

The Field Trip Project Asia: Developing 21st Century Competencies through Cross-Cultural Art Projects

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Abstract

This paper will examine the potential impact that contemporary cross-cultural art projects can have on the development of 21st Century Competencies (Ministry of Education, 2015) in students. Following the tsunami and earthquake that hit Japan in 2011, relief supplies, including used school backpacks, were sent to children in affected areas to help rebuild lives. To avoid excess supplies from being disposed of, artist/curator Daisuke Takeya proposed the Field Trip Project where artists were invited to transform the surplus backpacks into works of art. In 2015 the Field Trip Project Asia arrived in Singapore and a number of backpacks were sent to a local school for art teachers to engage their students to transform the backpacks into works of art. Despite living in a region that is sheltered from natural disasters and being mostly unfamiliar with facing physical hardship, it was hoped that children in Singapore would be interested and able to learn through the process of engaging with art-making that was directly linked to the recent disaster relief and aid efforts in Japan. The objective of the study will be to track the possible engendering of empathy, self and social global awareness, all part of the desired outcomes of education & emerging 21st Century Competencies. As this project falls under the description of contemporary art rather than traditional art practices, literature on contemporary art will be used to inform the findings. The embodied learning experience having taken place through a focused and partially self-directed art project, classroom observations and subsequent interviews with students were conducted throughout the duration of the student engagement in the project to provide data for this research study.

Keywords: cross-cultural, 21st Century Competencies, disaster relief, social and global awareness, contemporary art, art education

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Introduction

When the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami devastated Japan in March 2011, the world watched helplessly from our television sets. There was a huge outpouring of support as relief efforts came into Japan from all over the world. Many relief projects in the affected areas were established by non-profit organizations and individuals. However, as time passed, and victims settled into their temporary homes, international attention soon subsided thinking that their work is done. Although basic physical welfare of individuals was taken care of, many socio-emotional issues started to emerge (Takeya, 2015). There was an increase in suicide rates and symptoms of social-withdrawal among those in temporary housings.

At this point, a Japanese artist, Daisuke Takeya, who spent several months conducting trauma relief workshops met with another artist/teacher from Onagawa. Together, they decided to start an international art project to draw awareness to the on-going relief work that still needs to be done. Due to an excess in relief supplies of children's backpacks, also known as 'Randoseru' in Japan, they designed an art project where these backpacks were sent to artists from all over the world to be transformed into works of art. These backpack artworks were then sent back to the affected areas to be displayed and interacted with as artworks.

As most communities from the disaster affected areas still lived in temporary housing, there was a lack of proper gallery spaces to showcase the works. This resulted in the works being displayed in makeshift informal communal areas. The works are largely left in these areas for the residents to freely interact with as the purpose of the exhibit was not for viewers to admire the artworks from a distance as one would in a formal gallery setting, they were meant to be tools to bridge communication. Through these interactions, residents got to know their new found neighbours and started to open up and share their experiences. This quickly became a therapeutic experience for them. This meeting place also became the children's temporary playground which they lost to the tsunami (Takeya, 2015).



Figure 1: Relief surplus backpacks.

The Field Trip Project Asia in Singapore

The Field Trip Project arrived in Singapore in August, 2015. As Singapore is largely protected from natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunami, typhoon, and devastating floods, the intention of bringing the project to this island nation is to cultivate awareness and connect people through compassion and art. Programmes such as artists' talk, forum on activism and community, art exhibition and art procession were planned to get the community involved in the project. In the exhibition, there were 42 participating artists from Singapore, Japan, Indonesia, United Kingdom, Australia, India and Germany.

During the exhibition, a procession of students wearing the backpack artworks was led by local artist/performer/teacher Ms. Natasha Sophia Wei. The original exhibition in Japan happened in makeshift exhibition spaces that provided a freedom from the confines of the 'Gallery' space and its etiquette, the residents felt uninhibited while they interacted with the artworks, encouraging dialogues and a form of informal group therapy. The procession in Singapore references the dynamics of the first exhibition at the Onagawa temporary housing when there were no permanent gallery spaces.



Figure 2: Procession during the Exhibition.

