

MAKING MEANING: CULTURE-BASED STUDIES IN THE ART CLASSROOM

By

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A CAPSTONE PROJECT PRESENTED TO THE COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS OF THE
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ABSTRACT OF CAPSTONE PROJECT PRESENTED TO THE COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS
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Abstract

The purpose of this research study was to investigate how meaningful and authentic experiences could be created through cultural studies in the art classroom. My research goal was to deliver a culture-based unit to elementary-aged students, and to do so in an authentic way that allowed those students to derive personal meaning from their artwork. Action based research was used to collect photos of student work throughout the unit, as well as student reflective responses on their unit experiences. I also took extensive notes throughout the course of the unit activities. I found that my students were highly responsive to the authentic methods that were used and voiced having positive and meaningful experiences. My Capstone paper describes my research process, findings, and recommendations. First, I discuss my purpose of the study, my assumptions, and limitations. Then I describe how such studies might be incorporated into the contemporary elementary art classroom. I also share how my own thoughts about culture-based art education have been influenced by art education scholars including Bequette, Delacruz, Desai, and Stuhr, Lois Petrovich-Mwaniki, and Wasson. I conclude this Capstone paper with final insights about implementing a successful and meaningful culture-based curriculum into the art classroom. I also created the following products to accompany my research: a self-published culture-based unit plan available on ISSUU, a short video featuring photos documenting the unit plan and student work, and curated archives of resources in Scoop.it and Pinterest. All of these materials, along with my paper are accessible on my webpage created for this project. The following are web links to my accompanying works that were part of this Capstone research.

<http://mrs-mason-cablesartpage.weebly.com/capstone-research-project.html>

<https://vimeo.com/87331593>

http://issuu.com/cicelyamcable/docs/mason_unit_plan

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Introduction

Infusing the art of diverse cultures into my art lessons is of great importance to me. Coming from a small rural area in the mountains of Western North Carolina, I never understood how diverse the world was, and how diverse the people in it were. When I attended college, I had a professor who heavily touted the lifelong benefits of teaching multiculturalism in the art classroom. She believed that teaching about the art of ethnic cultures could help students to develop a respect for those different from themselves. One challenge for me in my current situation as a white teacher in a predominately white classroom is providing authentic cultural experiences for my students. How can I best explain the art forms, meanings and traditions of diverse cultures to my students when I share no intimate knowledge of those cultures? One solution to this dilemma was to research ways in which to incorporate a unit containing such experiences, and share my findings with others in my field.

Statement of the Problem

In September of 2013, I chose multicultural art education as a capstone research topic for my University of Florida Master's degree in art education. When I began to explain to my advisor why I believed that this topic was of great importance to my classroom, I was quickly questioned about my methods and desire for educating my own students on this topic. My advisor, Elizabeth Delacruz, posed the question, "How can your students possibly relate to art from other cultures?" She further prodded by asking what importance they would find in those studies, and how those studies could be meaningful to them. In one of her writings on this issue, Delacruz states that "nothing could be more irrelevant, even racist, than asking a group of little white kids to make African masks or Indian sand paintings" (Delacruz, 1995, p.105).

When reflecting on my previous style of teaching about cultures different from my own, I realized that I was asking students to create work in the likeness of the art from other cultures, with little or no regard to my students' own culture or interests. I was teaching multicultural education in a clichéd way. I introduced another culture, like ancient Greece, and that culture's art. My students would then create art in the culture's likeness. I always assumed that my students were learning a great deal about art of different cultures and were creating beautiful works in the process.

After being challenged on my multicultural teaching methods, I realized I was one of those teachers that were confused on the definition of multicultural art education. I began contemplating what benefit this type of instruction provided my students. While the study of multicultural art education can be the study of many cultures, I wanted my students to delve deeper into the study of one particular culture and really develop an understanding and genuine appreciation for that culture's traditions, customs, and art. Through my research I became aware of culture-based studies. While similar to multicultural education in that the two seek to study the art of others, culture-based studies are intended to be a more thorough and in depth study of one particular culture over the course of time. Culture-based studies cover more than just the art of the culture. It is meant to cover why the art was created, what it was used for, what purpose it served within the culture, how the culture is thriving today, etc. In a culture-based study an educator must also consider their own students and ask what deeper meaning or understandings they are getting from those studies and how it can relate to them personally?

