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## Cultural Identity Through Art(s)making: Pre-service Teachers Sharing Ideas and Experiences.

Jennifer Munday

*Charles Sturt University, [jmunday@csu.edu.au](mailto:jmunday@csu.edu.au)*

Atia Sajid

*Canada, [sajidhs@msn.com](mailto:sajidhs@msn.com)*

Brandi Reader

*Canada, [berylene.reader@gmail.com](mailto:berylene.reader@gmail.com)*

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## **Cultural Identity Through Art(s)making: Pre-service Teachers Sharing Ideas and Experiences**

Jennifer Munday  
Charles Sturt University  
Atia Sajid  
Brandi Reader  
Canada

*Abstract: In their Bachelor degree, Early Childhood Pre-service teachers undertake art(s)making and online journaling (blogging) to chronicle the process and thinking through the problem of themselves in relation to their world. They express and challenge their own thoughts and ideas regarding their daily lives and those of the children in their future classrooms. The article is presented as a Case Study with the outcomes of the process of the assessment task and the resulting artwork through two student experiences from different cultural backgrounds, who produced artworks using different processes and deep reflections about their lives. The sharing of the reflections through the blogs produced learning within the class as other students came to understand and see life and culture from other perspectives. Students should be given the opportunity to share their histories and experiences so that deeper understanding can occur for a more tolerant approach in the early childhood classroom.*

### **Introduction**

The new Australian Curriculum for the Arts, even for its Foundation to Year 2 in Visual Arts, expects that children "...will start to understand that works of art, artists and designers have a place in their communities, and that specific works of art tell narratives about themselves and about their own and other cultures" (2011, p. 16). Likewise, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) for Australian Pre-schools and Centres raises the expectations for broadening the learning we provide for very young children "...if the goals of equity and success for all children are to be achieved, children must be able to communicate their knowledge, experiences and ideas skillfully in the language used by those around them (Arthur, McArdle, & Papic, 2010, p. 2). These new guides to learning in the arts set high expectations on teachers of young children who often admit in their pre-service teacher training that they feel unconfident about leading learning in the creative and expressive arts (Russell-Bowie, 2012, p.65).

It becomes important for those working with pre-service teachers, knowing the limited time available to introduce tertiary students to all five disciplines in the national arts curriculum, that they find a process of learning that can lead graduating teachers to want to continue conversations and creative work with children in their future classrooms. This article provides an example of an assessment task that gives Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) pre-service teachers the personal chance to work in stages; and answer, from a personal point of view, many of the questions that are now listed as good practice for

exploring an artwork in the Australian national curriculum (ACARA, 2011). In the assessment task that is the basis for this case study the pre-service teachers begin by explaining how they perceive themselves; so questions in the curriculum relating arts to societies and cultures are addressed as they begin to explore their own personal arts practice. Later, as they progress through the assessment process of their art(s)making and ask themselves how authority figures perceive them, and relate their work to a social issue that has meaning for them, they even ponder the more difficult questions posed in the curriculum document: “Meanings: What meanings are intended by the artist(s) and understood by the audience(s)?” and “Psychology: What processes of the mind and emotions are involved?” (p.6).

Although there are many ways students can be assessed in the Creative Arts, if they can be stepped through an assessment process that will provide the opportunity to think deeply on their own sense of self and how others perceive them, they will have the chance to explore ideas beyond those usually shared and explained. Also, as is the case in this study, if the students write about the progress of making an artwork, and this is open and available to the whole class, the student has the opportunity to engage in a dialogue about their history and culture and their place in society. Because self-reflection on one’s place in the world relates to family, society and culture, (including the vocational choice a pre-service teacher will have made to work with young children,) sharing these reflections enables the participants to think about the value of the arts and the creative process as crucial to a person’s right to express themselves’.

When they study any of the creative arts, all students are encouraged to talk or write about their work, and visual diaries have traditionally been kept by the great artists and read with interest, although usually in retrospect. Students intending to study in the arts are required to keep journals for their final year of secondary school art-making, and teachers are seeing that portfolios and other collections with noted reflections are valuable in seeing a student’s development. These reflections are explanatory at least, and illuminating if students explore beyond the parameters of the artwork and explore the ‘self’ behind the art-making. Students are told, in the blog of helpful advice for Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) Visual Arts, that the assessable visual diary is, “...an expression of both the visual ideas you have in mind and also the conceptual ideas that link your artworks and contribute to the meaning and messages within your work” (Grant & Grant, 2012). In the assessment task that forms the subject of this article the pre-service teacher blogs were the way they kept a visual diary.

