



Deepening Connections: Technology as a Path to Aesthetic Knowing

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Abstract

Theories that stress the importance of imagination and creativity as a means for personal and cultural change (Eisner, 2002; Greene, M. 1995; Wilson, M.A., 2007) challenge educators to find ways to incorporate everyday experience as a way to encourage social change, aesthetic awareness and environmental consciousness. As a university educator of new and emerging teachers I have taken this task to heart over the course of my career and designed a number of projects that focus on modeling how the arts can be utilized to instigate societal transformation. However, as a result of scholarly and artistic exchange with Dr. Ming Liang a colleague from China, I began to question the Western notion that in order to instigate positive social change we must “do” something. I wondered if more profound change might arise from subtler engagement with our surroundings. Following this line of inquiry, I designed a project that asks students to observe, record, document and respond through technology, reflective writing and art to a part of nature they encounter as part of their everyday life. In this paper I will describe the “Adopt a (Binary) Tree” project and discuss how approaches that balance the notion of “doing” with the concept of “being” might be utilized to encourage aesthetic and written literacy while inspiring personal and cultural connection inside and outside of the classroom.

Keywords: art, creativity, culture, ecology, education

Introduction

It is difficult to deny that we are facing serious challenges as a world community. Global resources are being depleted at an alarming rate, human rights issues need our collective attention, and the economy is increasingly unstable. The issues facing us are too numerous to name. Many of us feel that “radical change” is needed, and that we need to stage some kind of intervention. However, knowing how and when to take action can feel overwhelming. In the field of education and art education in particular, the idea of the arts being utilized to bring about positive social change is becoming increasingly prevalent. For quite a few years as a university instructor of art education working with emerging and practicing teachers, I have encouraged my students to investigate art and social change through the “Transformation Project.”

The idea behind the Transformation project is for students to experience the artistic process in relationship to their own life, passions, and inner imaginings. Ideally the project is inspired by a significant change they wish to experience in their personal, professional life and/or community. The “transformation” could be specific only to them as an individual, or it could be a change they imagine happening on an environmental, local or global scale. Students are also encouraged to explore art mediums that are relatively new to them, so that along with

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creating the project, they are also learning and exploring media such as painting, sculpture, photography, new technologies, etc. Over the years, students have created a rich array of works such as ceramic pieces, paintings, illustrated books, tapestries, wearable art, short films, performance pieces, and so on.

A few years ago, Dr. Ming Liang, Assistant Dean of Art Education at Shanghai Normal University in China came to our faculty as a visiting scholar in order to learn more about Western approaches to encouraging creativity and imaginative practices in art education. When I first began to collaborate with Dr. Liang, she was especially interested in the projects designed to inspire positive social action such as the Transformation project. However, as we began to share ideas our exchanges became more equitable, and I began to learn more in depth about the approaches she was undertaking with her students. The projects she designed for her students emphasized “slowing down” and taking a more observant and reflective view of the world we inhabit. Simply stated, her methodology invites students to focus on their way of *being* in the world as opposed to what they are *doing* in the world.

Our exchanges prompted me to more deeply examine the approaches I have been taking and caused me to wonder if subtler and possibly more profound changes might be brought about through calmer and seemingly more passive engagement with the world around us. Even though the Transformation project was effective on many levels and feedback from students was very positive, I saw that in order for changes to go deeper and take root they might need to be interwoven more with our everyday life over time.

Seeds of the Binary Tree

With these questions in mind, I designed the “Adopt a (Binary) Tree” project for a new art education course I designed titled “Urban Arts in the Contemporary Classroom”. A primary aim of the course is to provide students with opportunities to explore the connection between art, technology, and ecology. An additional aim of the course is to support educators to refine and increase digital literacy skills in order to facilitate learning environments that are motivating and engaging for a generation immersed in utilizing media. An additional objective was to foster expertise in digital media and the arts, while providing students opportunities to pursue and develop their unique sense of aesthetic and personal meaning making.