Field Trip Project as Contemporary Art

The Field Trip Project is an example of contemporary art that is socially engaged. There is no single definitive meaning to contemporary art, however Kemperl (2013) describes it as a social practice about current issues, thus socially engaging and calls for active citizenship, critically refle[xivity], is heterogeneous, and a part of life and therefore not elite, invites active engagement and offers solutions to our modern day crisis. Cox (2000) added that it accepts diverse voices and viewpoints from artists as

well as viewers, it provokes community to engage with ideas and relevant issues, therefore encouraging dialogue (Sullivan, 2010). It can also be controversial, however, according to Emery (2002) shocking contemporary events and issues necessitates/instigates shocking tactics of engagement. Adams (2010) adds, “the search by each generation to find its own practices entails considerable risk, since they are by definition new and untested. Any existing models eventually become inappropriate. In order for artists – and learners – to make an intelligible social response they must by necessity be current and contemporary in their thinking, which brings with it dilemmas often in the form of social risk” (p. 694). In Vygotsky’s (1975) view, art presents the original and the most powerful weapon in the battle for survival, it is the most critical intersection of all biological and social processes of a person in society.

21st Century Competencies and Contemporary Art

According to Ministry of Education (2015) in Singapore, “To help our students thrive in a fast-changing world, MOE has identified competencies that have become increasingly important in the 21st Century. These competencies, represented in the following framework, underpin the holistic education that our schools provide to better prepare our students for the future. It is envisaged that schools and parents need to work hand-in-hand to help our students develop these 21st Century Competencies”. These competencies include global awareness, cross-cultural skills, critical and inventive thinking, communication and collaboration skills. The literature seem to indicate that teaching contemporary art in school promotes 21st Century Competencies such as critical thinking and creativity rather than merely skill based rote learning. Research suggests that teaching contemporary art encourages learner engagement, freedom of expression, empathy, risk taking in art making, a broader and deeper understanding in art and that it fosters higher-order thinking skills by increasing students’ opportunity in analyzing and evaluating art through art discussions and in contemporary art practices.

Contemporary art lends itself well to cross-disciplinary considerations as it straddles many genres and addresses contemporary issues. Subjects such as citizenship and patriotic education, and ethics according to Kemperl (2013), are part and parcel of most art discussions. Such discussions enable students to express their ideas and interpretations and offer multiple opinions and encourage applicability to real life situations (Hickman & Kiss, 2010). The issue-based nature of contemporary art also offers cross curricula opportunities across a range of subjects (Page et al., 2006) including but not limited to science, literature, languages, social studies, mathematics and performing arts. Beyond that, project based work built around research into different issues encourages students to problem solve provides a valuable form of integrated teaching (Tomljenović & Novaković, 2012). Since the Field Trip Project promotes social awareness as well as artistic expression, it fits well into the 21st Century Competencies paradigm.

Yishun Town Secondary School

When the Field Trip Project Asia arrived in Singapore this year, a number of backpacks were sent to Yishun Town Secondary School for their art teacher Ms. Candy Tong to engage students in transforming the backpacks into works of art.

Despite living in a region that is sheltered from natural disasters and being mostly unfamiliar with facing physical hardship, it was hoped that children in Singapore would be interested and able to learn through the process of engaging with art-making that was directly linked to disaster relief and aid efforts in the region.

The objective of the student engagement is the possible engendering of resilience, empathy and self, social & global awareness, all part of the desired outcomes of education & emerging 21st Century Competencies (Ministry of Education, 2015).

From Doraemon backpacks that ‘provides anything the carrier needs’ to Emoji smiley faces that brings smiles to everyone, the artwork’s that students created aimed to offer emotional aid to victims. As one student aptly puts it, “other than food and shelter, they need mental support too...”

Below are results from Pre-participation and Post-participation reflections of participating students:

Pre-participation reflection (26 responses)

1. What do you know about the Tsunami that devastated Japan in 2011?
 - 3 responses - Do not know/not sure
 - 23 responses – Had knowledge (Loss of life, family, home etc.)
2. Did you know/hear of aid provisions locally or globally that was provided to the victims? If yes, please specify.
 - 18 responses – No
 - 8 responses - Yes

If your answer to question 2 is yes, please answer question 3.

3. In your personal opinion, do you think the aid that was sent helped the victims? How?
 - 18 responses – No
 - 8 responses – Yes (shows people care, helped physically and emotionally etc.)
4. If you could send aid to the victims, what would you send?
 - 19 responses – would send water, food, medical supplies
 - 6 responses – would send medics or medical supplies
 - 4 responses – would send money
 - 2 responses – would send encouragement
5. If you were a victim, what kind of aid would you like to receive?
 - 4 responses – would like to receive money
 - 21 responses – would like to receive basic necessities for survival
 - 3 responses – would like to receive encouragement and comfort

6. What message or items would you like to send them now, 4 years after the devastation?

- 10 responses – do not know
- 9 responses – send emotional support
- 2 responses – send material support
- 2 responses – send educational support
- 1 response – send wishes
- 1 response – ‘Nope you all are well’
- 1 response – ‘Stay away’

Post-participation reflection (30 responses)

1. What do you know about the Tsunami that devastated Japan in 2011?

- 30 responses - Had knowledge (Loss of life, family, home etc.)