Since the pre-service teachers enrolled in the Bachelor of Early Childhood Studies at Charles Sturt University (CSU) have varied degrees of experience in their own art education it was appropriate to engage them in a creative process so they would experience and think through the practical problems of creating a work; change and reform ideas and intentions; and, feel satisfaction in producing an artwork. These outcomes would help them see the value for giving young children the same opportunity in their future classrooms. For students inexperienced in the arts, being asked to create an arts-based work is a great struggle, so using a blog to journal their ideas and process meant they could share their ideas and see that all students struggled with some aspect of the art-making. The first stage of the task asked them to think about how they perceived themselves. This reflection meant they could begin ‘talking’ about something they all knew well, and although some could be coy talking about themselves, all could manage it. This also encouraged them to make comments about what each other had said about themselves.

I was completely over-whelmed by the thought of this entire process. I do not consider myself in any way to have artistic attributes. (Student blog, 23/4/2012)

I have discovered that I am a simple yet intricate puzzle...this was how I described myself to my friend when explaining my assignment to him. (Student blog, 23/4/2012)

Hi B, I was also struggling to summarise how I perceived myself for the first layer. I made a simple mind map and just jotted down words that described me, or my life, at the moment. This gave me the ability to develop and reflect on these thoughts.

Maybe this would help you get started? Good luck with your canvas. Cheers, L. (Student comment on Student blog, 23/4/2012).

## **The Theory of Critical Reflection**

This case study is constructionist in nature, and the co-authors have shared a pathway to explain and understand a complex process of human learning and change (Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2006). The pre-service teachers were required to reflect on their ideas and process when undertaking the assessment task; reflective practice is a definite aim of pre-service teacher education. The outcomes of the task, though, and the resulting reflections are deeper and more ‘critical’.

In 2006, Jan Fook gave a keynote presenting her ideas around a theory of critical reflection. She recounted research where students engaging in reflective practice became aware of

...how assumptions about the connection between oneself and social context/structure can function in powerful ways to maintain existing (often unequal) power relations, so that awareness of these assumptions can provide a platform for transformative action towards a more equitable society (p.3).

The stages of the theory delineated by Fook correlate with the reflections presented in the blogs of the participants in this case study. Fook calls it a “pattern of learning” and outlines six stages:

1. A first level of assumptions is unearthed;
2. These may move to another (deeper) level through further reflection;
3. “Breakthrough” connections are made;
4. This/these assumption/s are evaluated against current experience/values/assumptions (and also other people’s opinions/experiences, literature);
5. Old assumptions are then reframed as their desired theory of practice;
6. Changed practices.

The narratives and blogs provided under the headings Art(s)making examples 1 and 2 below show substantial changes and growth through the stages articulated by Fook, as the pre-service teachers created their artworks and explained their ideas.

## **Data Collection**

The data that forms this Case Study consists of the responses from within the blogs of two of the pre-service teachers in one of the 2012 cohorts in Early Childhood Studies at CSU. These two pre-service teachers were chosen for their contrasting cultural backgrounds and different approaches to solving the same assessment task requirements.

Once the coursework for the Creative Arts was completed the two pre-service teachers were asked their permission to use their blogs, where they reflected on the value of the assessment task. The grading of their work had been completed, so there was no danger

of these participants being coerced into agreeing. Since much of this article contains the words written by the pre-service teachers it seemed appropriate they be invited to be co-authors. Therefore, the first author of this article is the designer of the learning through which the other two authors created works and wrote blogs as Higher Education students in an Education degree program. Their work is being presented as examples of how they took the opportunity to explore aspects of their different cultures and achieved completely different outcomes, even though responding to the same instructions provided in the assessment task outline.

The co-authors have continued to comment and reflect on what they achieved after completing the assessment task, and one of them has provided post-task reflections that form a metadiscourse to the article. These meta-reflections are very powerful, and show the success of critical reflection for the writer. A few of these have been interspersed throughout the article in boxes.