Through my discussions with other art educators, I have realized that many of them share in this problem. We often wonder how professionals in our field can best develop multicultural art units that are meaningful and personal to students. As an art educator, I also wonder how the

study of contemporary art from culturally diverse artists might be included into a multicultural art unit and how I could integrate the use of authentic materials into multicultural studies. I feel that these specific problems should be studied because students should learn about the art of other cultures and about the authentic uses, materials, and reasons for the creation of such art. They should also be studied to allow the student the opportunity to examine his or her own culture and traditions, thus learning more about themselves.

Goals of the Study

My goals for my capstone research were to consider the problems discussed above as I developed and implemented a curriculum unit in my own school that incorporated the study of traditional and contemporary Native American art. I closely monitored my students during a culture-based unit that was taught by a Cherokee artist in residence at one of my elementary schools. I documented the experience of my students through photographs, and through personal reflections that they wrote after the unit was completed. As a result of the study, my students had a clearer understanding of Cherokee art and how it has progressed to include contemporary art. They were able to better make meaning out of the art and significance it represented for the Cherokee. They were also given the opportunity to create their own artwork that drew from the inspiration of Cherokee art, but did not copy Cherokee works. Photos of my students' artwork and excerpts from their reflections can be viewed in my e-book culture-based unit plan published on ISSUU (http://issuu.com/cicelyamcable/docs/mason_unit_plan).

Research Questions

The following questions guided my investigation:

1. Why is it important to introduce the art of diverse cultures to students?
2. How can a culture-based unit of study best be presented to an elementary-aged art class?

3. How might a culture-based unit in the elementary art classroom benefit student learning?
4. In what ways might this curricular approach encourage my students to make personal art decisions that allow them the opportunity to also consider aspects of their own cultures?

Rationale and Significance of the Study

This study is primarily needed to serve as a guide for me and other art educators as we begin to plan culture-based unit of study. My research reveals, as expressed in the words of my students, the benefits of having a guest artist from a specific culture the students are studying come into the art room to share his or her own art, culture, and traditions with the students. That artist can convey the importance of his or her culture and its art in a more authentic way than a teacher who shares no ties with the culture could.

Assumptions and Limitations

As I began to develop my curriculum unit, I decided to create two lessons that would educate students about a particular culture, while allowing for them to make their own personal choices in their artwork. My assumption was that the study of culturally diverse art would be beneficial to my students. I also believed that allowing room for my students to make personal choices in their own artwork was a vital key in delivering a successful unit. While I would have enjoyed creating a unit plan for my project that featured multiple culture-based art studies, I decided to focus on one specific type of cultural art. The geographic area that I teach in is steeped with rich Cherokee heritage. Because of this heritage, I decided to focus on contemporary Cherokee art. My visiting artist is a member of the Cherokee Arts Council and he led my students in two separate culture-based art projects. The first project stemmed from traditional Cherokee art, and the second project focused on contemporary Cherokee art. Limitation of this study include the location and topic of the curriculum unit, the age and other

demographic characteristics of my students, and the short duration of the project. Scheduling issues with the artist caused a much smaller time frame for research than was initially anticipated. Both sessions with the artist were devised to fit into the small time frame, but were carried over in the following weeks' lesson plans during the regular art time. This study was also limited to thirteen fifth grade participants who are identified as Caucasian students in a specific educational setting. The study also focused primarily on one particular culture (Cherokee) for the culture-based study. Despite these limitations, my findings offer much in terms of insights about incorporating culture-based study into an elementary art curriculum, and readers are invited to infer aspects and findings that are useful to their own teaching contexts.

Definitions of Terms

Culture-based studies. Culture-based studies is a term given for the study of a specific culture. It is differentiated from multicultural studies in that it does not attempt to cover a lot of different cultures in a school year, favoring instead the study of one culture at a time, and more in depth. James Bequette (2011) wrote that culture-based studies “promotes sensitivity and cultural awareness of” different cultures (p. 97).

Authenticity. Authenticity in art education deals with how accurate and genuine information provided in a curriculum project is. When devising a culture-based unit, it is important to fully understand the traditions and meanings behind the cultural art. Dr. Dawn Joseph and Dr. Jane Southcott (n. d.) suggest that “to achieve” better cultural diversity in the classroom, “we need to demonstrate authentic practice” and that without authenticity “we risk stripping the arts of their meaning” (p. 1). Joseph and Southcott posit that “materials should be prepared with the involvement of someone within the culture and include cultural context” (n.d., p. 1).

