

Women's Well-Being Initiative: Creating, Practicing, and Sharing a Border Pedagogy for Youth

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines alternative arts-based education in two urban educational settings for underrepresented or marginalized youth. In particular, the authors use postcolonial and feminist theories to create borderland spaces where marginalized youth can develop strong identities, establish a community mindset, and cultivate leadership skills through supplementary arts education programs. Our goal with this work is not only to empower youth but also to bridge the gap between post-colonial theories of the borderland and traditional classroom practices. In addition, our efforts bring students' work and voices to the forefront, helping students take the first steps to becoming critical change agents within their communities and beyond.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

You walk through school everyday and know that theres people that heard the "rumors" about you and not the truth so they have their mind set on you. You cant tell them the truth because your already labeled, and you cant change what they think of you. You feel trapped and surrounded by all these rumors when you know who you really are but cant make them see that. (Cassie's Journal Entry, 11/18/06)

At first glance, it seems that Cassie—a fifteen-year-old female—is highlighting the anxieties of a typical youth, from a sense of isolation to an overall lack of agency. What makes Cassie's comment even more poignant, however, is that she is a teenager living on the margins, a first-time youth offender who has been labeled and marginalized by her urban community. She is in need of a borderland space in which she can affirm her identity, feel a part of and contribute to a community, and develop a sense of leadership. She needs an educational space where she can reclaim and redefine herself, carving out her own path.

Scholars have theorized about multiple approaches to creating these types of liberatory environments, and the need for such spaces is even more critical in an era in which education has become more and more conservative and stagnant, causing urban schools to become increasingly segregated (Apple, 2000, 2001, 2003; Freire, 1970, 1973; hooks, 2003; Kincheloe & Steinberg,

2000, 2007). As graduate students involved in education and Women's and Gender Studies, we were inspired by theories of educational borderlands, especially living in an area where some schools are grossly undervalued and underfunded and too many low-income youth and students of color are ignored. Our involvement with the Women's Well-Being Initiative (WWBI) gave us the opportunity to engage in the work of putting these liberatory theories into practice. The WWBI, created by faculty, staff, and students, is an initiative sponsored by a southern flagship university's Women's and Gender Studies Program to address oppression in the surrounding urban areas through research, education, and action. As two arts-based, multicultural educators, we wanted to use creative tools to reach marginalized youth in the community because many educational institutions lacked the resources and teachers to offer arts programming. In particular, we developed arts-based programming for a juvenile arbitration program dedicated to keeping first-time youth offenders out of the court system and for a private, last-chance school for youth who were not succeeding in or had been pushed out of public schools. Until our involvement, neither setting had any arts programming.

In many ways, then, these youth, their environments, and the arts were marginalized, and we came to see the programs we developed in collaboration with our students as borderlands.

In *Borderlands: La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) defines the terms "borders" and "borderland" as follows:

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. (p. 25)

For most of these youth, society had stereotyped them as "at-risk" or "troubled," and thus they were the "prohibited and forbidden." Most of the youth with whom we worked were marginalized due to race and/or class. Both the private school and Juvenile Arbitration were intermediary programs, last attempts at reaching children who did not fit into the supposed norms of dominant society (i.e., White, middle-to upper-class society). The programs too, then, operated on the margins. The arbitration program was on the margins of law-abiding society and those who break the law. Similarly, the private school was on the margins between public school and juvenile detention centers, alternative schools, or no school altogether. In both situations, most of the young people were in the position of having one last chance to prove themselves by moving out of the margins, following the rules, and assimilating into dominant society. Moreover, the community itself is on

the fringes of the larger city. In interviews with community members, we found that they often felt marginalized from the city itself, left out of city-wide initiatives, and lacking adequate resources and programs for their youth. Similarly, the arts are borderland or “at-risk” subject areas. After all, state and federal governments and boards of education too often view the arts as expendable, and arts educators know that their areas teeter on the margins when it comes to support and funding, especially in schools or educational programs that do not cater to dominant society.

Our goal, then, was to use alternative methods of teaching to embrace and celebrate the diversity of our students, their unique individuality, and their points of view in order to build an inclusive multicultural community. We did not want students to pretend to assimilate to a society that never accepts them fully. Rather, we wanted them to develop a sense of identity and community that would help them navigate through dominant culture without losing themselves. We argue that the arts-based programming we co-created with the students acted as what Anzaldúa (1998) and Homi K. Bhabha (1995, 2004) term borderland spaces, where students learned to cross cultural, class, and gender borders; to flourish in an often unfriendly world; and to be critical, active agents by examining, analyzing, and deconstructing dominant ideologies.

Through the process, we witnessed students develop a sense of mission and purpose as citizens of their community, and thus we made it a goal to share our findings with researchers/teachers with a focus on urban education and students. Many postcolonialist and feminist scholars have expressed the need for a border pedagogy (Giroux, 1990; Maher & Tetreault, 1994, 2000; McLaren, 2000; Rains, 2000). The difficulty comes in bridging the gap and using the theories of border pedagogy in daily classroom practices. Both of the settings described here provide examples of how educators can begin to bridge these gaps and develop borderlands along with their students.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

While we approached our project with a number of questions, this particular paper seeks to address the following research questions: (1) How can arts-based pedagogy become a borderland space where underrepresented students learn to cross cultural, class, and gender borders? (2) How can this borderland pedagogy help students develop community? (3) How effective were the artistic tools we used to help students become critical, active agents? (4) How can educators work to bridge the gap between theory/research and practice to achieve praxis? (5) How can students and educators be collaborators?