Art is a very important part of the whole picture of education not only in early childhood but also at University level... Hence, nurturing and knowledgeable teachers are essential for pre-service students, as well as for young children to learn about art. I never imagined that I could express myself as I did during my project. It became possible because the barriers of language and words were removed and I could express what I felt through different mediums. Once I understood myself, I realized how important art is and how liberating art can be for children. Childrens' young, but wise, voices can become visible in the adult work with the use of art.  
*Atia Sajid*

The problem, or assessment task, that all the pre-service teachers faced was creating an artwork that initially reflected how they saw themselves; then they needed to progressively add to the work, or make more works as a series, showing how they thought others perceived them—this included those they considered in authority over them. The work also needed to incorporate a social issue of importance to them: in all—four layers.

Each of the participants in this study thought deeply about themselves in relation to their family, their culture, and their beliefs about society. Each tackled the problem differently, even though they both chose the vehicle for the artwork quickly—one decided to make puppets, the other knew she wanted to practice a printing technique she had been taught recently. One had emigrated and brought a history and culture steeped in traditions, the other talked about her family and their place in her life, but opened herself to chance and being influenced progressively by what she found in her world or environment. Both women also talked about their future work with young children and the value of the arts to help children communicate and express ideas.

## **Methodology**

The coursework in Creative Arts in the pre-service teaching degree at CSU has been offered since 2010 and is a component in two undergraduate degree programs for pre-service Early Childhood teachers. Students come from various backgrounds internationally, and Australian students are sometimes in remote locations. This is the only dedicated creative arts coursework in the degree program. The outcomes of the blog/art(s)making assessment task has been very successful and provokes very rich discussion and outcomes from the

participants in all yearly offerings. It seemed timely to look closely at examples of the outcomes of the task.

In 2005 a case study approach was taken for an Education in the Arts report for the Australia Council (Hunter, 2005) where the “perceptions about students’ learning was collected from the students themselves (p.18),” and thematically analysed. In this study the two co-authors’ works and blogs provide two different approaches to the same task, where they successfully discussed the process, their experiences, and the innovative outcomes of their work. The case study approach has often been used when reflecting on arts education since it serves as a valuable guidepost for improving classroom practice (Quesada, Jolls & Grande, 2004).

It is my hope and wish that there should be more opportunities for not only Early Childhood Pre-service teachers but also for teachers who are going to work in Primary or Elementary School systems to learn about art and its positive impacts not only for the educators but also for children.

Art is something that is very basic and instinctive to us humans or at least to me.  
*Atia Sajid*

## **The data**

In the remainder of this article sections from each of the participant blogs and artworks will be presented through a cultural lens.

If we want to consider a person’s cultural identity, generally, we could consider their discussion or description of any customs they practice; the artistic expressions they appreciate; the social institutions they live by; the achievements of their national or social group; any attitudes they demonstrate; and possibly, behaviours they show in relation to others. Paul Gilbert (2010) says, in his text *Cultural Identity and Political Ethics*, that cultural identity can be explained as:

The various features of the way someone has been brought up which identify her in various respects—her linguistic and literary background, her religious and moral education and choices, her socially acquired attitudes and manners... (p.2)

The process the participants took did not set out to uncover these aspects of them’selves’, however the progressive nature of making the artwork and keeping a journal and responding to others revealed these characteristics and showed the elements of society and culture that had meaning for each of them.

## **Background to the task**

As stated earlier in this article, the assessment task was designed for pre-service teachers to introspectively reflect on how they saw themselves—how they viewed themselves in the world. Knowing they needed to ‘talk’ or blog about this meant they could start in this way and propose ideas to their fellow students about how they might solve the problem of beginning the art(s)making. There were no limitations on the form of the art, nor the techniques they might use. There was encouragement for attempting a new technique or developing an idea, for which the academic teacher would provide tuition, but no lesser view

was taken of a work if they had prior experience, and wanted or needed to use that as a starting point. In his discussion on prior knowledge and new experience, Roschelle (1995) reminds us:

New knowledge does not replace prior knowledge, rather new knowledge re-uses prior knowledge. Re-use is made possible by a process in which prior knowledge is refined, and placed in a more encompassing structure (para. 21).

The main aim in the coursework is to help the pre-service teacher be excited about the value of the arts to them and the children with whom they will be sharing learning as vehicles for expression, not make them anxious and shy away from their use.

