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### Discovering Multicultural Connections

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## Discovering Multicultural Connections

### Cover Page Note

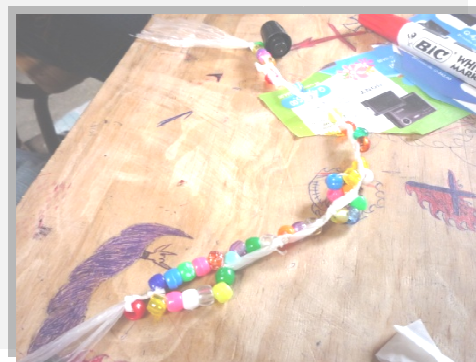
Special thanks to Jan Johnston (my mentor in this project) , VCU Undergraduate Research and Creative Scholarship Summer Fellowship Program, ArtAdventures, The Highland Support Project and the fabulous friends I had made along the way in my journey to understand Art Exchange.

*“All objects, all phases of culture are alive. They have voices. They speak of their history and interrelatedness. And they are all talking at once!” -C. Paglia (Paglia, 1992)*

## Preface: Why art exchanges?

The art exchange allows many opportunities to enhance a student’s education. The art exchange can be described as a collaborative art making experience in which art is shared between two or more persons. Asking students to examine their own culture in order to generate meaning can promote interest in not only their own daily life but also the subject(s) at hand (Darts, 2006). The ability to generate self-interest as well as culturally responsive curricula provides a lot of responsibility to the teacher (Andrus, 2001). If the course is well structured and communication active and inquisitive, the students have an opportunity to represent themselves to another culture and in exchange learn fair and honest elements about that other culture’s daily life. In turn, if a course is ill-prepared and poorly maintained the students can gain a superficial and impersonal vision of their exchange partners.

Art exchanges can exist on multiple levels. Exchanges can happen just within a classroom, or connect many parts of the community. It can stretch to the other side of one’s country or fly to the borders of another. The key to an art exchange is the link, or the teacher, that brings all parts together. Putting these concepts to practice, an art exchange is practiced between partnering programs in Guatemala and Richmond, Virginia.



*“The artwork can be a medium through which the students explore another domain”-M.C. Sjostrom (Sjostrom, 2006)*

## Popular Processes to the art exchange

There are many methods to the art exchange and this section only highlights a few of the most popular techniques. The categories are



defined by their closed and open nature. The rationale for the categories, open and closed, were devised to separate the art exchange programs that cater to their participating students in differing ways. In the Closed category the communities involved are selective; in contrast the Open category involves communities from a multitude of places with little to no selection.

### *Closed Procedure*

**Same Teacher, Same Procedure:** Organizations such as Class Act: Arts, Children, Technology Inc. follows a process that uses the same teacher in both countries. As described in the Constant Contact publication, not only do they have the same teacher, but the same procedure is carried out in the course structure (Lund, 2010).

**Different Teacher, Same Procedure:** In this structure the students' teacher follows guidelines to projects that are also to be followed by other teachers in distant classrooms. People to People International is an organization that follows this code as the teachers are encouraged to form connections over a long time span (People to People International.org).

**Teacher Exchanges and Residency:** The Fulbright Teacher Exchange offers a different twist to this procedure as the teachers are expected to take a semester long residency in the other culture. This contrasts with the short visit that the Class Act course provides (Fullbrightteacherexchange.org). The Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corporation also has an artist exchange in which the students were learning about culture from the teacher in residency and not the students she regularly worked with in her community of origin (Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corporation, 2010).

**Incorporating Technology in Closed Procedure:** By incorporating technology into the art exchange process the teacher may easily facilitate inexpensive exchanges between two or more cultures. Organizations such as School Net Global use popular media such as Apple's iChat A/V, iSight cameras and secure Instant Messenger accounts provided by Intuitive Media to create a safe and easy exchange between two or more classrooms (SchoolNetGlobal.com).