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Banking versus Liberatory Education

Throughout the history of public education, Americans have viewed education as the great equalizer, the cornerstone of the American dream (Weber, 2001). We also know, however, that our education system has failed a great number of our youth—particularly low-income students and students of color. In part, this is because the structure of American public education has abided by the “banking” model Freire (1972) warned against in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Too often, we view students as empty vessels that we cram with facts and we track them based on their ability to memorize and recite. This is the paradox of education—we continually have faith in a supposedly democratic system that privileges some and marginalizes others. Conversely, critical educational theorists claim that liberatory education has the potential to move us toward a truly democratic society. Within this process, “if teachers or students exercised the power to remake knowledge in the classroom, then they would be asserting their power to remake society” (Macedo, 2000, p. 10).

This pull between liberatory and traditional education creates a binary felt by students and educators. Within the school environment, for example, teachers feel pulled between strict

standards and creativity and freedom. Many marginalized students, meanwhile, adopt a mask, a façade of normalization, yet their identities are in contradiction to the norms by which society expects them to abide. bell hooks (1994) explains, “Ultimately, they end up feeling they can only reject or accept the norms imposed upon them. This either/or often sets them up for disappointment and failure” (p. 183). As hooks (1994) argues, then, we need to move beyond binaries to create borderlands for marginalized students, spaces where they “creatively invent ways to cross borders” and “alter the bourgeois settings they enter” (p. 183).

Borderland Spaces

The question as educators, then, is how to make the borderland a reality and develop the tasks of this space. Giroux (1991) outlines the basic theoretical underpinning of a border pedagogy in the following description:

... a pedagogy of difference provides the basis for students to cross over into diverse cultural zones that offer critical resources for rethinking how the relations between dominant and subordinate groups are organized, how they are implicated and often structured in dominance, and how such relationships might be transformed in order to promote a democratic and just society. Difference in this case does not become a marker for deficit, inferiority, chauvinism or inequality; on the contrary, it opens the possibilities for constructing pedagogical practices that deepen forms of cultural democracy. (p. 509)

The idea, then, is to provide students with a space to question dominant ideologies, a space where students have freedom and room to grow without assimilating. As scholars have noted (Delgado-Bernal, 2002; Giroux, 1991), the marginalized and displaced need spaces where they can speak and write about critical issues. This is the function of the borderland.

Theory/Practice Gap

The problem is that it is often difficult to put these postcolonial theories

of borderlands and pedagogies of difference into practice. As hooks (1990) explains, postcolonial theory has been “dominated primarily by the voices of white male intellectuals and/or academic elites who speak to and about one another with familiarity” (p. 23). Often, borderland theory is “opaque” and falls into the realm of the academic (Kapchan & Strong, 1999; Niesen de Abuña, 2003). This is antithetical to a theory meant to work toward the liberation and support of marginalized populations. We seek to contribute to the field, then, by bringing these borderland theories to life, meaning out of the ivory tower and into the realities of the marginalized. Our findings from these two case studies demonstrate the ways in which we, along with our students, began bridging the gap between theory and practice.

We used the arts as a medium for this borderland pedagogy, but we approached the arts from a critical standpoint. As Brazilian theater activist Augusto Boal (2006) argues, “Theatre is a form of knowledge” (p. 20), and we argue the same is true of the arts in general. Visual art, performance art, music, poetry and prose, and dance are mediums through which we can examine dominant society and its binaries. We can use art to investigate and deconstruct the “either/ors.” In this way, the socially critical arts are essential to problem-solving education. As an example of critical arts education, we often used Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, forum theatre in particular, as opposed to more traditional forms. As Boal (1995) asserts, role-playing sets in motion a transformative experience:

In the Theatre of the Oppressed, there is a proposition: interference, intervention. In the conventional theatre, we present images of the world for contemplation: in the Theatre of the Oppressed, these images are presented to be destroyed and replaced by others ... the action shown on stage is a possibility, an alternative, and the intervener-spectators (active observers) are called upon to create new actions, new alternatives which ... we want to transform a reality we are trying to change. (p. 72)

As noted here, critical arts can provide a means for us to question and

challenge dominant ideologies, and this is one of the purposes of the borderland. With these creative tools, we constructed the basic foundation of these borderland settings using Beverly Daniel Tatum’s (2007) work on inclusive environments. Tatum (2007) describes the work of inclusive environments as “affirming identity, building community, and cultivating leadership ... three critical dimensions of effective learning environments in which students feel invested and engaged” (p. 114). With these three elements as the guiding framework, we used socially critical arts education to apply theory to practice and co-create borderland spaces where “high-risk” and low-income students and students of color could begin changing their social landscapes.

METHODOLOGY

Positionality

As graduate students, we spearheaded the activities of the Women’s Well-Being Initiative, a program focused on a community surrounding the city in which the University was located. Although the purpose of the program was very broad—to use grassroots efforts to lessen oppression based on race, class, gender, and/or sexuality—we wanted to focus on youth because of our experiences and our expertise. Sheri had a particular interest in the youth in this community because she grew up there and knew that resources for youth, especially those on the margins, were lacking. Having been a first-generation, low-income college student, Sheri’s purpose was to ensure that students in this community had resources and support to reach their goals. Being a theater director and puppeteer, Amanda wanted to utilize the performing arts as a means for critical investigation and problem solving. What better way to speak about bullying in a school environment, but to act out the scenarios with one’s peers, educating one another about potential behavioral alternatives in the situation? Amanda’s goal was to ensure that the youth had the necessary tools to defend against and free themselves from oppressive situations. Although both of

us came from different backgrounds and expertise, we knew the arts were critical in terms of our own educational histories, and we wanted our students—those without easy access to the arts—to have the same opportunities.