The “Adopt a (Binary) Tree” project was created as a way of responding to the aforementioned objectives. For the project students were first asked to choose and adopt an area of nature that they saw on a regular basis, such as a tree, creek, bushes, etc. They were then asked to respond to their “adopted area of nature” through multiple technologies including video, photography, reflective writing, and art. Artwork could take a variety of forms (designing wearable art, creative writing, poetry, drawing, painting, music, dance, sculpture, etc.). These interactions took place over a three-month period and the final pieces culminated in the creation of a “digital collage” that were shared with the class.

Description listed in Course syllabus reads as follows:

Major Assignment: Digital Collage: “Adopt a (Binary) Tree” For this project you are asked to observe, record, document and respond to a part of nature that you encounter on a regular basis as part of your everyday life (for example specific tree/trees, bushes, area near creek, and so on). A key concept of this project is to encourage a deeper awareness and connection to

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nature through multiple technologies. Photography, video, drawing should be used in the documentation process, and you are encouraged to respond through a variety of forms (writing, poetry, drawing, painting, music, dance, sculpture, etc.).

Your observations and responses will culminate in a digital collage to be presented in class. You are free to add music and text to your collage, but all images must be photographed or created by you (images cannot be downloaded from the internet). Collages will be presented in class on final week. Digital process log to be emailed before final class.

You will also be required to write a (minimum) three-page reflection on your experience with discussion on how a project such as this might be used to teach existing curriculum, cross curricular areas and/ or develop new directions in curriculum development.

Composition

The composition of students taking the course was diverse with a range of familiarity and expertise in artistic and digital literacies. Approximately one half of the class were Education students, with a small number of practicing teachers taking the course as part of a Graduate diploma. The course was also available as a Breadth requirement for students outside of the field of Education and these students were generally from the fields of Business, Economics and Science. It is worth noting that about half of the students were international students, consequently there was a wide range of cultural backgrounds.

An interesting aspect of the project was the disparity in responses between students educated in the Western tradition with students educated in China and Korea. Many of the students educated in Asian countries reported that one of the most challenging aspects of the project was that in addition to being asked to create the digital collage and reflect on their own creative interactions, they were also asked to consider the question, “how might this activity be used to extend, modify or connect cross-curricular areas of the curriculum? It was interesting to see the reverse – whereas most of the students educated in Western traditions, struggled with the patience and time that was involved in forming a relating to a particular part of nature on a daily basis, they had no problem with the second half of the assignment which was to surmise how they might use an activity such as this in the classroom with a specific group of students. From my perspective, I see there is a need for both, as each approach was strengthened by the addition of the other.

Even though the course was designed to support practicing and preservice teachers in teaching the arts, most of the students were non-artists, which meant there was a clear range of pre-existing skills. Consequently, taking this course was a fairly “risky venture” for the majority of students. The marking criteria made it clear however, that grading was not based solely on their final product, but also process and engagement with the guiding concepts. Furthermore, it was emphasized that “failures” were to be expected as they are an essential part of any creative process. Students were asked to record and reflect on their experiences throughout the semester. Therefore, a key aspect of the project was “evidence of process” such as photos, sketches, documentation of art created. and journal entries. Student responses indicated that the combination of formative and summative assessments increased their comfort level in trying new approaches especially as there was ongoing feedback in the form of peer review, discussion

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and consultation. I found students were very open and honest with one another and offered each other valuable support and direction.

The classes were designed so that a substantial amount of time was spent investigating both traditional and more contemporary approaches to art making. The weekly sessions were four hours in length and at least two hours were spent engaging with hands on activities. As much as possible the in-class activities were designed to demonstrate course expectations, consequently working outside in nature was modelled from the beginning. The first class was in early January, and after a presentation on “the elements and principles of design”, students ventured outside with viewfinders, smart phones and drawing tools to draw and capture images in nature that exemplified one of the elements or principles of design, for example, texture, line, contrast, and so on. The viewfinders were used to intentionally slow down the process, so that the activity encouraged observation and contemplation. Additionally, workshops on using animation and iMovie apps were offered to help students build their skill base in using digital media.

