

Subversive Literacy: Arts-Based Learning for Social Justice, Equity, and Student Agency

The authors explore how multiple arts-based learning strategies (ABLS) provided a means to subvert traditional literacy methods.

Rose

“In this time and the state of the world that it’s in right now, I feel like everyone kinda has their own kind of suffering. It seems like no one’s life is perfect. . . . It seems like I’ve not met, met anyone who doesn’t have problems.”

Rose shares thoughts about our world after participation in a yearlong, arts-based literacy collaboration that explored issues of power, equity, and justice. As public high school teachers educated in progressive radical pedagogy (Britzman; Ellsworth; Friere; hooks), we realize our unique position. We are wholly part of a system (public education: with all of its history, and its systemic and structural oppressions and our positions as middle-class, cis, heterosexual, white males) as well as trying to subvert and disrupt students’ views of that system and of the world.

Public education’s obsession with high-stakes tests challenges critically conscious classrooms. The mantra “Make them write more!” forces our teaching contradiction. In 2017 Jerome C. Harste called for a radical change in how educators understand literacy, where “[i]n order to value new forms of literacy, our social practices—what we have often called *methods*—need to change” (90; italics in original). We know from years of teaching language arts that “being literate” is not the accumulation of English conventions. In our classes, “[l]iteracy means different things to different groups depending on their contexts, cultures, and schooling” (90). Students’ literacy emerges as a social practice through

meaningful social-cultural interactions between students using a variety of sign systems.

Throughout this article, we explore how multiple arts-based learning strategies (ABLS) helped subvert traditional literacy methods. We ask two large questions: (1) How, as critically conscious educators, might we break down inherent institutionalized oppressive structures and have an education of liberation and freedom? (2) What can we say about the students’ sense of justice, equity, and social agency as a result of their involvement? We focus our thinking within the recent journey with a group of 20 tenth- and eleventh-grade high school students of diverse backgrounds (LGBTQ+, economic, ethnic, political, spiritual, religious, philosophical, etc.). We interrogate, challenge, and attempt to make connections between our multi-literate (Lewison et al.) critically situated arts-based (Dawson and Lee; Marshall; Stankiewicz; Weltsek) approach and the school principal’s condition that “[w]e can do this but the students need to learn how to write a five-paragraph essay.” It is our hope this reflection encourages the use of drama and arts as pedagogy and praxis to engage teachers and youth in the creation of a more just and equitable education and world.

Situating Ourselves and the Study

Paulo Freire explains, “Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students” (72;

italics in original). But how to do this and actually inspire agency? We also find it impossible to teach “English” without owning the potential for “English” to oppress as well as empower (Pennycook). To do so would be to ignore the unique ways individuals creatively use language(s) across cultures and sign systems to reshape reality.

In the spring of 2016, Noel, a language arts teacher at The Conservatory for Free Enterprise, an inquiry and project-based STEM high school, approached Gustavo, a teaching artist and scholar at a local university, with the challenge to create a space for students to experience what it meant to be active agents in the creation of a more just and equitable world. He explained that he felt “crippled” by his curriculum and the need to “teach to the test and the standards.” Noel wanted to challenge students to figure out who they were in an unfair, bigoted, and unsafe world, to make literacy and critical thinking “matter” outside the classroom.

Methodology

As critically self-reflective teachers we explore how our pedagogy and praxis informed students’ sense of power, equity, and justice (Medina). Our data were gathered from planning sessions, lesson and unit plans, field notes, and student-produced artifacts (drawings, sculptures, and creative character journals). Video and audio recordings were taken of all drama work and other student physical and vocal presentations. Pseudonyms are used throughout. Human subjects approval was awarded by Gustavo’s university. Assent and consent forms were collected from all student participants.