The task did not ask them specifically about their cultural identity, but because they needed to explain their perceptions of themselves, the topics of their history and family naturally arose. The reflective nature of the blog revealed differing approaches to the idea of customs, for instance—neither of the participants mentioned customs, but Atia demonstrated her strong immersion in her culture when she described the material in which she wanted to work:

I used clay because we used it in art class. Clay seemed like a good medium to me although very fragile (I am not going to fire my puppets) but it is also very flexible and versatile. In my Asian culture, it is believed that all humans and other creatures are made of clay so it seemed like a good idea to use clay. *Atia Sajid*

Brandi, also made no specific mention of customs, but talked in one of her posts about what it was to be a 'customer when it came to those in authority over her, and as she worked her way through the task, 'consumerism' presented itself to her a predominant contemporary custom.

The following sections of the article provide a narrative around sections of each of the examples in this case study to show how each pre-service teacher took an individual and contrasting approach to the same task, and through the process had insights that would change their practice.

### **Art(s)making example 1**

Mostly, the pre-service teachers start timidly with the task, but they know they will receive supportive and encouraging responses from their classmates and the academic teacher. The task asks them to talk about how they perceive themselves and this usually brings up explanations of family structures and elements of culture that have meaning for them personally.

The music that I have chosen is that of a personal favourite of mine - The Beatles. The song that I have chosen is titled "I'm only sleeping" and although it is not directly connected with the perception that I hold of myself within the world, the poetry of the lyrics do hold symbolism to the manner in which I have come (with the help of an artistic background in music, dance, photography and language) to understand the world around me and to appreciate free-flow of ideas, controversy and the generation of many possible realities. *Brandi Reader*

Since the song referred to by Brandi belongs to an album released in 1966, we can presume she has heard the music of the Beatles played within her family or during her childhood. It seems she has attended classes or places where the arts she names are valued, and these are the formative cultural influences she identifies.

The first stage of the task asks for the pre-service teacher's own perception of themselves, followed by a second stage where they think about how others perceive them. Some individuals struggle to articulate this and resort to asking family and friends to

describe them to help them out. This is a safety net for them, and of course, they will receive positive reinforcement, which helps when discussing and creating a work that is so personal. Some of them are surprised by the reactions of others, as shown by the following entry from Brandi's blog:

I left my father for this category simply because during my formative years, I would have considered him to be an authority figure and his opinion of me was and remains one of the most influential in my life. When I approached my father with the question of how he perceived me, he seemed nearly honoured that I would want to know his thoughts on the matter. This in itself gave me much to think about regarding the very intricate perceptions that we all hold of one another in this world, especially those that we do not vocalize on a regular basis. *Brandi Reader*

As the pre-service teachers begin to tackle the art-making they need to decide whether they will make one artwork, which can be added to with each layer of thinking, or if a series of works are necessary to demonstrate the different findings they have. The task requires four layers, with the third being how they think authority figures perceive them, and the fourth is their relationship to a social issue.

Brandi still had the problem of how those in power perceived her. She had already stated her determination to keep her 'self' out of the picture by asking her father his opinion, and began to open herself to 'chance' encounters in her life to be influential in the process. A comment had been made in response to one of her blog entries that her process reminded one of John Cage famously using 'chance' and randomness in his music composition and performance:

I just happened to glance at a bank statement sitting on a pile of unopened mail and it suddenly occurred to me that my answers to these inquiries of authority had been sitting there all along!

I opened the bank statement, following by a letter from my insurance provider and then a letter from the provincial student loans office. It quickly became my opinion that each one of these entities (financial and otherwise) was indeed that authority in my life that I had been pondering. At first, this might seem like an odd conclusion for me to have arrived at, but when one considers all of the important life decisions (as an adult) that I must make in consideration of finances past, present and possibly future, the insurance that I must purchase in order to use my vehicle or protect my family (should anything ever happen to me) and the simple fact that without borrowing funds from the government, I would not be in a financial position to take part in this very class at the moment; one cannot possibly dispute the authority that financial institutions and governmental departments hold over me as an adult and a Canadian. *Brandi Reader*

Brandi continued this 'chance' approach and decided to take all the words she'd collected that had been given to her by others to describe her, and randomly select one for each layer to be screen-printed. She had decided to print onto inexpensive white and black cotton t-shirts because she needed an affordable product that could be "easily manipulated and printed on."