2. Did you know/hear of aid provisions locally or globally that was provided to the victims? If yes, please specify.

- 11 responses – No
- 19 responses – Yes

If your answer to question 2 is yes, please answer question 3.

3. In your personal opinion, do you think the aid that was sent helped the victims? How?

- 11 responses – blank (no response)
- 19 responses – 15 responses – Yes, 4 responses – Not enough

4. What did you think about while you were making your backpacks?

- 30 responses – How the audience/victims would feel/think = Empathy

5. Now that you have completed your backpacks, can you explain what you have done? What do you hope your artwork will communicate?

- 30 responses – Described in detail how their artworks would communicate their message to the audience/victims = Compassion

6. Do you feel that you have more compassion for the disaster victims now that you have completed this project?

- 30 responses – Yes

	Pre-Participation reflection	Post-Participation reflection	Percentage increase
Knowledge of Event	78%	100%	22%
Knowledge of aid provisions sent	31%	63%	32%
Personal response to aid sent	31%	63%	32%
Compassion for victims	54%*	100%	46%

Students' Written responses to the Field Trip Project

Below are some written responses from the participating students:

“we want our bags to make them feel happy and to entertain them with the games inside of our bags with our drawings and paintings inside the bags and all of the Japanese words of encouragement for them I hope when they see the Mount Fuji makes them happy”

“We decided to use felt for the rainbow on the bag as it is flexible and...adds texture to the bag. We attached the rainbow ribbons to make the bag look like it has fringes to add more colour and fun to the bag. We want the children to wear the bags and imagine themselves on cloud 9, flying with the help of the cloud wings. We want them to feel our joy, represented by the sun and rainbow with the help of the cloud wings. We want them to feel our joy, represented by the sun and rainbow.”

“we have also came up with our customized white board which would allow the passerby to jot down their thoughts and wishes on the board and to add more enthusiasm there is a raincoat attached to the back of the bag just in case there is a bad weather. The head of the Doraemon would bring excitement to the kids and would encourage them to come forward to enjoy the lively treat...”

“We want to let the people know that one day the nuclear meltdown will be cleared from the sea just like a rainbow would appear after a rain...”

“The googly eyes represent the people who are there to support...them mentally or physically.”

Their responses suggest that students have developed not only art making skills, but also thinking skills and meta-cognitive skills. As observed by Herne (2005), students who participated in contemporary art making workshops gained visual literacy skills and started to understand how images are constructed and communicated within shared popular culture conventions. The processes they go through in art making also help students understand how visual imagery can impact contemporary society and

how through them, historical events and shared experiences can mold our identities (Yang & Suchan, 2009).

Through this art project, students were able to construct their own identities and verbalize them to their peers and teachers. In this process they not only got to know their friends better, they were able to articulate their opinions and in so doing, recognize their own worth. Such broad engagement through the arts helps them develop a strong self-esteem and confidence, increases their capacity to be respectful of others and ultimately prepares them to be active citizens (Herne, 2005). With increased self-confidence, they become more involved and can contribute more actively in the teaching process which feeds back to their acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitude (Tomljenović & Novaković, 2012). According to Kotin, Aguirre McGregor, Pellecchia, Schatz, and Liu (2013) students began to “develop sensitivity to the role of art in the world...they realized that...they could speak from a position of power and authority”.

Conclusion

Student reflections seem to indicate that cross-cultural art projects such as the Field Trip Project can play a role in the engendering of empathy, self, social and global awareness, all part of the desired outcomes of education & emerging 21st Century Competencies.

Response to disaster effected zones in the world, to sustainable development in our relationship with the environment and other pressing global concerns are topics that call for active citizenship. Rusanen et al. (2011) reflected on the practices of art education as cultural education, concluded that there are many definitions of culture, one of which includes the ways we live in our communities and societies. In the recent European compulsory curricula, arts and cultural education are combined. As such, promoting art is equivalent to promoting cultural heritage and diversity. There has been an emphasis for art educators to organize art activities that enable the social and cultural participation of children. Governments are starting to realize the importance of arts education to the health and well-being of a community (Freedman, 2010). Open and critical conversations brought about by contemporary cross-cultural art projects such as the Field Trip Project encourage the understanding of our own views and encourage empathy and sensitivities for the experiences and views of others. With the findings in this small scale research seeming to fulfill one or more of the objectives of citizenship education and emerging 21st Century Competencies this research aims to add to the body of knowledge on the use of contemporary art in education for human development and to encourage further research into the application of contemporary art strategies in the classroom.

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