Our Journey Began

Using the work of Brian Edmiston, Bridget Lee et al., and Weltsek as models, we created arts-based experiences around the notion of Empires. By examining the advent, rise, and fall of empires, we believed that students would struggle with how modern-day governments, particularly the United States, use oppression to maintain power. We hoped that through the arts as literacy and language education, focused on persuasion, argument, and a struggle with issues of equity and justice, students

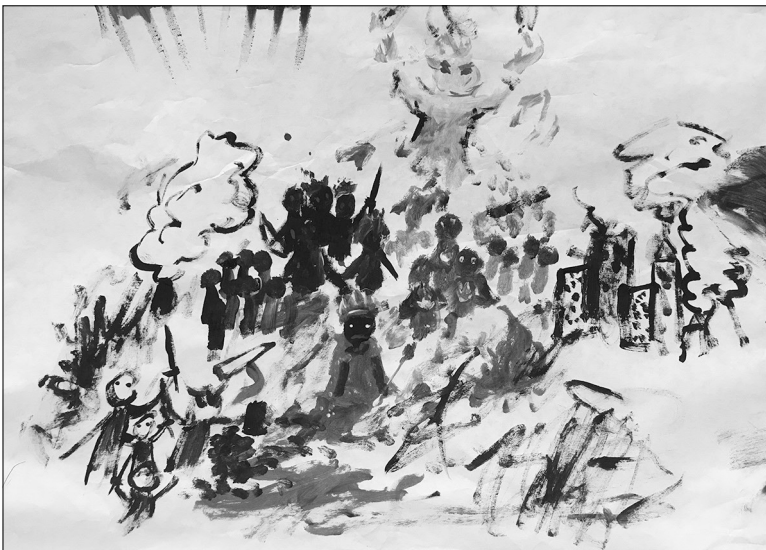
would see themselves as competent learners and active agents of social change.

Graffiti Wall/Prewrite

On day one, *Power*, *Difference*, and *Empire* were written on the board. There was no class discussion. Instead, art supplies were distributed, and students were invited to respond through images and words on large sheets of paper (see Figure 1). This arts invitation was positioned as prewriting to investigate prior knowledge and brainstorm ideas. Some students created landscapes of oppressed peoples (see Figures 2 and 3); some tagged the mural with words. Immediately, we saw students engaged in creating sophisticated and meaningful connections to complex sociocultural issues. For example, graphic representations of enslavement, oppression, and abuse of power emerged. In both Figures 2 and 3, one figure hovers above the rest in dominance. In Figure 2, the figure appears to trample the enslaved, and in Figure 3, the figure looms above—a malevolent God. In the written tags students engaged in direct political dialogue and wrote things like “He will not divide us #trumpforprez” and stated dissatisfaction with the current president. Another wrote, “Destruction is easy to use but hard to master,” with a satirical note that seems to open up the idea that destruction is something to use “correctly.”

FIGURE 1. Brainstormed Graphic Responses



FIGURE 2. Graphic representation of oppression**FIGURE 3.** Graphic representation of abuse of power

“Imagine who your empire character is, not just what they do, but who they are. How did power enter into their worlds? What was just and equitable for them?” Again, our objective was to subvert traditional literacy methods, position the use of multiple sign systems as language, and continue to support students’ exploration into issues of power, justice, and equity.

Many students took particular interest in the creation of the characters and diary. Ansley explained, “I was really excited about the Diaries. I liked the prompts. They got me thinking about how I thought about things, not just my character.” For example, at the conclusion of the project Ansley wrote, “Today will be the last day I write . . . I’m ending my story today. This dynasty has become too sad and lifeless for me to carry on.” In role as a peasant he projected a sense of despair and futility. He explained, “I can’t escape . . . they would kill me as soon as I touched the wall . . . if I end my story . . . my spirit will be free from this place of captivity.” Using writing in role Ansley considered complex hierarchal truths and focused on equity and the disparities between classes. Instead of simple reader response prompts, student diaries allowed students to internalize issues of power, equity, and justice.