These cotton t-shirts were honestly selected because they were the most affordable of fabrics that I as a student could use, and afford to practice on throughout the creation of my art piece. *Brandi Reader*

The art-making to this point had given Brandi the opportunity to consider herself in her world and describe and question that place. A 'cultural identity' can be formed when this reflective action is taken and a person places themselves within their key activities and cultural customs. Angus (2003) explains:



Self-interpretation of a situated self, whether personal or ‘higher-order,’ involves action as a necessary and constituent element. The investigation of cultural identities is not primarily about the ‘beliefs’ that individuals claim to hold when asked but about the activities that the cultural identity undertakes that constitute it as such and which are the basis for selfinterpretation (p.7).

The self-interpretation is where Brandi now found herself as she began to create the work:

This exploration of self in terms of the perceptions of authority figures was much more involved than I has originally anticipated it to be and therefore gave me a great deal (emotionally/intellectually) to be unpacked. I am looking forward to discovering the final layer of my art piece as I begin to physically construct it, employing the first perception of me as defined by me. *Brandi Reader*

Brandi stated that she hadn’t given herself the opportunity in the past to question her place within her family and social networks. So the process of self-interpretation in relation to the process of making the artwork enabled her to explore ideas she wouldn’t usually engage with. The process is not an easy one, it is not always comfortable to self-reflect, but once started the pre-service teachers supported each other to remain true to the process. The following is part of Brandi’s response to a comment written on the blog:

I have found this entire process has made me feel very vulnerable and receiving such kind and encouraging feedback really does help to make the process easier. *Brandi Reader*

The task required the pre-service teachers to consider themselves in relation to a social issue. Most had a cause at the ready to talk about and add to their artwork. Brandi, on the other hand, expressed her need to decide what her social issue was, and, in the open way she had approached the earlier parts of the task, responded to the ‘chance’ recognition of something in the process of the art-making.

As I waited for my final screen-prints to dry onto the t-shirts, I happened to glance down at the tag on the collar of one of the t-shirts and something caught my eye. The tag read “made in Bangladesh” and this immediately made me wonder, how, where, who and why regarding the manufacturing of these very inexpensive pieces of clothing I had been purchasing for use in this semester of study...

Because I have been raised in a relatively middle-class family and have never had to make the choice between attending primary school or financially supporting my family; I also had not stopped to consider how I might appear to my fellow global citizens. This recognition of ignorance and perhaps denial, offered me an overwhelming amount of food for thought...

I decided to explore the issue and was shocked at what I came across. What I uncovered (through research) regarding the manufacturing, trade and acquisition of the seemingly simple material that is cotton, will continue to influence the manner in which I participate in our consumerist culture from now on as both a global citizen and an educator. *Brandi Reader*

Her research led her to question the use of cotton in many products, including the stuffing in children’s toys, and a toy bear was added to her artwork.

The outcomes of the process of discussing and creating a work drew the pre-service teachers back to their prospective career choice, and each of them pronounced a change in thinking with regard to their future work with young children.

As educators of young children it is also important that we do not turn a blind eye to those children who do not live as those we are fortunate enough to teach and this

often means admitting we are participating in practices (through consumerism) we might not otherwise support. *Brandi Reader*

Brandi's work became an installation that she called *The airing of dirty laundry*: ...inspired by the world issue that I have chosen to incorporate (trade) and the action of hanging all my descriptive words and response to the world issue on a clothesline. The airing of dirty laundry refers to a popular idiom... The airing of dirty laundry in this sense refers to the exposure of possible "dirty" trade secrets in the world of cotton production. *Brandi Reader*



*The airing of dirty laundry*, by Brandi Berylene Reader

The title of her work led Brandi to place the artwork out in the open in a public place, in the style of an installation.

## Art(s)making example 2

The second participant also approached the task very quickly from her cultural point of view and made decisions very quickly. Within the learning materials provided in the coursework the pre-service teachers were introduced to the approaches that artists often made to their practice through the uses of metaphor, naturalism, and abstraction. Atia adopted the use of metaphor in order to express the many ideas that were coming to her at the start of the work. The first metaphor, when describing her perceptions of herself, were of a butterfly:

I came from far away. I traveled halfway around the world to come to Canada. I am traveling all day in search of knowledge (going to CSU) and accomplishing many tasks like a butterfly does. *Atia Sajid*.