Literature Review

Multicultural art education has long been a research interest of mine. As a Caucasian art educator teaching in a predominately Caucasian community, I view the teaching of multicultural art as a necessity in my own classroom. I believe there is a need for my students to better understand and respect diverse cultures. The study of such diverse cultures can impact students and help create better global citizens for the future. My own views on what multicultural education entails, why it should be taught, and the best ways to teach it have drastically changed since I began researching and reading articles written by others that pertain to this topic. Several scholars inform my topic, including Adejumo, Bequette, Delacruz, and Desai. Each researcher provides information in their work regarding the importance of authenticity in teaching culture-based studies, the benefits of using one's local resources when preparing a culture-based unit, and the necessity of allowing students to add their personal ideas and interests in projects that also reflect their cultural values and experiences.

Authenticity in Culture-Based Studies

My research has allowed me to see the importance of authenticity when teaching culture-based units. Like Joseph and Southcott, Desai (2000) wrote about the importance of authenticity when participating in culture-based studies. Desai argues that "one primary concern of multicultural education is to provide accurate and authentic representations of the art of racially and ethnically marginalized groups" (p. 114). According to Bequette and Hrenko (2011), a beneficial way to keep units of study authentic is to incorporate the use of "guest teachers, storytellers, and local artists and crafters" into the unit (p. 105). Chalmers (2002) adds an additional mandate. He believes that educators should "teach for those forms of artistic

imagination that problematize cultural information and acknowledge that a politics of difference involves a dialogue with others who speak from different traditions” (p. 296).

Having dialogue with individuals from different cultures can result in a clearer understanding and in more meaningful and authentic studies in the classroom. Bequette (2009) further shares that his research on the topic has yielded that “indigenous artists clearly possess a traditional cultural knowledge that white and other non-native teachers do not have. This traditional artistic capital is of value to students, and given the opportunity, native artists can offer it to them” (p. 77). Bequette adds, “when cultural assets are valued and ways are found to distribute these resources equitably in classroom settings, this process can lead to better student learning and school-Indian community relations” (p. 77). This reveals that by utilizing local cultural artisans who have a certain understanding of their own culture’s traditions, my students can benefit greatly. Bequette’s study suggests that having a traditional artist come into the classroom to lead students in an authentic culture-based lesson will yield a positive learning experience. Allowing the artist to discuss the context behind the art and traditions, and providing authentic materials for students to use allows for an authentic culture experience.

Sensitivity in Culture-Based Studies

One good way to shape culture-based art experience for students is to be sensitive and knowledgeable about the culture that will be introduced. For example, Yuen-Wan Lin (1999) describes her experiences of being a Taiwanese immigrant to Canada. She “found that the Chinese are categorized as a single ethnicity by the Western world” and that the “differences between the cultural heritage which influences Chinese students while engaging in art making and appreciation and the cultural tradition that art educators derived from reading instructional packages and visiting Chinatown, need to be examined” (Yuen Wan Lin, 1999, pp. 111-112).

This statement suggests the need for art educators to be sensitive to not categorizing different cultures into one homogeneous group. Doing so can confuse and mislead students. Before teaching a unit art educators should be aware of their own biases and educate themselves on the chosen culture of study in order to counteract that bias.

Adejumo (2002) claims that in order to “understand and maximize the benefits of multicultural art education,” art educators of today “must engage in a critical and honest dialogue about its potentials and limitations” (p. 1). We must force ourselves to weigh the benefits of what we are teaching our students and strive to develop the best ways to teach it. Delacruz adds that “art educators must strive to explore the difficult task of teaching art wisely, sensitively, with great regard for the grand multicultural experiment that is America” (2012, p. 234).

Making Culture-Based Studies Meaningful and Personal

I am concerned with how I can best develop a culture-based art unit that is meaningful and relevant to students. This concern has driven my research interests. One particularly successful program that I learned about in my readings was *Project Intersect*, a program created by a Native American art educator and a group of art educators who were concerned with introducing culture-based studies into the classroom. Their goal was to make those studies meaningful to students, some of whom had no tie to that culture presented. Using *Project Intersect* and the writing of Bequette and Hrenko (2011) as a model, I developed and implemented a “curriculum that mapped where teaching about American Indian art and culture could meaningfully intersect” with the subjects and interests of my students (p. 97).