Characters Diaries and Writing

After the Graffiti Wall, students selected Empire groups based on a generated list. Next “Writing in Role” (Booth) was introduced. Through writing in role, the students were invited to take on the identity of a character from their chosen empire and, using either words or images, keep a diary. It was shared that these “characters” would be used throughout the project. Along with provided prompts (see Appendix) students were invited to

Image Theater (the Outline)

First, “Proximity to the Problem” was introduced. Here a chair was placed in the middle of the space. Noel explained, “This chair represents a problem. In our case, it represents a problem for your characters.” In role as their diary characters, the students were asked to physically place themselves close to or far away from the “problem” (the chair) based on how their character was affected by the problem. These physicalized stances were a way for the

students to embody the ideas of power, equity, and justice (Perry and Medina). The students' bodies became another interpretative tool, a language to explore their sense of power.

For example, through the prompt "Famine is widespread . . . your empire is starving," Rose, as a Han Dynasty artisan, sits, head bowed in what we might imagine as despair close to the problem (see Figure 4). Nick, as "Emperor," is far away from the problem in the upper left-hand corner. He stands on a bench, hand outstretched, pointing, and laughing at the mob. Rose explained that "This . . . let me feel my character in a way that I hadn't before. I mean I thought about the struggle, like the struggle just trying to stay alive. I felt it, my body felt it, like it was me." Likewise, Nick explained, "I felt powerful, yeah. Looking over everyone. I could yell at them, they were mine. It wasn't my problem that they were starving. I had the power." It is perhaps the notion of feeling that defined this moment for the students.

The proximity to the problem strategy was one of the first moments in the Empires project where students experienced what power meant to them. These students physically located themselves within unequal structures with "the possibility of *transforming the already existing inequalities*" (Boal 23; italics in original). Subverting a traditional literacy approach

that would have had the students "write" about their feelings, for Nick and Rose this strategy honored their pure emotional sensations and responses.

Tableaux/Revision through Rehearsal

Now that characters had life breathed into them, groups conducted research using primary sources, the Internet, and history textbooks. We asked the students to create a sense of how power, justice, and equity influenced their empire's rise to prominence, legacies left behind, and eventual fall. This structure provided an outline to revisit and revise throughout the semester as their critical understanding of the empire changed.

To further their critical engagement, we introduced tableaux. Through tableaux students become parts of a sculpture or tableau that embodied the outline they had identified. Along with their bodies, in role they added "personal" monologues connected to how their characters experienced these crucial moments. For example, Figure 5 shows the group who explored the Han Dynasty.

Across the tableaux, it is possible to see how the students began to take a stance and establish a sense of agency. In Figure 5 their bodies show death, subjugation, and violent oppression. Kyle as a monk shared that "My way of life, the very heavens were

FIGURE 4. Visual interpretation of power and oppression



FIGURE 5. Student interpretation of injustice

snatched. Now after years of his rule many have forgotten faith and the Han Empire has instilled the moral doctrine of Confucius it will be our salvation.” In another tableau the students stand to form a wall of bodies to represent the bodies used as mortar. Young shared in role as a slave, “1000’s of people died in the Qin dynasty building the wall. But now in the Han Dynasty we don’t worry about 1000’s of death ever again.” The final image shows a literal “fall” as Rose in her role as peasant knocked down the other students and exclaimed, “In the Qin Dynasty as a peasant I was stepped on and disregarded. In the Han Dynasty nothing has changed.”

Tableaux provided a glimpse into students’ thoughts about how power, justice, and equity informed their empires. We saw conflict among the groups as some felt there was equity and justice at points or, as Rose explained, “Nothing has changed.” As far as the writing “curriculum” was concerned, the tableaux created a space to both draft, revise, and refine through the rehearsal process.

Publishing through a Living Museum

Imagine, if you will, walking into a traditional classroom set up for a final. Chairs in a line, assigned seating, space between desks for the teacher as guard to walk through to squelch cheating. Now imagine walking into a space transformed into England, Rome, China, and Persia. You are confronted with sounds, songs, chants, and smells from around the world. In this space, you do not see students humped over blue books furiously trying to

remember facts, figures, dates, or a formula for good writing. In this living museum, you are greeted by characters from across history sharing their lives, hopes, dreams, and pains.