In contrast to Brandi, who needed to self-reflect and self-identify, Atia was very clear about the depth and constant immersion in her culture. Where Brandi proposed a Beatles song as an influence from culture, Atia immediately talked about music from her native country:

In my Asian culture, girls or women are considered sparrows, who have arranged marriages and go to far off lands and never come back to their home land (I am in tears even while writing it). The song goes as "sada cheerian da chamba aye" in Punjabi. *Atia Sajid*

Within the physical classroom setting, Atia is a pre-service teacher among others, she gives comments when asked and offers her ideas in a very quiet and polite manner. Since

the blog and the artwork create a virtual classroom where individual ideas and circumstances can be explored out of a scheduled time-frame, she had the chance to use metaphors to explain her feelings and tell some of her history, which had never been shared with her 'fellows' before.

I start my day early and I take care of my children and children in my care. My flight is long and I am vulnerable and weak like a sparrow. I am harmless like a sparrow and the world is too big for me. I sometimes just sit on the side like a sparrow and look at people...

I also used the colour black because many people do not know me in Canada and I seem mysterious to some people. Sometimes people come and ask me where I am from or are surprised to know about my culture. I do not know what the future holds for me and black symbolizes that very well. *Atia Sajid*

Since Atia was already working with young children and had children of her own she decided she would create a work for herself as well as her own children, and possibly to use with the children with whom she worked. She came to the idea of making puppets very quickly, because they could be useful, and would be appealing to children.

Atia continued to use metaphor to think through the perceptions of those in authority, in order to add to a series of puppets:

I think God is one authority figure in my life and he is very kind to me. I have teachers here, and even at my school, college and university in Pakistan, who are simply amazing. My mother used to say that once you start your journey you will find many shady trees. I started the journey of my education and I met many wonderful teachers and helpful people and mentors. When I think of these authority figures, an image of tree comes to my mind. Authority figures can be intimidating and difficult but also nurturing, helpful, kind, protecting like a shady tree. *Atia Sajid*

Atia found the blogging medium suited her very well and she was able to use metaphor to tell and explain many things about her life and history. As she found new metaphors her puppets grew in number. She also began to incorporate her learning from other coursework areas, and her life in her adopted country, into the reflections for her art-making. Where Brandi had wondered about a social issue and responded to an anomaly within her work, Atia knew from the outset the issues she wished to discuss:

My views about environment and racism are very strong. I love to protect the earth and environment. In my faith it is considered very important. I love recycling or saving water. I love saving water also because I was born in a region where water is very precious. Women walk miles every day with pitchers on their heads to get fresh water. I do not like it when people waste water or ruin the environment. Learning that Aboriginal people do not have access to clean water in Canada broke my heart. Every time I open my faucet to get clean water, I think of Aboriginal people and millions of people around the world who do not get clean water or any water. In my faith it is also said that all living things have a spirit and we should be careful and gentle with them. It is also said that we should walk on the earth with humbleness and respect, not with arrogance and disrespect because one day all of us have to go inside it (when we die, we get buried). *Atia Sajid*

Atia's feelings for issues surrounding society's apparent unconcern with valuing the environment were echoed within the pre-service teacher classroom community, with several others writing affirming comments in response to her blog posting, and several of them also responding within their own blogs as the social issue that caused them the most concern.

Indeed, it was Brandi's own concern for the environment that prompted her to place her installation in a nature reserve to make her statement about 'consumerism.'

Atia's comments about racism, though, were very poignant, and helped the class have a view of her as a fellow pre-service teacher, in a new light.

Just because I look different or have a different faith or speak English with an accent, it doesn't mean, I am any lesser human being. It also does not mean that I will not weep if anyone hurts me or bleed if anyone cuts me. I breathe the same air and eat the same food, laugh at the same joke, and cry at the same tragedy as anyone else. Then what is the difference between me, an immigrant, and a non-immigrant? Racism is a poison that kills me. I feel it in the pit of my stomach; it brings tears to my eyes, hurts my soul and bleeds my heart. I worry about my children's future. I faced, what I had to face, but for them I worry more. Racism is the poison of my world and I am going to depict it with a can of pesticide that is killing a lady-bug that symbolizes me. Insects are an essential part of our environment but some people consider them pests and use pesticide, which hurts the whole eco system. *Atia Sajid*

Another pre-service teacher wrote:

Atia, your statements about racism are very powerful. I started to cry when reading your blog. I agree that hatred is a prominent problem in society and the attitudes of people who are consumed by differences need to be changed. (Student blog, 2012)

The blog tool had the capacity to include images, so the pre-service teachers were able to let each other know about the progress of their art-making, and respond to each other with advice and encouragements. Atia was able to display through digital images her growing array of puppets. As she discussed them, she decided she was inspired to write a play for all the puppets, which she also published in her blog. She also posted that she'd read the playscript to her family and they really liked it. At the very end of the assessment period, Atia and her family performed the playscript with the puppets and posted the performance on YouTube. These final additional steps were not required in the assessment task, but as with Brandi's desire to take her work further than the blog and install it in a public place, Atia felt she needed to take the work beyond the virtual classroom.