In terms of methodology, we used postcolonial and feminist methods and approached our settings as ethnographic case studies. According to Jordan and Yeomans (1995), feminists argue that lip service and a superficial application of postmodern techniques have succeeded in “merely exposing power relations within texts rather than overcoming these relations in the field” (p. 395). In this way, “the ethnographic gaze,” they argue, turns into an ethnographic “glance” (Jordan & Yeomans, 1995, p. 396), but the hierarchical power relations are present all the same. In terms of how to address this issue, Jordan and Yeomans (1995) argue that studies need to take the environment and the daily lives of the participants into consideration. We made it our goal, then, to position the environment and lives of the students as the focal point of our work. We see the students interacting, we hear their voices, and they bring the borderland to life. Their voices move the work past mere textuality.

As mentioned earlier, this paper examines two settings, a juvenile arbitration center and a last-chance, private school. Along with approval from our institutional review board, participants in both settings gave written assent to use their work, and we use pseudonyms for all students, administrators, and places to protect identities.

Settings and Participants

Juvenile Arbitration. As stated in the introduction, the Juvenile Arbitration (JA) program seeks to keep first-time youth offenders out of the court system. Instead of a court hearing, youth choose to participate in the JA program, which includes community service, educational workshops, and visits to the local juvenile detention and adult detention centers and the local prison. Before we collaborated with the program, JA coordinators required students to attend workshops focus-

ing on life skills, but they were eager to have the WWBI introduce arts into the program. We decided to develop four workshops per year—two in the spring, one in the summer, and one in the fall/winter—for four different sets of young women. Each workshop took place over four consecutive Saturdays from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. Typically, each series had between five and ten female participants ranging in age from 12 to 17.

Old Brookland Christian Academy. Old Brookland opened in 1979 “as a daycare service for children who were unwanted in other schools” (Fieldnotes, 6/5/06). Now a K-12 institution, the school “predominantly serves underprivileged students having a hard time academically,” as one of their employees noted (Fieldnotes, 6/5/06). In our initial involvement with Old Brookland, we developed a weeklong summer workshop for young women attending the school. On any given day, the workshop had anywhere from three to five girls in attendance. After the summer, the WWBI returned to the school to create a class entitled “Creative Arts for What?” every Monday and Thursday afternoon from 2:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. Our class included ten students, ranging in age from 16 to 18 years, equally split with

half boys and half girls and five Black students and five White students.

Data Collection and Analysis

In deciding what types of data to collect, we used Yin’s (1994) six sources of data collection for the case study: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct and participant observation, and physical artifacts. We summarized the data collection in Table 1.

As seen in Table 1, we had a lot of data to examine, but we wanted to ensure that we created “a triangulated research strategy” by using “multiple sources of evidence as a way to ensure construct validity” (Tellis, 1997, p. 2). While we will not analyze all data sources in this paper, they all informed the direction of this study. We included a broad range of students’ experiences, and we do not attempt to generalize about these students or educational institutions. We realize that the problems and the measures taken to address oppression differ from place to place. There is no cure all, and what works for one program may not work for another. The point is to learn and share all we can from our students.

For analysis, we read through all fieldnotes, re-examined physical artifacts, and began coding data or looking for themes and patterns

that emerged (Spradley, 1980). Using these initial patterns, we coded by dividing bits of data into three major domains—identity, community, and leadership development. We individually coded these bits of data and came together to discuss patterns and differences. For many of the activities we conducted, we also created graphs to visualize the effects of specific activities. The coding of data and the search for patterns expanded as we began writing about our experiences.

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

Identity

From the beginning of our work with both programs, we saw a need for borderland spaces where students could discover and/or strengthen identity through art. In reference to Old Brookland, the program’s director at the time told us that the students “are starving for opportunities to be creative. They all have a range of talents, and the school doesn’t have the resources to develop their artistic talents further” (Fieldnotes, 5/05). Not only did the school not have the resources, but also, as the students noted, the institution of school failed to support the development of identity through the arts or through other means.

Many of the students felt that they had to develop two different identities, one for school and one for outside school walls, and the arts enabled them to reveal these feelings to us. As John, a Brookland student, noted in reference to a visual arts project in which he created a mask, “When I’m in school, I use my mask around the teachers so they think I’m a good kid and I’m responsible, just a good kid. But around my new friends and old friends, I take my mask off and I’m just my self” (Classroom Presentation, 10/4/05). The indication is that John wore a mask or disguise in school, but this performance did not allow him to be his true self and feel comfortable. Similarly, Angie, another Brookland student, stated in reference to a self-portrait, “To me, this picture is expressing how I *really* am. In school I’m quiet and keep to myself but out of school I’m loud and obnoxious and