### *Open Procedure*

**Same Theme, Open Participation:** In this category students may participate and the theme stays constant. For example the VSA International Organization of Arts and Disability asks their participants to translate a word in different ways (VSAarts.org). The structure is modeled by a vague theme and participants are meant to send in work that follows the assigned topic. In response they will receive a work from another student involved in the program.

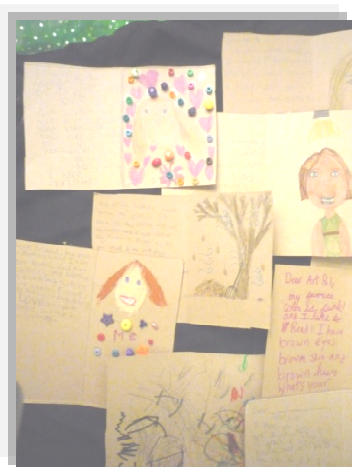


**Open Theme, Open Participation:** Many organizations have an “open theme and open participation” method in which students can make any work with any theme and the organization acts as distributor. This is advertised as an “easy” or “simple” form of exchange. In this style of program organizations like Paintbrush Diplomacy act as distributors for artwork. The students do not get in contact with their partner communities prior to art creation (Paintbrush Diplomacy). Similar to Paintbrush Diplomacy, One World Classrooms follows a process of mail exchange. In a mail exchange all the students are required to do is send in artwork and after a waiting period they will receive work in return (ccph.com).

## *Method and Practice*

This project concentrated on a *same teacher, same procedure* method in the category of closed procedures. In order to design an exchange in which students might learn from one another the teacher must find a shared topic of interest. This topic should be something that affects both student populations’ lives serve as an introduction between the two communities. I chose two themes: Recycled Art (a theme as well as a media) and the Calendar in order to discuss the activities which the students partake during the year. The two communities were chosen due to their cultural and economic differences on the premise that they could possibly supply artistically different responses to the projects assigned. The communities involved were an art center called ArtAdventures located in Midlothian, Virginia and a 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom of a public school, Chuicavioc, in the highlands of Guatemala. Each student group spent three and a half hours total on their 6 projects. Input on the success of the project was collected via questionnaire once exchange was concluded.

## *Choosing Sustainable Materials*



There are certain materials that can be found in one area of the world and not in another. When a teacher is conducting an exchange it is vital that they check with his or her exchange provider to determine what materials would be available. For example, construction paper can be easily found and bought in countries around the world. However, not every school has a laminating machine. Thus, the theme of Recycled Art suits a multicultural subject well when its focus on local materials. Art Educators such as Steve Elliot and Sue Bartley (1998)

agree that the use of sustainable materials is an internationally recognized topic, “In its purest sense, the thing that makes art, art, not only in our culture but in societies around the world, is the attitude and activity of making it special or precious” (pg. 53). Naidus (2009) states the importance of using recycled materials highlights “how to find meaning in everyday objects” (pg.8). The construction paper was from the area and the fabric was donated. If a student or student group has no way of replicating the project after the teacher leaves, then what is the point in learning it? Keeping sustainability in mind, it was necessary that materials were easily found and afforded in the local area.

### *Art-Making Preparation*

Due to the limited amount of time provided at each student center a sufficient amount of preparation was necessary for each lesson. The Calendar was sewn with two large pieces of fabric together to form an empty pillowcase. The Calendar’s design incorporated both Mayan and Gregorian calendar months with their labels on the back. The months were created with cardboard that was cut in a triangular shape then glued fabric to cover the labeled side. Similar steps were followed to cut strips of paper for the paper dolls and assemble materials together for the supportive lessons around the topic of time.