The blog gave Atia the space to talk about and understand things about her life and family. She was willing to share her experiences and feelings through the use of metaphors in the telling of her stories. Fellow classmates did not know some of these experiences before they were all asked to undertake the art-making task. Bhugra and Becker (2005) remind us that:

Cultural identities need to interact as people who have migrated come into contact not only with people of the majority culture but also with the immigrants of both similar and disparate cultures. Resultant feelings of a sense of belonging and comfort or a sense of alienation and distress may occur (para. 20).

Atia described experiences from these opposing viewpoints, and being able to express her feelings within the confined space of the class blog, received comments of support from the other pre-service teachers in the class:

In reading your blog it really moved me. (Student comment, February 2012)

I enjoyed all of your blog entries especially the ones where you talk about coming to Canada and the feelings of being different, as I can relate to those feelings... (Student comment, February 2012)

At the finalisation of the task, Atia concluded she had made quite a journey: I not only ended up with a resource for my teaching in the form of puppets but I also learnt a lot about myself. I see more clearly that I still consider myself an immigrant and how much racism saddens and scares me. I learnt during this project how much environment matters to me and also my experience of living in different parts of the world has given me a different perspective than an average Canadian about the environment and natural resources. *Atia Sajid*

The task of talking about herself and her life and expressing her ideas through making art inspired her to take her work further, and work beyond the requirements of the assessment task. With the comfort and support of her academic teacher and others in the class, she felt brave enough to try out techniques in art and experiment with the tools of technology.

I never uploaded anything in YouTube before but during this assignment I became brave enough to try this as well. *Atia Sajid*



Puppets and props for *The Unwanted* by Atia Sajid

## Discussion

Both participants claimed they were changed through the process of making the artwork and talking through their processes and work-in-progress up to the finished product. They were keen to start the task and made quick initial choices. With regard to Fook's (2006) first stage in her "pattern of learning" these quick choices may be the safer and easily identifiable ones Fook refers to as each woman quickly decided on what form the art-making would take. And, along with their classmates, their first descriptions of themselves were through the lens of their families.

Through further reflection, each participant moved to a deeper level. The task required them to think about how others perceive them. Fook explains that this second stage may unearth strong values that may appear unrelated to the earlier ones. Atia's abilities to think and contemplate through metaphors gave surprising insight to her cultural background,

and Brandi's openness to reflecting on details in her life allowed her to look more deeply at the everyday control organisations and institutions have over us.

The "breakthrough" connections for each of these woman came in their experiences relating to the social issue. Fook tells us that it can be the connection "with a personal experience (past or current) which allows connections to be made... (p.6)" Atia described her feelings, from her worldly point of view, about water wastage, as well as racism. The way she was able to describe her feelings through the blog had a deep affect on her classmates, in a way that might never have happened in the classroom. Brandi, too, in discovering the "cheapness" of the garments she was working with came to the realisation that we take many things for granted and that by understanding global issues you can have more personal control over your own consumption.

The art(s)making task is intended to help pre-service teachers evaluate their assumptions about the creative process with the aim of transforming their thinking about the value of the arts for young children. Ryan and Healy (2008) say the arts "are a means for *personal* transformation through acute awareness of and reflection on one's own beliefs, knowledges, and values through the process of creating art (p.89)." Brandi, in particular, re-evaluated her world view on 'consumption' through the powerful realisation her art-making provided her. Atia expressed her personal pain about racism through the blog, expressed through the metaphors and meanings her puppets gave her.

A reframing of a desire theory of practice came about towards the end of each participants' blog when they talked about their social issue in relation to their futures as teachers of young children. Reflection, together with the art-making, allowed each woman to give voice to a personal logical outcome. Each claimed that they, personally and professionally, felt changed by the experience.