Rather than publishing a final written piece, the students created an interactive immersive multisensory adventure—the Living Museum. Their objective was to engage the museumgoer in a critical consideration of the students’ struggles with notions of power, justice, and equity connected to their individual empire explorations. We believed that having the criteria to “interact” and “engage in critical dialogue” would place the students in a position of agency. First, students selected and created an artifact they felt represented their understanding of the empire. Next, they layered the artifact with a commentary about how issues of power, equity, and justice played out in that empire in their character role. The third layer was to, in role, engage the museumgoers in dialogue about power, equity, and justice. In Greg’s installation (see Figure 6) the coliseum is recognizable. Layered upon this are blood, money, and jewels.

Nick and Greg

Upon entering Rome, you were greeted by students dancing, sharing their stories, and enlisting you as a gladiator. As a centurion, Greg handed you a helmet and a sword and thrust you into the “arena.” Nick as emperor explained, “If you win you will get a gold coin to place on this grid to share if you felt empowered or liberated by your experience.” The

FIGURE 6. Coliseum installation

grid, taped on the floor, had two sides. One read “Oppression” and the other “Empowerment.” The grid was meant to generate thought about the violence and lack of agency imposed on the gladiators and those slaughtered within the arena—the animals and humans alike. Each battle ended with the museumgoer winning.

Greg’s and Nick’s agency appeared throughout the installation. Each step was choreographed to immerse the museumgoer in a sense of captivity. At no moment were you free to simply walk through the exhibit and passively look on. Instead you were forced into battle. Even after “Winning” and being awarded your gold coin, you were not free to leave until the coin was “placed” on the grid. In a post-interview Greg explained, “It was our point to let people win. We wanted them to experience that they could fight power. But when we looked at the grid people still felt oppressed, I guess we made them fight, even if they won, they were forced.” Nick and Greg succeeded, though; the museumgoers reflected on issues of power and equity as they were immersed in an actual experience of oppression.

Rose

Rose explored the Qin and Han Dynasties and was drawn to the Great Wall. She explained, “The Wall, like the actual Wall when you go . . . a lot of people don’t realize what went down. That they’re walking over corpses that there are like bodies in the Wall. Not a lot of people think about that.” To create her piece Rose fashioned 1,000 pea-sized clay balls. Each ball “represented 1,000 people.” On the day of the living museum, Rose sat on the floor (see Figure 7). She invited you to “Help me . . . I am tired. Hold this ball?” Upon taking the ball she continued, “It’s hard building this wall. I was taken from my family . . . hold this bowl. I am an artist I make things . . . here take this [handing you a pestle] crush that ball for me? Yes very hard . . . many people lost their lives. They just throw our bodies into the wall. That ball there, you’re crushing, it represents 1,000 lives! Please give me the bowl.” Rose would then take the bowl, add water, and form the mud into a replica of the wall.

Rose’s experience reinforced the idea that ABLS opened immediate and critical spaces. Rose explained that she was using bodies “as materials, not literal bodies but these materials as representations

FIGURE 7. Rose’s living installation



to build this wall . . . so mine’s like that . . . I’m not just showing a model. I’m building the wall, talking about what went down, they understand better than if they just saw a wall.” Rose had an agenda—“I want people to know that everyone suffers”—took a stance, and engaged people in the examination of the Great Wall as a form of activism.

Drew

“The Empire has fallen!” Drew had been diligently “painting right in the middle of our exhibit. I was engaged in painting the Mosque and the sun setting on the empire.” He explained, “My political commentary was about endings and beginnings and about what would happen if we moved forward. I expected people to ask me what I was doing . . . then I’d tell what I was painting and why.” At the end of the day, with the words “The Empire has fallen,” Drew ripped the painting in half.


Drew made his final statement and “destroyed” his artwork, symbolically showing the end of the Ottoman Empire. Throughout Drew’s installation his goal was to “engage people in what I was doing and why.” Drew’s agency rested on his desire to share a feeling of loss, ending, and destruction. The destruction of his art, carefully created over the length of the installation, placed Drew powerfully in control of his own destiny and the ways others saw him. It also made a commentary about the impermanence of power and the fleeting nature of the material world. Indeed, empires rise and empires fall and time always wins.