Table 1
Summary of Data Sources Used for Case Study

Data Sources for Case Studies	Types of Sources Used for This Study
Documents	School website, histories, and pamphlets
Archival Records	Census bureau information and research on school and city demographics Minutes from meetings with administrators and program coordinators Past and current meeting minutes
Direct and Participant Observations	A combination of direct and participant observation and field notes from every class at Old Brookland Christian Academy during the academic year, from a week-long summer workshop at Old Brookland, from fieldtrips to the local university with students from Old Brookland, and from a series of Saturday workshops with Community Juvenile Arbitration.
Interviews	Several informal interviews with students, faculty, and staff.
Physical Artifacts	Students’ written work: journaling exercises such as freewrites (rants) and dialogue books; individual and group poetry; character research and analysis (table work) for theatre pieces; written critiques of movies, literature, and songs; and written feedback from students on the class, including content and activities Students’ visual work: self-portraits, social collages, drawings of oppression and liberation, masks, murals, and photography

I just smile!” (Fieldnotes, 10/2/05). Like John, Angie indicated that she could not be herself at school. Neither student noted that he or she felt happy or free. We did the mask exercise to give ourselves an idea of how students self-identified, but they taught us that a line was visible between their school persona and their after-school persona, illustrating for us the need for a borderland space. From this activity, we were able to talk about ways in which we could bring their “after-school” identities into the classroom through music, movies, and other culturally relevant materials of their choosing. In answering their call for a more critical and thoughtful form of education, both teachers and students could dissect this binary and deconstruct the normalized White academic student from the marginalized, “at-risk,” rebellious youth.

In many cases, students have difficulty discovering or strengthening their identities because school stifles youth to the point at which they do not know how to express themselves or simply cannot express themselves. At the beginning of our time at Old Brookland, Terry wrote in a journal entry, “I’m most of the time angry” and Billy also noted, “I am a big storm of emotions and I don’t know why” (Journal Entries, 10/9/05). Without an outlet for students to understand or express these emotions, many youth end up in trouble. It was these types of statements that led us to introduce activities that might provide a space to speak freely, examine emotions, and critique environments.

Students also wrote about themselves through poetry and journal entries, and this helped them to work through some of these emotions. Initially, the students had a difficult time with freewriting. As Shor and Freire (1986) note, students often want assignments to be exact and have definite directions and structure. We constantly found ourselves repeating that we just wanted them to write or rant about something that bothered or inspired them. After asking the students to start class with a “rant” for several days in a row, they finally realized the importance of writing for the sake of writing. Several students noted that this felt “wonderful” and “radi-

cal” (Written Evaluations, 9/08/05). As we went through the fall semester, students began to feel more confident, creating amazing pieces about themselves and life. As one student wrote, “I was born and raised in Brooklyn. My love for you goes away and I get so depressed. Brooklyn is the home of my loud sounds. The noise of a loud drum set and pianos playing at night” (Sasha’s Journal Entry, 10/9/05). Another student wrote, “I feel like a tiger standing in the weather with it changing from thunderstorms and rain that soothes me to ice storms that just cause pain with the hail hitting me. I’m stuck in a place with annoying tamberines” (Angie’s Journal Entry, 10/9/05). Students went from wanting strict direction to being able to tune into their emotions and write fluidly about themselves, including poignant details that drew on their senses. They began to discover outlets for expression.

We also focused on creating exercises that asked students to examine their identities in relation to others and society in general, and, eventually, students began to create pieces about themselves involving social critique. As Denado pleaded in a freeverse rant, “teachers, parents need to stop giving up on their children so soon. ... Now the student’s in the office, parents don’t want him no more, now he’s dead up in a coffin. Adults never give up on your kids because it’s hard to maintain that

same child up in your crib” (Denado’s Journal Entry, 10/11/05). Pulling from his experiences, Denado indicated that schools and parents often fail to provide the support that children need and fail to hold high standards for all children. Another exercise we used with both Old Brookland and JA was social collages. We asked students to create collages representing their selves including who they wanted to be and who they felt pressured to be. Figure 1 is an example of a collage created by Mary during the summer workshop for girls at Old Brookland.

Mary explained that the image in the middle is herself, but the self is disjointed and almost abstract. She explained that the media indicates that young women constantly need to fix their bodies to be the “cream of the crop” through dying their hair, getting plastic surgery, and losing weight. The push is to be perfect and better than every other girl. From creating and discussing their collages, though, the girls brought these issues out into the open, and, as Tamika noted, “It helps to talk about this kind of stuff ’cause this isn’t stuff we talk about in school. I could talk about this all day. It makes me feel stronger inside, like I know me” (Fieldnotes, 05/25/05). If given the chance to examine themselves and the pressures put upon them, students can learn to form a strong sense of identity that does not need to fit into

