Facilitating Productive Encounters with Difference: A Visual Essay

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ABSTRACT

Advances in technology and global migration continue to provide people from all over the world with greater access to a diversity of personal and collective narratives. Children and teenagers are becoming more aware of how people in faraway places live, and they are more capable of sharing their narratives with one another. If students consciously choose to consider these different ways of knowing, or “difference,” the experience can potentially enhance self-awareness, promote creativity, and generate a more compassionate perspective on human similarities and diversities.

AUTHOR NOTE: In this visual essay, the term “difference” is broadly defined and should provoke multiple interpretations. Nevertheless, relating this term to specific topics such as differing value systems or socio-cultural characteristics positions the audience to consider how perceptions of “difference” can impact our visual and collective beliefs and behaviors. Insights presented in this visual essay reflect the author’s personal understandings which have been greatly influenced by the literature listed in the references section.
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Advances in technology and global migration continue to provide people from all over the world with greater access to a diversity of personal and collective narratives. Children and teenagers are becoming more aware of how people in far away places live, and they are more capable of sharing their narratives with one another. If students consciously choose to consider these different ways of knowing, or “difference,” the experience can potentially enhance self-awareness, promote creativity, and generate a more compassionate perspective on human similarities and diversities.

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Encountering differing global narratives can potentially confirm pre-existing assumptions or perpetuate stereotypes, but it can also open our eyes to a new point of view. Engaging with difference can potentially provide positive learning opportunities that inspire curiosity, imagination, empathy, and self-reflexivity. If educators encourage students to be self-reflective and aware of the way in which they respond to difference, these experiences might become opportunities for positive growth. Furthermore, when a child or teen makes a personal connection with a global partner whom they perceive as different, they might recognize and more fully appreciate the characteristics that define our shared human condition. In other words, engaging with difference also impacts our perception of sameness.

Engaging with global narratives through experiences with art naturally involves metaphorical thinking. Choosing to think metaphorically, or perceiving one thing in terms of another, helps us to comprehend how different people make meaning and share ideas in different ways. Encountering differing global narratives provides opportunities to consider how knowledge is individually constructed and contextually specific. Sharing personal narratives using visual metaphors can also enable global partners to build personal connections with those who speak a different language. Overall, creating and interpreting visual metaphors with others has the potential to transform encounters with difference into valuable learning experiences.

The following visual essay illustrates the process of encountering difference, and it describes how engaging with art and metaphorical thinking can promote imagination, empathy, and self-reflexivity.

The following series of visual metaphors intentionally simplifies the complexities of encountering difference by representing several intra- and interpersonal experiences that often occur during this process. Viewing this interaction through the lens of a bird and fish intends to provide an opportunity for the audience to think divergently while addressing topics that often evoke strong emotional reactions. Although their dyadic relationship can be interpreted as two individuals from different parts of the world, the audience is encouraged to consider the multiple ways that this interaction might represent the experience of encountering difference.

Encountering difference can be both affirmational and transformational. It can evoke feelings of...

fear,

I can’t imagine being suspended in the air.
I would never last under the water.
I would certainly fall!

I would never last under the water.
I would surely suffocate!

curiosity,

Maybe I could leave the water if I jump high enough?
I wonder what the world is like out there?

I could use this year to see and breathe under the water.
I wonder what I will find down there?

or envy.

I wish that I could dive deeper and explore life under the sea.
I wish that I could soar above the clouds.

What an amazing view that would be!
Encountering difference opens our eyes to other ways of existing and provides an opportunity to imagine seeing the world from a different point of view. "Playing" with different perspectives and identities can reveal unending possibilities as we realize our power to define who and what we want to become.

Considered new perspectives can lead to feelings of self-abandonment or betrayal. It might cause us to address why we share similar perspectives with those we choose to interact with, and recognize the benefits and disadvantages of sticking with our "kind."

Encountering difference can stimulate our desire to learn about the origin of our differences. We might wonder how our ancestors have responded to their environment over time. How have historical events, influential figures, and contextual circumstances contributed to their worldviews?

Look at me! I am no longer a fish. I see like a fish. I am now a bird!

We travel in groups and go with the flow. It is necessary for our survival.

We do too - especially when we migrate to new places.

Wow, some birds don’t have to migrate because they adapt to their changing environment.

Furthermore, we might reconsider who or what determines our identities and group affiliations, recognize the power of self-determination, and question whether we really need to be defined!

In addition to looking critically at our past, we should apply these new understandings to our present lives and future goals.

Encountering difference gives us opportunities to become more self-reflexive. Self-reflexivity involves acknowledging how our presence and our interactions within a particular environment impact the way that we interpret what is going on around us.

Encountering difference can help us to avoid becoming too rigid. Rather than drying into fixed, impermeable stone, we should aim to maintain our integrity while adapting to the dynamic environment that we share with our local and global neighbors.

Engaging with difference can open our eyes to new perspectives and possible ways of living. This can potentially release our imagination, promote self-reflexivity and empathy, and help us to be more adaptable and receptive to our environments. This can be a transformational experience if we are open to the idea of transforming.

Thinking self-reflexively calls attention to our existence within systems, and the way in which these systems impact who we are.

We must consider both the present and historical purpose of systems as well as the roles that we play within them.

How do we want to be remembered? What characteristics and values do we want to pass along to future generations? How might they interpret our stories?

Flying fish propell themselves out of the water and glide through the air using their wing-like fins.

Puffins’ short wings enable them to swim underwater using an adapted flying technique.
How does this relate to art education?

How might teachers facilitate experiences with art that will help students to transform encounters with difference into opportunities for productive growth? In order to avoid perpetuating stereotypes or unexamined beliefs that confirm existing generalizations, teachers must help their students to become self-reflexive and aware of the following challenging questions:

**Can we embrace the tension between comfort and fear?**

**Can we push ourselves to the learning edge and open our minds to a new way of knowing?**

**After this transformational experience, can we maintain a positive identity and sense of belonging?**

Furthermore, how do we maintain a sense of belonging and civic responsibility while exercising a more autonomous and dynamic personal identity? Does this involve belonging to nothing and everything at the same time?

Interpreting works of art employs metaphorical thinking because we construct personal meaning from images rather than from language. Sharing our interpretations with others gives them a window into our imaginations. Encountering difference in this way can promote empathy and creative thinking.

Art educators can provide opportunities for their students to encounter and interpret one another’s personal narratives by exchanging pictures rather than words. Students in different parts of the world can create visual responses to a given theme, and then share these metaphorical representations with global partners.

Students would then create individual visual responses to this theme that reflect their personal narrative.

Creating a visual metaphor to represent an idea requires divergent thinking and imagination. Rather than drawing commonly used symbols to represent ideas, teachers could introduce students to creative thinking strategies that would help them to generate more personal visual responses.

Students might begin by discussing the theme with their local peers in order to broaden their individual understandings.
As students generate, share, and interpret one another’s personal responses to the given theme, their existing understandings expand as they consider new points of view. This ultimately increases the number of metaphors that they can pull from while making meaning of this theme.

Encouraging students to consider differing perspectives can potentially counteract their tendency to make quick judgements. These conversations might involve investigating their personal biases in order to become more self-reflexive and empathetic toward others. Specific instructional strategies would depend on contextual circumstances such as the students’ developmental levels and other distinctive conditions which define the learning environment.

Facilitating this type of exchange can feed students’ innate curiosities and fuel their desire to engage with difference. In addition, establishing this type of personal connection during their formative years can potentially increase their willingness to appreciate “difference” later in life.

References