Conclusions

“Yes! This is it! We WILL do this again and this time use the main cafeteria!” was the principal’s reaction to the Living Museum. As educators, committed to a critical, social, and equitably just pedagogy, we challenge ourselves to create spaces for students to wrestle with “the awakening of critical consciousness through the investigation of “generative themes,” as they discover who they are and what they believe in relationship to complex and difficult social issues (Freire 87). ABLS allowed us to do this. Through multimodal arts-based work the students imagined multiple complex, political, and socially charged realities, which went beyond curriculum barriers and testable skills.

As Drew shared, “This gave a chance to not think about anything you learned and instead think about a situation.” Drew’s statement perfectly describes the value of this work. The expectations for what is “supposed to happen” are subverted. What is of value, as Rose shared, is that “I had the control of what I wanted to do, and definitely had a lot of power in my decisions.” It is this sense of the engagement and action that situates ABLS as a vehicle for a pedagogy of liberation and freedom. Even when some like Nick felt that the experience “[d]idn’t really connect that much to some sort of course of action,” there remained an undeniable sense that the experience “was really influential though on how I viewed power and the treatment of citizens and things that affect an Empire.”

Hartse challenged us to embrace the idea that “literacy as a *social practice* can be revolutionary” (90; italics in original). We see school as “the structure,” as “the system,” that often perpetuates oppression and marginalization through unchallenged agendas embedded in curriculum and evaluation. If a “revolution” within education is to take place, it must begin by honoring the multiple ways youth make meaning across the spectrum of languages, especially the languages of the arts. We conclude with a student’s thought that sums up the entire experience, pointing to hope, a hope for the future and from the future—the students.

Knowing that I am a part of something bigger than myself . . . was something I have. Having to be in role, to create made me think about our individual roles in society and how we are able to change things if we choose to. 

Appendix

Empire Character Diary #1

Imagine for a moment who your empire character is, not just what they do, but **who** they are.

You have decided that you must begin keeping a diary for future generations as a record of your life and of your world in which you live. This first diary entry introduces us to your character, their thoughts and feelings and their worlds. **It should be written as a first person, personal account, with specific details that allow us to understand both you as a person within the empire and the empire in general.** For this entry, please consider the following:

1. Name, age, occupation
2. Family situation
3. Thoughts about life within the empire
4. Reason and hopes for writing the diary, i.e., why write the diary and who are you writing it for?

Empire Diary #2: Finding a Place

Now that you have looked at some of the visual images of your empire through the books, please write about two of the places you may see in your day. You can briefly talk about where you are going and what you are doing for the day, but you must include something that happened to your character in this place. This could be an interaction with another person, place, thing; remember, this is your diary and your person that you have created.

1. Please name in your diary **two** places that your person decided to go and why they decided to go to these two places.
2. Please give details of a specific interaction or event that happened to your person at or on the way to **one** of your places.

Diary #3: Out of Your Window

In your character diaries, imagine that you are looking out of your window as your character, whatever version of a window your character might have. Looking out onto the world of your empire, what are you seeing outside the window? Use sensory language to allow your readers to see and experience what you see.

GP—Diary #4: Character Monologue

Create what you’ll say when your character “activates.”

Diary #5: Proximity to the Legacy/Proximity to the Fall

After witnessing each group’s tableau, please write how your character would have been a part of the legacies that you observed. Make sure you identify what the legacies are. Also, draw where your character would have been in proximity to the legacy image.

After witnessing each group’s tableau, please write where your character would have been in proximity to the fall of the empire. How would your character have been involved with the fall of the empire? Make sure you identify what added to the fall of the empire you just witnessed.

Tasks:

- Draw an image representing the legacy.
- Write how your character would fit into the legacies of the empire.
- Write where your character would be in proximity to the fall of the empire.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION	Lisa Storm Fink, RWT
<p>In "Graffiti Wall: Discussing and Responding to Literature Using Graphics" tap students' desires to doodle and draw by having them create a Graffiti Wall, using graphics to discuss a piece of literature that has been read by the whole class. http://bit.ly/2FVtXz9</p>	