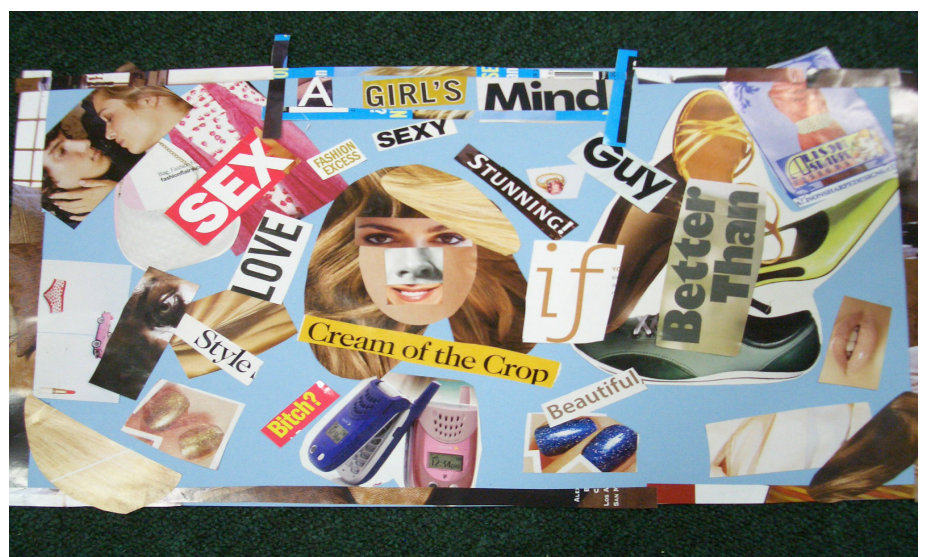


Figure 1. Mary’s Collage from May 2005.

any specific mold. Liberatory education asks us to question stereotypes, and activities such as social collages allowed us, as teachers, and the students to investigate critically the creation and maintenance of such stereotypes, to examine alternatives to dominant society, and to embrace ourselves.

As with the students at Old Brookland, many of the girls in Juvenile Arbitration were on the border and were struggling with identity, and this program was trying to keep them from teetering over the edge and being labeled as permanent “troublemakers.” When they came to our workshops, they expected us to lecture them about why they needed to stay out of trouble. As one participant noted, “I thought it was going to be like punishment or like a lecture like school, but we actually get to talk about things” (Fieldnotes, 1/24/09). Before the arts class, they spent their time in Arbitration learning about the identity they did not want—the troublemaker—not focusing on cultivating their own sense of self.

Although we were with the girls in Juvenile Arbitration for only four Saturdays each session, we tried to spend as much time as possible on identity development using some of the same techniques from Old Brookland such as journal writing, “I am” poetry, role-playing games, self-portraits, and abstract drawings of oppression and liberation. For many of the young women in this program, “I am” poetry, in which the girls developed poems about themselves beginning with the phrase “I am,” became the favorite activity. When asked to respond to the prompt, “what annoys you about this world,” one young woman noted, “it’s hard to stand my ground in a male-dominated society” (Fieldnotes, 4/7/07). She expanded on this idea in the following “I am” poem:

I am pain and sorrow
 I am joy today and tears tomorrow
 I have so much, but yet so little
 I have so many companions, that
 I’m always caught
 in the middle
 I am walls that I’ve put up to hide
 the real me
 I am over everything but still left
 with the memory

I always get what I want, its always
 been that way

I never take no for an answer, its
 always been that way

I am putting away my love letters
 from long

gone boyfriends, to liberate my
 heart

I am putting away my notion of
 how women

Should act in male dominated soci-
 eties to liberate

my mind

I am mistakes, that I cannot take
 back

I am bad decisions, throwing me
 off track

I am forgetting about my old boy-
 friends so that its

easier to find the next

I’ve found something better, better
 than all the rest

I am free of stress. (“I Am Poem,”
 4/7/07)

Here, this young woman highlighted the pull between those binaries created by dominant society. She is “caught / in the middle” and constructs walls “to hide the real me.” Both the workshop setting and the activity of writing the poem, though, become a borderland for her to deal with these binaries. In this poem, she finds liberation in being herself. She “puts away” notions of how boyfriends and men think she should act, she puts away mistakes, and she puts away bad decisions. When she takes control and decides to “liberate her heart,” she becomes “free of stress,” free from the pull between various worlds and free from the pull between the body and the mind. We would argue that she also becomes free through the act of writing and putting these words on paper. She comes to define herself rather than relying heavily on how others define her. At the end of this same session, this young woman stated, “The poetry was good for me because it helped me release some things I was holding on the inside and made me stand up for myself in a stronger way” (Evaluation, 4/7/07). In this borderland space, then, she finds a tool for self-discovery and for the emotional release of this stronger, willful self.

In both settings, the youth asserted

that they felt the creative arts classes provided a space for freedom of speech and stressed the importance of this freedom in both self-identity development and social critique. Sherika wrote, “This class is different because we get to express ourself freely, but yet mannerly and we get to learn about the outside world in ourselves as well” (Evaluation, 10/16/05). John also wrote, “In this class we get ta talk and work in groups. All the other ones are the teacher talking and us writing” (Evaluation, 10/16/05). Whitney agreed, stating, “I value the opportunity to come to a great school and be able to express myself the way that we are allowed to do not only in this class but being able to express myself in the world” (Evaluation, 10/16/05). Students appreciated the opportunity to speak on their own behalves, whereas their voices are generally debilitated and silenced and they endure an education of taking notes from the chalkboard, listening to the teacher, and regurgitating information for the test. In using some of the techniques mentioned above, these teens became fearless in revealing themselves. Poetry, theater, and visual arts became windows to their souls, and, at the same time, these arts-based activities offered a sense of protection to students. As creative pieces, these activities took the pressure off of the individual from having to face external scrutiny so that the students could deconstruct dominant ideologies without feeling the pressure to assimilate.

Community

Community went hand in hand with identity. As students worked to discover and express themselves, it was important that they had a supportive community in which to engage in borderland work. Establishing community elicits a number of advantages for teens’ sense of self – accountability towards themselves and others, motivation, discipline, recognition, exploration, trust, and diversity (Global Kids, Inc., 2008). As Deangelo, an Old Brookland student, said, “Be real with me like I am with you” (Fieldnotes, 10/11/05). We made this idea of “being real with one another” and

creating a community environment key to the creation of a borderland space. Asking teens to invest in a “border pedagogy” can cause fear and uneasiness because they have to embrace their multiple social identities, find strength in their diversity, and overcome the plight of power and privilege.