As a prime objective of the course was to provide opportunities for participants to experiment with innovative approaches to integrating art with technology, it was vital to foster an environment that would support risk taking and open-ended learning. Consequently, acceptance of students highly individualized starting points was critical, and implementing a “low floor, high ceiling” approach to teaching the art activities was key. Because of the range of experience and skill sets in the arts, it was important to offer activities that had a range of entry points and could be developed and built upon regardless of the individuals skill set. The activities themselves allowed for a range of interpretations and the criteria took into account a wide range of pre-existing skills and expertise. Other examples of hands-on activities included collecting found objects from nature to make drawing tools. These tools were then used to make large collaborative drawings as well as individual renderings. Students also designed and created wearable art (using recycled materials) and collaborated to build soundscapes based on an image they had taken of their “adopted area of nature.

The following is a sample of artwork created in response to a student’s adopted area of nature, The image was created using found branches dipped in with black acrylic it is in response to their adopted tree:



Student Reflection and Responses

The Digital Collages, presented to the class at the end of the semester were as unique and diverse as the students themselves. Many of the final pieces incorporated personal narration, music and poetry. The following are a selection of excerpts from students' narration, commentary and reflections illustrating the depth and breadth of connections made (accompanying images are screenshots from students' digital collages):

Student One: Another part of this process that I enjoyed was the rush I got when either passing a certain point in the skyline by vehicle and feeling the anxiousness in trying to capture the right shot and the right angle with my camera. A small bit of adrenaline seemed to flow through me. The sadness I experienced when my cell phone battery was dead, but the moment of just being and enjoying a view, looking up into the infinite abyss that is known as the sky was

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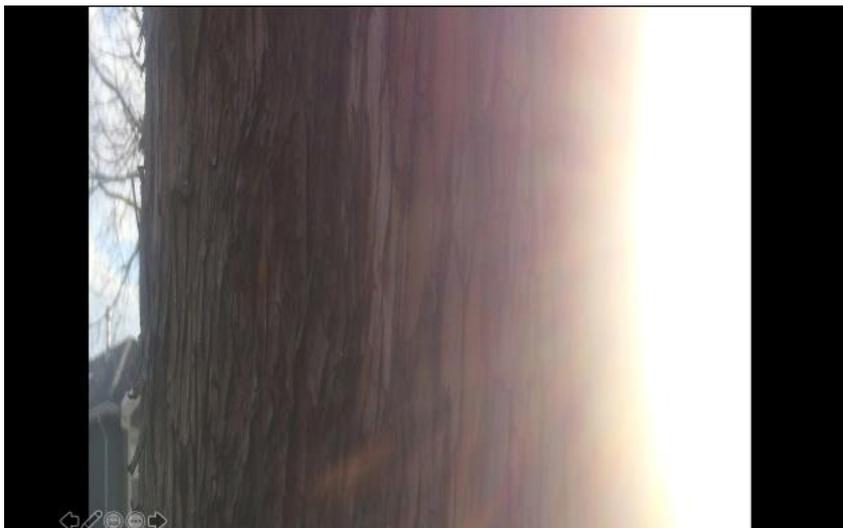
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truly fascinating. Just knowing that I was the only one in that specific spot looking up at this sky from my own unique perspective and not being able to share this moment with anyone but myself felt, oddly, special. It was my moment, no one else's, and only I in this lifetime or entirety of this earth would ever get to experience this one thing. It was my secret, a moment that was a gift to myself.

Student Two: *As I committed to this tree and continued to make observations for any potential changes, I started to enjoy the experience a lot more: I wasn't just out there to take a photo for an assignment, but I was trying to take the best photo of my tree. I was ecstatic when it snowed because I thought it would result to changes within the tree or the tree's surface. When the snow stopped, and sun started to peak out I began to think about the strength of this tree. I was standing there looking at the same tree trunk, regardless of the weather it had the same pattern of peeling bark. From that moment on I began to see the tree as stronger, tougher, and sturdier than anything around it. It can withstand all weather and still stay the same, unlike the soil getting loose by rain and wind and spreading across my pebbled sidewalk or when the grass flattens by storms and sometimes even fries and turns yellow by the sun. It had life but now I had learned to see it as a living thing.*