When a teacher follows the exact same preparation strategies for each community the expected results have greater chances of success. Brown, Collins, and



Duguid agree that knowledge is situated and that learning becomes apparent in the act of making (Brown, 1989). When students are making and doing similar tasks and projects they learn similar. If, in an exchange, students from different cultures complete the same projects, then they have common experiences from whence common learning arises. When age becomes a variable, however, exact

procedure can be modified. In typical art classes it is often seen that a fifteen year old might experience less of a challenge in braiding as opposed to the four year old who still struggles with their physical coordination. For this reason the older students often finish quickly when the preparation stage has already happened. Thus, if one of the student groups in an exchange differs drastically in age from their exchange partners the stage of preparation can be augmented to suit the desired challenge for an older and/or younger group.

*“To maintain continuity ...teachers should listen to children as they talk about familiar topics from home and the community”*

*-Eliza Pitri  
(Pitri, 2004)*

### *Putting Into Practice*

My hypothesis upon entering this project was that by holding both student groups to the same expectations in their art projects, a successful multicultural experience will result. This hypothesis proved accurate, student feedback was interpreted that they valued the experience and most students wished to continue communication with their art-pal after the project concluded. A key to success was being an adaptable teacher in the exchange.

Unexpected changes occurred due to Guatemala's natural disasters during the Summer of 2010. This led to a change in travel time and a surprise adaptation in the age of the students due to class availability during their test week. In the Midlothian, Virginia art room students ranged from 4-21 while in the Chuicavioc the age range was between 8 and 15. The lessons were targeted toward an age range of 9-11 for the average 5<sup>th</sup> grade American student. I constructed the lessons by a series of organized steps and the artistic choices were derived from the students. In this way each student could represent themselves while following the same procedure of creation. I found that maintaining a similar / same procedure in the process became a control in the art making. When each student follows the exact steps to reach an expectation a 21 year old can communicate with a 4 year old through the language of Art.

### *The Exchange: Encouraging Questions*

In order to not influence the students' art by the work from the cooperating class, I chose not to grant the students their gifts and held off the physical exchange until the group's work was finished. This worked well and the teachers and students were especially interested in the quilt. Based off their own experience in piecing the quilt together, students recognized which months go where and began to ask question about what was depicted. This shows that a shared experience

becomes a common language within an exchange. If two student groups have to go through the same process in order to create something, they can immediately empathize with their art-pals responses.

*"Here the arts of peace fulfill their noblest ends in the crusade to eliminate human misunderstanding"*  
(Beverley, F. 1952)  
-Livingston L. Blair

### *Student Feedback*

Enthusiasm filled the classroom as one by one students answered a questionnaire about their experience. In both schools the students responded that they were excited about the work that will return from the other countries and that they would be interested in doing this project again. The favorite project of each student varied widely as. When asked why they enjoyed the class a few comments stuck out. From ArtAdventures a student said they appreciated the experience as it "shows other people's perspective." A student from Chuicavioc claimed, "I want to see their art." Many students had ideas for making the projects more relevant. One student from ArtAdventures asked to focus on the theme of heroes. Another asked to explore more painting in the future.



### *Results*

The art exchange resolved itself through questioning. From the beginning of the first assignment, the Calendar Quilt, the students were asked questions about their own culture. Once they received the work from the Art Pals students began to ask questions about others. The success of this exchange was measured through observations and feedback collected from the students. At ArtAdventures 11 out of 12 students wanted to take the class again. In Chuicavioc all students in the 5th grade classroom replied with a "Si" or yes when asked if they would like to repeat this course.

My knowledge as an art teacher has expanded after this experience. When I asked students to describe the class in one word some common responses were



in one word some responses claimed: “fun”, “fantastic”, “really-cool”, “bonito” and “importante!” Through art the act of questioning was produced and from these experiences, the communities of Midlothian, Virginia and Chuicavioc, Guatemala now have a formidable connection that can blossom.



## Conclusion

The experience of working with students from dynamic and differing areas was monumental for me as an educator studying exchanges. I am working to sustain this project while designing a model for other teachers to get involved in successful art exchanges. The largest lesson to learn from this project is that it takes persistence of the teacher(s) to make connections for and with their students. Unexpected variables will occur in planning this project and it is the drive of the teacher(s) that will resolve those challenges.

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