon my return to Florida, I began to analyze the narrative and the accompanying learning activities for content, strategies, orientations, or themes that might evoke potential links to visual culture studies. As I reviewed and coded emergent linkages, five underlying themes became apparent:

- Aesthetics: lessons which suggested opportunities to analyze or critique beliefs and values embodied in visual imagery, material objects, designs, experiences, behaviors, and other cultural products;
- Cross-cultural comparisons: lessons presenting opportunities to examine visual phenomena from diverse perspectives to become more critically aware and learn about/from one another;
- Design literacy: lessons leading to analysis of advertising, marketing, corporate identity, and the creation of desire;
- Maps: lessons with pedagogical strategies calling attention to the symbolic representation of spaces, places, routes, other phenomena, from a politically engaged perspective;
- Illustrations: lessons with pedagogical strategies or text dictating the use of new skills or materials in recording information visually, through drawing, printing, painting, or other techniques, for example.

The first two themes, aesthetics and cross-cultural comparisons, appeared in the materials used by all three grade levels, while the last three seemed to be emphasized during different years. For example, during the first year of the culture class, many lessons presented opportunities to teach various techniques of illustration, to record and communicate information and to create images of contemporary Huichol concerns, lives, and values. Also during year one, a few lessons suggested cross-cultural comparisons of visual imagery, relating on equal terms examples of locally produced imagery to images from other places and times. Aesthetics also appeared in this first section of the text, and was presented as a fundamental human concern related to our senses and how we experience the world.

Pedagogical strategies attached to the text for second year students drew attention to maps as politically charged forms of visual culture. The narrative content of the lessons in year two continued to support reflection upon aesthetic concerns and cultural comparisons, and in addition, suggested opportunities to engage students in consideration of graphic design, advertising, and marketing as powerful examples of visual culture, to become more critically aware of the messages and values they embody. Engaging with design as visual communication seemed to dominate the third year curriculum, although the other themes recurred as well. Out of the (75) separate lessons in the three-year textbook, I identified a total of (44) (14 each in the first two years, and (16) in the third year) that presented potential linkages for building intercultural graphicacy. Of these (44), I selected two for further development and presentation, on the basis of my understanding of pressing issues in the Huichol community. One of these narratives concerned vision, which I linked to the visual technologies being introduced into their village, and the other concerned territorial politics, which linked to the visual culture of maps and their uses. Prior to my visit, I created lesson plans, collected teaching resources and had everything professionally translated into Spanish. I assembled this information and a supplementary assortment of art materials into classroom packets for teachers, administrators, and students before leaving for San Miguel to conduct a teaching demonstration in the school. During my brief visit, I was able to work with five groups of students at all three grade levels. I taught the vision lesson four times and the map lesson once.

The Lessons

The first lesson I chose to develop was linked to First Year, Lesson 10 in the textbook, entitled *Para Que Sirve Tu Vista* (English: In what ways does your vision serve you?). In part, this text asks students to reflect upon the importance of vision in their daily lives and to consider how sight is a treasure to be guarded. The suggested pedagogical strategy was to create a book of human senses, based upon discussion of how each serves us and how we can take care and develop them (Martinez & Corona, 2002, p. 39).

Keeping in mind the recent influx into their community of high-tech equipment for transmitting visual information, I decided that the most productive teaching toward intercultural graphicacy that I could create to complement this lesson on vision would be an explanation of the fundamental mechanics of moving pictures. Because animation pre-dated photography and film-making, and requires only the simplest technologies and materials at its most basic, I designed a lesson for the first year students about two of the earliest devices invented to make images appear to move. This included an explanation of the workings of the

eye because animation depends upon the retina retaining one image until it is replaced with another, a phenomenon called *persistence of vision*.

One of the earliest known mechanisms for fooling the eye using this characteristic of sight was a thaumatrope, a small, flat device with images on either side and strings extending in either direction from its central horizontal axis. When the strings are twisted tight and then pulled, the device spins rapidly, making the two separate images visually blend into one. My lesson invited students to create a thaumatrope, as well as a two-page flipbook. The students eagerly participated in making and sharing their own animated images, while I explained that television and internet images are just more elaborate versions of these same simple mechanisms, based upon the same fundamental characteristics of sight. I closed the lesson with a reminder of how easily the eye can be fooled. On a certain level, perhaps, understanding the basic mechanics underlying new technologies might de-mystify them to a certain degree and perhaps even encourage students to envision the possibility of creating their own.

Maps

The second lesson I developed focused upon maps, the dominant theme of the second year communication strategies. The narrative portion of Year Two, Lesson 14 was titled “*El territorio para el Wixarika es importante. Nos preocupamos por el?*” (English: “For the Huichol, territory is important. Does this concern us?”). The text brings up issues of indigenous territorial rights and suggests that the government has divided the Huichol territory, and thus the people, making it harder for them to unite and defend their rights. It asks the students to consider what would happen if they lost their territory, and invites them to become active in political processes to maintain their rights.