It is difficult to deconstruct stereotypes surrounding sexuality, race, class, and gender, and establishing community is an important part of approaching issues of diversity. One of the activities we often used to establish a supportive community was theater, particularly role-playing. During one class, for example, students at Old Brookland participated in numerous role-playing scenarios in order to examine their cultural stereotypes. With their bodies facing off and clashing, they wore headband labels on their foreheads, playing along with a fictional story line in which they were oppressed on the basis of their label.

In one scenario, labeled as a physically handicapped teenager, Angie and her bully, played by Terry, engaged in a confrontational harassment scenario. The bully attacked the physically handicapped girl using derogatory name-calling, and Angie decided her tactic was to ignore her bully. She stated, “It doesn’t bother me” as her defense. One way in which the oppressed can defeat the oppressor is by cutting off the device that empowers her/him to insult. Finally, Terry gave up because it was not fun to pick on Angie with her silent protest and successful, non-confrontational defense. The role-playing scenarios helped us to explore the idea that community is not always about peace, but it is also about the struggle. This particular role-playing scene took two roles—the oppressor and the oppressed—and asked the students to live through this scenario and put themselves in another’s shoes. Therefore, although we did not come to a point of catharsis, we deconstructed the challenge of this particular oppression. Like a mirror, the reflection of these imaginative performances might influence encounters on the street. As actors alter their course of action in a play, students may arrive at change in the “real world.”

In terms of community, it is also im-

portant for students to develop trust by engaging physically with one another in safe, dynamic, and trusting physical orientations (Boal, 1995, 2002). The body is a part of the educational apparatus; without understanding its capability, again the student is relegated to being a receptacle filled by dominant ideologies illustrated by distance and fear. Rejecting the traditional practice of preventing students from becoming physically involved with one another, we integrated physical exercises into both settings to retrain the body and brain to rethink personal space, trust, and community partnership. As an illustration, we asked the students to “mirror” one another, as described below:

Colombian Hypnosis: One actor holds her hand palm forward, fingers upright, anything between 20 – 40 centimeters away from the other actor’s face who is hypnotized by the hand. The actor moves his hand slowly in all directions while the other actor must contort his body in every way possible to maintain the same distance between the face and hand, so that they remain parallel. The other actor will use muscles rarely ever activated or forgotten. The leader mustn’t do any movements which are too violent; she is an ally not an enemy. The roles are swapped so all actors have the opportunity to be the leader. (Boal, 2002, p. 51)

Following an initial hesitance, we saw partners moving freely in the space, connecting gazes, sharing the responsibilities of the exercise, and taking creative risks such as contorting their bodies down onto the ground, showing an absolute freedom of bodily expression. They began to trust one another as a community of learners.

At the same time, though, this community exercise asked students to question their stereotypes concerning sexuality and gender, and this was difficult. For the exercise, we paired boys with other boys and this caused them some anxiety, as they feared the effect such an activity would have on their reputations. In our discussion following the exercise, Terry responded

that the exercise made him feel “gay” or “cake-ish” because we paired him with another boy. Homosexuality was a topic about which these students felt very strongly, especially considering their Christian beliefs. By engaging in a conversation about this topic, we collectively arrived at a crossroads where “to build community requires a vigilant awareness of the work we must continually do to undermine all the socialization that leads us to behave in ways that perpetuate domination” (hooks, 2003, p. 36). By falling into a pattern of categorizing physical contact as “gay” and using derogatory terms, the teens perpetuated biases and acted as oppressors. We recognized the males were performing their gender as traditionally constructed concepts of masculinity and strength, while the females engaged in the physical exercise as traditionally giving and vulnerable partners; however, the ultimate goal was to crack open these gendered and sexualized assumptions and consciously move towards a community of acceptance.

This activity, though, led us to engage in dialogue that we might not have had otherwise. It also moved students into a borderland space that was uncomfortable yet necessary. The physical activity itself, the assisted mirroring, forced them to confront certain stereotypes. The exercise took them out of the classroom and put them into a performance that provided a protective barrier for dealing with the more difficult issues of homosexuality and heterosexuality. This activity of community led to a rigorous analysis and discussion of oppression. Students worked through their feelings and stereotypes, and opened the door for a dialogue about change.

Eventually, these dialogues about stereotypes and change became some of the most important community-building moments. One day during class, Kathryn, a young White woman, told a story of a “Black man” who “started getting up in her face at a game,” and she went to “sit next to her father so he would protect her from the Black man.” Deangelo piped up and said, “Hey, I’m a Black man.” Terry teasingly remarked that Kathryn was being racist, saying “just ‘cause he’s a

Black man” (Fieldnotes, 1/25/07). We used the opportunity to examine the stereotypes society has developed concerning what it means to be White or Black. bell hooks claims, “this disconnect between their conscious repudiation of race as a marker of privilege and their unconscious understanding is a gap we have to bridge, an illusion that must be shattered before a meaningful discussion of race and racism can take place” (2003, p. 26). The students understood Kathryn’s story about personal space invasion but did not approve of her ignorance of race and culture. Another White male, Marshall, educated Kathryn by forewarning “there is a difference in how you describe the person and what actions you say they have – it could be offensive to some” (Fieldnotes, 1/25/07). The debate developed into an anti-racist commentary analyzing white supremacy. bell hooks (2003) asserts, “every citizen of this nation, white or colored, is born into a racist society that attempts to socialize us from the moment of our birth to accept the tenets of white supremacy, it is equally true that we choose to resist this socialization” (p. 56). The other students resisted white supremacist ideology by adopting an anti-racist position that affirmed diversity and humanity as synonymous.