Student Three: *I believe everyone takes away something different with them, because our background and experiences vary to each other's. I live really close to nature, there is a forest just outside my bedroom, I never appreciated the beauty which is so close to me. I also felt I should be better to my family and friends, as they are really close to me, I thought they loved me, and sometimes my temper and stubbornness might hurt them. It also made me treasure and respect life, the bush has its own life, I saw it struggling through the harsh winter, getting blown by heavy wind, covered by snow and standing in the pouring rain, but all is fine when the sun comes out, even though the bush cannot walk or speak, I can feel its passion and energy.*

Student Four: *What was changing at this point in the activity, was not what was happening to the garden but what was happening to me as I related to the garden area. The statue [image below] grew in significance and importance to me as the process unfolded. What I noticed as I processed visual cues for changes in my garden was an element of peace that*

seemed to envelop me. In a sense, I was processing another step in the death of my father through this object that he owned, and that I identify so closely with him. It may sound silly, but I found myself talking to my father using the statue almost as a stand in for him. I felt his presence as I observed the garden.



The well-considered content students selected for their final pieces and the reflective quality of their narration and commentary made clear that students had moved beyond a “surface read” of their adopted area of nature to make personal and meaningful insights relating to themselves, others and the world around them.

Discussion

A strong emphasis of this project was to offer participants increased opportunities to develop aesthetic awareness and appreciation through engaging with art, nature and technology. One of the greatest values of the arts is their intrinsic nature. Aesthetic appreciation allows us to feel the beauty in life without feeling compelled to appropriate it in order to serve us in an instrumental fashion (Kant, 1982); we are allowing objects, nature and people to “simply be”; not looking at something or someone through the lens of our personal needs or desires.

The ongoing development of aesthetic literacy has many benefits. To live aesthetically means to enrich and enliven our sensory selves (Richmond, 2009); the word “aesthetic,” based on the Greek word “aisthetikos” means perception by means of the senses. Celeste Snowber writes, “living aesthetically is intrinsic to what it means to be human on this richly textured earth. It is attentiveness to the extraordinary in the ordinary, which has the capacity to expand our seeing, thinking, and being” (p.65, 2009). The expansion of aesthetic attention provides the means to experience the sublime in our everyday lives through forming more reverent and intimate relationships with ourselves and the natural environment. Ideally aesthetic attention can grow to encompass not only beauty in nature but also expand to include others.

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The effects of aesthetic development extend beyond the classroom and affect our overall sense of being alive. It is an awakening on a number of levels - we are simultaneously waking up to our own sense of being alive, as well as consciously joining with the life we are intrinsically part of. Engaging in aesthetic practice draws us into the present moment and we can more easily experience the "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) of life. When we are in the "flow" Csikszentmihalyi speaks of we find ourselves naturally slowing down. Consequently, we are living more fully in the present moment and developing a sense of appreciation for simpler, sensory filled aspects of being alive - the crunch of leaves under our feet, the scent of pine branches as we look up at sky, cool rock against our bare arm. By slowing down, and truly taking in our environment, we become more conscious of our breath and body in relationship to the simple act of being alive.

One of the most striking outcomes of the project was that overall, students demonstrated a high level of aesthetic engagement and judgment. As demonstrated by the artwork produced and Digital Collages created, it became abundantly clear that "aesthetic knowing" and creativity flourished. In their reflections a number of students alluded to their aesthetic development, as noted by one student: "As I committed to this tree and continued to make observations for any potential changes, I started to enjoy the experience a lot more: I wasn't just out there to take a photo for an assignment, but I was trying to take the best photo of my tree." It would seem the unexpected level of artistic expression is related (at least partially) to giving students ample opportunities to experiment with digital media as it relates to art and nature. I found this to be true, especially when compared to art produced by students in more traditional Art education courses I have taught over the years.

A final piece of the project was for students to reflect on their experience of the project as it relates to education and learning in the schools. To help guide this process, they were asked to consider the following questions: How might a project such as this be utilized to teach existing curriculum, cross curricular areas and/ or develop new directions in curriculum development?