The suggested pedagogical strategy was to make a map showing the boundaries and defining moments of the Zona Huichola in the past and in the present, using different colors to differentiate the two (Martinez & Corona, 2002, p. 99). Expanding upon this activity, I developed a very detailed lesson plan with a set of visual resources to illustrate the concept that a map is a form of visual culture with an agenda. I collected reproductions of maps from many parts of the world, many eras, representing many different agendas and worldviews. Important among the examples I showed was a yarn painting of the five cardinal directions, called “The Womb of the World” by José Benítez Sánchez, a Huichol artist/shaman featured in the art show *The Huichol Creation of the World* (Clisby, 1975, p. 83). The set of teaching visuals also contained copies of many different historical maps of Mexico, from the Aztecs to Spanish explorers to land-sat images, as well as territorial maps by other groups of indigenous peoples, contemporary computer-generated city maps, and map-based artworks by seven contemporary artists from six different countries. The lesson was designed to encourage student understandings that (a) maps always leave something out, (b) the things that are left in typically reflect the agenda or interests of the mapmaker or those who commissioned its making, (c) often the ways that a place is represented by outsiders has little connection to the way it is perceived by the people who live there, and (d) creating a map that asserts a different, personal point of view can be a powerful statement, both politically and artistically.

To construct these understandings, students were asked to examine the many different map reproductions and discuss what their original purposes might have been. After considering the uses and meanings of these maps, students were shown pictures of map-based artworks by artists from a variety of cultures and media traditions. They were asked to think

about why each artist chose maps as a way to challenge viewers' perceptions and assert a personal vision. Students were then invited to think about their own vision of their community and record it on paper. After sketching individual maps showing places each student valued within the community, the entire class, including the teacher, worked together on a larger map, using pastels on damp fabric.

At the center of their map is the spiritual center of Huichol life, the Kaliwei, which is in fact physically located on the very outskirts of their town. Symbols of Wixarika spiritual life--the drum, arrow, deer, and peyote blossom--are featured, along with the plants, animals, and water sources that have traditionally sustained the community. Interestingly, the schools, shops, and wireless power poles of the area are not included. The act of creating their own representation of their place in the world answers the representations created by outsiders and asserts one vision of what is most important to those who live there.

Conclusion

This brief visit to San Miguel and the secundaria Tatutsi Maxakwari allowed me the opportunity to gain insights into contemporary Huichol culture, and to begin a dialogue with the teachers, administrators, and students of the school about the potential role that deliberate study of visual culture might play in the construction of the educated Wixaritari adult. Although time limitations prevented me from conducting a formal assessment of student outcomes from these learning activities, I was able to draw some conclusions about the lesson plans themselves. I examined the appropriateness of content, the formal structure of the lesson plans, the pre-requisite knowledges, and the presentation of materials, and I identified several modifications that I will keep in mind when refining and expanding this curriculum. One of these realizations, for example, was that the term "caricaturas" ("cartoons") seemed to communicate more clearly the intended concept for the first lesson than did the term "animación" ("animation"). Similarly, I learned that I cannot rely upon professional translation assistance to make my ideas clear. I need to be mindful that Spanish is not the first language of these students, and make an attempt to learn current colloquialisms used within this community.

During this experience, I also learned that I can omit from my lesson plans any explanations of strategies for encouraging collaborative work, because the members of this community have their own highly evolved methods for approaching this process. I gained insights as well into some aspects of other art-related learning that occurs in the school and the community, and so I am better prepared to integrate and enhance those aspects of their education through the intercultural graphicacy curriculum. In particular, I will make an effort to find more opportunities within the curriculum to incorporate the beadwork, weaving, and embroidery typical of the community.

Because I was able to travel to this school, present these lessons, and observe these students as they completed the activities successfully, I consider this a successful trial run. I hope that it was also mutually beneficial, per Dr. Aguinaga's recommendation. Is it an even exchange when, just for teaching a few lessons and donating some resources and art supplies, I gain unquantifiable insights into this Huichol school and community? As a result of this experience, I intend to return to San Miguel Huaixtita during the coming year to lay the groundwork for a longer stay in the community. If all of the pieces fall into place, this will allow me the opportunity to work closely with the students, teachers, and administrators of Tatutsi Maxakwari toward the further development and implementation of an integrated

curriculum for encouraging intercultural graphicacy. Eger and Collings (1979, p.35) suggested that “the isolation of the Huichols has been the source of their strength, stability, and survival” Similarly, Muller (1979, p.100) asserted:

If the Huichols ... are left alone with only some well-thought-out help and encouragement from the government, their traditional culture could continue to thrive. But if economic pressures open their territory to a large influx of outsiders, they will find it difficult to maintain their way of life, which now provides us with a valuable window into pre-Columbian America.

Despite the somewhat paternalistic and self-serving stance of these comments, real concerns remain today about the potential loss of cultural identity in the era of globalization. However, rather than seal a group of people in a glass box and deny them any self-determination or agency, the emerging intercultural approach seeks to preserve the *adaptability* of a culture, by providing people access to the information essential for making critically engaged decisions and participating in the world on their own terms. As Thomas (1999, p. 8) reminded us, indigenous cultures, “though often discussed as if they belonged to the remote past, are not static.” And indeed, indigenous education has to proceed as if cultural change/adaptation is acceptable, since the function of teaching is “to give students a way of understanding something that is not yet part of their culture ... to learn necessarily involves changing” (Freadman, 2001, p. 290).

Partial support for this study was provided by the University of Florida Fine Arts Scholarship Enhancement Fund. I would like to thank Dra. Sarah Corona Berkin, Dra. Rocio Aguinaga, and the students and teachers of la secundaria Tatutsi Maxakwari for the opportunity to work with them and learn from them.

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