Quite frequently, anti-racist remarks are illustrations of power dynamics that are counteractive to a democratic community. Using the conversations above as catalysts, we engaged in an activity called powerwalk or identity circle. The students listened to a question about identity, and, if it resonated with their story, they stepped into the middle of the empty space and faced those remaining on the sidelines. We asked students whether they were Christians, minorities in their neighborhoods and in the city, knew someone who had been assaulted, lived in one place their whole lives, had been picked on or had picked on others, and so forth. We discovered that each of us was different, and yet we may be similar in more ways than we think – “As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another’s voices, in recognizing one an-

other’s presence” (hooks, 1994, p. 8). After engaging in this activity in one of our Juvenile Arbitration sessions, we noted that the girls “were amazed that they all had so much in common, but were also very different. They liked it and enjoyed figuring each other out” (Fieldnotes, 4/7/07). After another powerwalk at a JA session, one young woman claimed, “I was really surprised that we all have so many things in common ’cause we all look so different on the outside, you know? That was cool” (Journal Entry, 1/31/09). An essential component of community development is breaking barriers of difference, thus helping youth to feel connected through similarities and to respect diversity.

Students in each setting expressed the desire for and appreciation of community. As a student at Old Brookland commented, “This class is a lot different ’cause we open ourselves up to one another” (Evaluation, 10/16/05). His statement affirmed that community development can be achieved through the liberatory practice of redefining borders and establishing trust. As Angie stated, “I hate that we can’t have this class everyday, so without it I feel lost. This class is different because it’s fun. We can speak freely. We learned to be

honest and open and to listen to other opinions” (Evaluation, 10/16/05). Sometimes the sense of community shocked us as facilitators as well, especially with Juvenile Arbitration. Since we had these young women for a short time, we feared that community development would be difficult. As one of us noted in the fieldnotes after one session, “I’m really amazed by the sense of community that has been established. Every week, the girls become closer and are even talking on the Internet now, and they didn’t even know one another before this. Hayden even said she didn’t expect to feel so ‘comfortable’ in these sessions” (Fieldnotes, 7/21/07). We can promote community only if students are truly comfortable with themselves, with one another, and with their instructors. We, as instructors, had to become a part of community by opening our minds as well. We introduced activities such as the powerwalk and mirroring exercise, but the students taught us about community by sharing their experiences, challenging one another, and understanding one another’s choices and perspectives. The borderland relies on a community of diversity, acceptance, and trust from all participants,



Figure 2. Spring 2007 mural project at Old Brookland.

and it is important for teachers to become students and students to become teachers. These roles are never fixed.

IMPLICATIONS: FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CHALLENGES

Cultivating Leadership

One of the major implications stemming from this work is that we need an increased focus on providing leadership opportunities for students. As Tatum (2007) notes, along with identity and community development, educational borderlands should provide marginalized students with opportunities to cultivate leadership and take what they have learned outside of the borderland. This is key for youth whom society fails to identify as future leaders. As is evident in the data presented above, these youth created some strong works of art and have tremendous potential if they have a system that supports and believes in them. We felt that by helping students develop a strong sense of self and community we were also helping them find the tools to become stronger leaders. At the same time, however, this area needs additional work and more time.

In both settings, the students showed leadership through the creation of murals. Figure 2 and Figure 3 are examples of mural projects led by students.

In both of these mural projects, drawn by artist Julie Jacobs, students had to share leadership roles in painting the murals. The young women who painted the mural in Figure 3 were in Juvenile Arbitration because they had been in a group fight with one another, yet they were able to put these differences aside, work together to create an amazing artwork, and become friends in the process. In addition, these activities are examples of students moving outside the borderland to share their work with local communities, an opportunity that they rarely had. These culmination projects brought together identity, community, and leadership, thus achieving praxis through border pedagogy. Furthermore, both murals emphasized the importance of diversity and acceptance. The Emily Geiger mu-



Figure 3. Fall 2005 mural project with Juvenile Arbitration.

ral, for example, highlighted a local female heroine too often neglected in history texts. With the mural in Figure 2, the idea was to emphasize diversity and internationality. Each element, from the tree to the fish to the bird (not pictured), stemmed from a different culture, and the word “vision” highlighted the importance of seeing, accepting, and embracing the diversity of the world.

Beyond the mural projects, we also asked local university students to work with our youth on various projects and events. These particular university students were from a program serving first-generation and low-income students and students of color. We wanted our high-school students to have mentors who could demonstrate some of these leadership skills. We do not mean to imply that college is the only option for leadership, but we wanted to introduce our students to possibilities that expanded beyond their schools’ and parents’ expectations. This became a leadership opportunity for the college students as well. As one first-year college student noted, “some of these girls reminded me of myself,” and “this was one of my favorite events all year. I felt like I was doing something important ’cause it was like talking to myself two years ago when, before I knew about college” (Written Evaluation, 12/06/05). All of the students involved—high school and college—crossed borders in terms of location and with their knowledge. As we noted above, however, the im-

plications from this research indicate that educators need to offer students increased opportunities to share their knowledge outside the borderland and to celebrate students within their local communities and beyond.