Fook emphasises the final stage of critical reflection is that "changed practices result". Brandi had talked about her future as a teacher of young children through the process of the blogs, but the biggest change for her was a personal one:

I am now very interested in the idea of Fair Trade and have become committed to finding ways of purchasing as many products through these means as possible... I am now making conscious choices about where my money goes... fair trade products [mean I] know the hands on the other end of the purchase... I cannot go back to ignorant consumption. This is another unexpected way that this assessment has influenced who I am and how I view myself. *Brandi Reader*

Since Atia was already working with young children she was cognizant of children and learning throughout the process, doubly so because she had children of her own. Atia has talked about the value of arts to young children in the meta-reflections in the boxes in this article, but she too said she had been personally changed:

...during this assignment I became brave enough to try... I not only learnt about myself but I also realized during this project how much I like making art and I also learnt many new things along the way. I enjoyed this journey through art. I think after doing this art assignment I know more about myself, my relationships to others and the world. *Atia Sajid*

Not only did these pre-service teachers complete the task according to the outlined assessment task of four layers, but both added what Brandi called a "fifth layer" where each of them took their work to an extra stage. Both were so inspired by their personal achievements within the virtual classroom provided by the blog, to take extra steps at the end of the art-making to share their achievements more broadly: one in her real world as an

installation in the natural environment; and the other on the internet beyond the secure walls of the University online environment.

Going beyond what has been asked of them as higher education students in an assessment task has happened previously in other teaching situations for the first author, particularly in the creation of ePortfolios for showcasing of achievements (Munday, 2008). Similar criteria to the task described in this article needed to be included: students were engaged in a creative process and felt willing to overcome obstacles; they knew they were in a safe environment judgementally from peers and academic teachers; and, were making something satisfying that is about themselves, which may have use beyond the assessment task.

## Conclusion

The assessment task filled the desired outcomes of providing pre-service teachers with an opportunity to engage in a creative process; reflect on their own sense of being; and, relate these to their future professional life working with young children. By sharing their experiences and ideas the participants in this study were able to make the connections between their own positive art experiences working to the need for young children to engage in that process and understand the benefits that an arts-rich program of learning will have for them.

The most fascinating thing about the outcomes of the task was that the assessment question and process of instruction made no mention of cultural identity. However, the pre-service teachers end up strongly delving into their history and sharing intimate thoughts and experiences that have to do with the social fabric they are woven into. There is a sense of privilege in witnessing what a pre-service teacher journals, which comes through in the comments by the fellow students.

Another irony to contemplate is that Universities provide stated, published graduate attributes that are advertised to prospective students and future employers of graduates—these are regularly mapped across programs, and explicit explanations are made regarding how these will be effected. A task such as the one in this case study does not claim to achieve any of the graduate outcomes at the outset, but at the conclusion of the journey for the pre-service teacher, several of the attributes can be demonstrated, particularly those that relate to professional knowledge, communication skills and culture.

The outcomes of the task also make us consider how Higher Education has changed and the different ways an educator needs to design learning in this technological age, particularly when working in the online environment and with students at a vast distance as the ones in this study were. Educators need to be providing learning that will do more than the actual words on the screen. This need is described by Goodyear & Ellis (2010) in a text on “rethinking learning for a digital age”:

...students – and indeed everyone involved in their education – will need to develop more robust understanding of how to engage in knowledge work... with a view to seeing how they might be helped to manage the evolution of their belief and practices (p.101).

They go on to describe the changes to learning that are possible if we move from being instructive to allowing the students to be constructive with their knowledge:

The teacher’s role shifts to one of learning facilitator; someone who monitors and helps manage learning activities as they unfold. Good teaching, on this view, involves a sensitivity to learners’ needs, the ability to spot emerging problems, and a knack for providing just the right level of guidance (p.109).

The assessment task that forms the basis of this case study is a movement towards providing this kind of learning, and the changing role of the teacher/facilitator.

The closing words in this article come from the meta-reflection of the second author in the box below:

The process was very cathartic and it helped me understand myself, and most importantly, my teaching philosophy. It also helped me realize by personal experience that art is very important and it is not mere drawings or paintings, but an expression of our inner being. If we suppress the voice inside us, it stifles us but if we set ourselves free through art then we can understand other people better and perhaps become better professionals.

*Atia Sajid*



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