Many students emphasized the importance of connecting with nature and their environment, As noted by the following students:

Student One: "There are a few reasons why this project would work for educating about the environment. First, documenting the development of nature forces students to engage with nature rather than observe it from a distance. This is important because people become more connected and gain a sense of responsibility for things that they believe are a part of their lives."

Student two: "Our education system has accomplished many things both negative and positive. Unfortunately, one of the negative things that our education system has accomplished is to help perpetuate the movement of society away from being connected to nature. This is quite an incredible accomplishment considering the fact that nature is everywhere. This is what the project shows. It shows that we do not need to venture into the vast wilderness to experience nature. Instead, nature is in our yards and on our streets. This project inspires us to see this and implores those in education to realize this as well. I feel that this is extremely important, because as educators, we need to help children reestablish their innate animist connections to nature in order to slow down, stop and reverse the human destruction of the environment."

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Student Three: One of the crucial functions of the education system should be to help children reconnect with nature, so that the natural world becomes internal to human beings as opposed to simply an external resource that only exists to be exploited for human gain. That is, the natural world needs to be seen as the means and as the ends as opposed to just the means to be exploited to achieve some ulterior ends.”

Student Four: I think activities where we can tie in the arts and nature are becoming more and more important to bring into schools at any age as nature and the environment more and more are becoming real issues and it is important that students learn about nature and develop a sense of awareness and empathy and love towards nature so that our environment does not get completely destroyed.

As illustrated by student observations and commentary, incorporating a critical place-based approach (Graham, 2007) to learning can bring about stronger and renewed awareness of the environment we live in and offer a way to perceive familiar locales with fresh eyes. Forming lasting relationships with nature in our local communities is vital because “children need to experience the natural world before they are asked to save it” (Sobel 1996 as cited in Graham, 2007, p.5). At the core of critical place-based education, is the formation of meaningful connections with others and our environment. These relationships are vital because they emphasize our shared dependency on each other and the earth.

This approach is not only meaningful in terms of learning, but it can also offer fresh approaches to teaching and designing curriculum. Some participants commented on how the project had influenced their teaching practice. As noted by one student, “this project has reignited my passion for art and given me renewed vision for how I am practicing the craft of teaching.”

Conclusion

It is evident there is a deep connection between humans and nature, and I believe engaging with art and technology is one way to spark those connections within our education system. Throughout this article I have emphasized the value of offering students opportunities to develop and strengthen aesthetic awareness and appreciation. In her research report Beth Carruthers states, “The arts can facilitate a process of learning through engaged senses, bypassing conditioned patterns of thinking and allowing other ways of knowing to come forward, at times subtly, at times overwhelmingly” (2006, p.3).

Even though it can seem that technology is pulling us away from focusing on what is of deeper value in our lives, in many ways digital media spurs creativity and can be a conduit for meaningful connection. For example, documenting and digitally sharing images of nature captures and extends the ephemeral nature of the experience. Another positive aspect of utilizing digital media is it allows individuals who are less skilled in activities such as drawing and painting, to create pieces that are visually expressive and hold personal meaning. This in turn, encourages students to engage aesthetically and form richer relationships with the world around them.

Working with students on the Adopt a (Binary) Tree project has reminded me of a few key truths. One is “the importance of wide awakesness, awareness of what it is to be in the world” (p.64, 1995) Maxine Greene speaks of. It has also reminded me that we can never

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underestimate the power of subtle shifts in consciousness, for our internal landscape shapes our external world. The kind of shifts I am speaking of are subtle and occur in the “quiet” moments when we are engaged in the flow of an activity such as being in nature or taking part in art making or reflective writing. These moments occur in many forms and, almost always, have a seemingly random quality to them – they are the “aha” moment when we see something afresh. Even though they are subtle and fleeting, cumulatively they add up to tangible differences in how we think, feel, and act. On one level, nothing seems to change but, on a deeper level, everything changes.

In terms of addressing the very serious concerns we are facing in the environment and the world today I believe we need to interweave “contemplation” with “action”. It is critical students are encouraged to question and examine long held ideas and beliefs as a way to instigate positive social change. It is equally important we offer students creative and engaging opportunities to form and deepen relationships with the life surrounding them. Both approaches are needed and essential to create long lasting and nourishing change.

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