Changing Education

Community-based programs such as the WWBI are good examples of spaces where we can offer students increased opportunities to engage in border work, but educational institutions have to be willing to provide borderlands as well. Within individual classrooms, too, teachers need to provide spaces for self-discovery and need to work to know their students and emphasize multicultural education. As one student from Old Brookland noted, “the flaws in education are you have to learn what *they* [teachers, schools] want you to learn instead of learning things to better your future” (our emphasis, Written Evaluation, 10/16/05). To many of these students, “bettering one’s future” does not involve memorizing and repeating facts and following the rules set by dominant society. As illustrated in our research, education should involve being able to speak freely and express oneself and being able to see oneself and one’s values reflected in the curriculum, opportunities that do not exist in many schools. As we argue, the arts are a vehicle for providing these opportunities; however, liberatory education can occur in any setting

and subject. And once educators and students create these borderlands, we need to share the successes and challenges that went into this process.

Challenges

This does not mean that the journey to self-discovery and community development is easy for those involved. John, for example, expressed suspicion at least twice over the arts class at Old Brookland. When we told John that he could write anything in his journal, he asked, "Are you sure? 'Cause other teachers say that and then they go and get us in trouble" (Fieldnotes, 10/9/05). This same week, John repeated, "it seems like other teachers at this school have started out [nice] and then turned on us" (Fieldnotes, 10/11/05). We saw a big part of our job as establishing trust with students through continued identity and community development exercises.

In addition, not every session went as planned, and not all students left feeling empowered and ready or capable of change. There were times when students fell short in terms of assignments, not finishing projects. When we developed an end-of-year showcase at Old Brookland, for example, only three of the 12 students showed up on the day of the show. As with any high-school students, there were also times when we had to deal with behavioral issues. Once we knew the students better, though, most did not want to disappoint us by not following through on assignments. In addition, many of our students dealt with multiple oppressions stemming from their class, race, gender, and sexuality, and the convergence of these oppressions added another element of difficulty in classroom activities. Students often missed class due to environmental factors that were out of our control but influenced our work as we became further involved in students' lives. We had to realize that liberatory education involves facing harsh realities. It does not result in the creation of a utopian community.

Although we knew this deep down already, we learned that schools and administrators do not necessarily view their students as potential leaders, see

art as a technique for self- and community development, or value the same type of growth or change as the teachers do. When one of our male high-school students wrote a poem about drugs for the end-of-year showcase, the school's director told us that she did not want his work shown. Although we explained that drugs were a pressure that Stephen was dealing with and that this highlighted his reality, the director told us we were "young, fresh, and naïve" (Fieldnotes, 4/3/07). We did not take Steven's work out of the show because he needed that space where he could bring together those two masks—the one he wore at school and the one he wore around friends. He needed a place to move beyond those binaries, and we viewed our class as this space.

As a final challenge, we must remember that the road to liberatory education can be a frightening and overwhelming journey on which to embark. We first feared the repercussions of the administration at Old Brookland Academy and the rules and regulations of Juvenile Arbitration. We had times where some teachers or parents resented our approaches and felt that we were helping the students find too much power. At the same time, though, there have been cases where they have seen students become better writers and public speakers. We felt a great divide between our two classes a week and the rest of the curriculum at Old Brookland. We also felt a divide between our workshops in Juvenile Arbitration in juxtaposition to scare tactics such as visiting prisons and detention centers. For adults critiquing our programs, they feared the unknown, saw us as challenging their authority, and viewed our class as too open around issues of sex, race, class, and violence. In essence, though, we wanted to offer students borderland spaces to deconstruct and investigate these oppressions and their roots, and, as a result, we hoped they would choose more proactive alternatives to addressing oppression.

CONCLUSIONS

Our goal as creative arts facilitators at both sites was to offer these underrepresented students a space support-

ing their discovery of a strong sense of self and community. Contrary to the anti-democratic educational system in which the students were situated, our classrooms valued individuals, embraced difference, and critically investigated reality. We used a toolkit that included theater role-playing, movement, poetry, creative writing, and dialogue to access liberatory education. While we definitely have room to grow, we hope that we moved toward liberatory education and the creation of a borderland space through arts education. As one of our students, Steven, noted, "I think this class is more open to the reality of things" (Fieldnotes, 1/25/06). While some at Old Brookland argued that arts were not necessary in everyday life, the arts helped these students understand themselves and become closer to one another. In addition, the young women participating in JA expressed the importance of self-reflection, self-discovery, and community. These young women were excited to be together and participate in these activities—even early on a Saturday morning.

Co-creation of borderlands requires flexibility on the part of both teachers and students. Teachers come in with a framework, but the creation of a borderland is a daily process of negotiation and adaptation. We saw students' preconceived ideas about intersectionality expand with a greater awareness of humanity and critical perspectives. We ask that more teachers of all disciplines attend to liberatory education as a home for themselves and their students as it can break down the borders of domination and conformity. If we are patient and willing to change and learn, the borderland can be a space where we bridge the gap between theory and practice. We feel grateful to have worked with these programs, for our experience has been a journey to the borderlands, a pedagogy of truth, passion, and persistence – one we will never forget.

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