According to Milner (2005), “teachers can maximize student learning by importing the culture and everyday experiences of the students” (p. 392). I incorporated my own students’ culture and experiences when developing my multicultural unit. Stuhr, Petrovich-Mwaniki, and

Wasson (1992) confirm such an approach in their observation that “effective multicultural curricula utilize the students’ knowledge, experiences, skills, and values in the formation of learning and teaching activities” and that “students participation in this process is critical because students bring with them to the classroom prior learning from outside the school, motives, goals, insights, strategies for learning, or personal identities that give direction to their growth” (p. 16).

Proceeding With Caution

Ballengee-Morris and Stuhr (2001) state that “a recognition of our own socio-cultural identity and our biases make it easier to understand the multi-faceted cultural identities of others (p. 7). In a day and age where students come from a variety of backgrounds and family types, teachers must be careful when striving to put together a multicultural lesson. In our attempts to have students personalize their art, and make their art about their own cultures, Delacruz (2012) explains that we must realize that some lessons have a goal of celebrating “family connections and” showcasing “children’s multicultural identities,” can instead “dramatize some children’s sense of inadequacy and family circumstances over which these children have no control and spotlight their inability to recreate desired cultural narratives” (p. 234). Delacruz and others also observe that cultural identities are not static, singular, or simple, and attempts to have students make art about their own cultural identities and histories can be over simplistic at best, and problematic and even harmful at worst. With my own research and unit planning, I hope to proceed with caution and consider my students diverse backgrounds when devising ways to implement such a unit.

The Need for Further Research

While there has been much written on this topic, there is room for further examination. Bequette’s culture-based study focused on both Native American and Caucasian teachers

instructing both Native American and Caucasian students. What about a Caucasian teacher instructing Caucasian students? What is the best way to approach multicultural and culture-based studies for this particular population? Through my research, I have been able to show that my students reacted in a positive way to a visiting artist who is teaching a lesson from his own culture and traditions. My documentation also shows that my students had meaningful experiences they could not obtain from my teaching of a culture-based lesson. Through my readings I developed strategies on how to devise such a unit with the help of this artist. It is of the uttermost importance to teach culture-based art education in an authentic, meaningful way so students can best benefit from their time spent learning.

My topic evolved from being conceptualized as a multicultural study to one of culture-based art education and how it could be incorporated in to the classroom for a positive learning experience. The desire to produce an authentic curriculum unit influenced how I planned my project and the instruction of the unit so my students were more engaged in effective pedagogies. Through my readings, I discovered ways art educators can integrate the use of genuine materials into multicultural studies in the classroom. I began to understand how contemporary art and artists play into the teachings of culture-based art education.

I believe that students need to learn about the present as much as the past. The present, and art of the present contemporary culture should be intertwined in with culture-based art studies so that students can see that there is a relevance to what they are doing today.

Methodology

The main goals of my research were to determine the best ways to develop an elementary age-appropriate culture-based art unit that introduced local Native American culture to my

students in an authentic, meaningful, and personal way. In order to do this, I conducted my research on this topic using the action research method.

Subjects

According to *Infed Action Research*, “the approach is only action research when it is collaborative” (n. d.). Because of this I decided to work with a local artist to collaborate on the best ways to infuse culture-based art education into my classroom. My study took place on January 14th, 2014. Thirteen fifth grade students at one of the elementary schools where I teach participated in the study. A visiting Native American artist came to lead my students in two separate culture based lesson plans dealing with Cherokee art and culture. Jeffery Marley, the artist-in-residence, and I had several earlier conversations over the course of a month that dealt with the planning and conceiving of this unit. Mr. Marley shared his thoughts on how he wanted to teach students and what he would like them to derive from the unit. He wanted to share personal art-making stories as well as traditions that were passed down to him from his grandmother. He was also very adamant that the students would put their own personal spin on their artwork.

Research Site

My school is small, located in the rural Appalachian mountains of North Carolina. It is a pre-K to fifth grade elementary school. There are only around 120 students in the entire school. The event with the artist took place on January 14th in my own classroom, and was carried over for approximately two weeks after the departure of the artist in residence. The first lesson took place in the morning (all morning) and was a traditional Native American gourd art lesson. The second lesson took place in the afternoon (all afternoon) and was a contemporary Native American approach to mask making using only contemporary materials. My school facilitated

this full-day immersion, allowing my art students to miss their other classes for the day. In addition to this event, I prepared my students in advance, and followed up with additional educative activities after our day with the artist.

Data Collection Procedures

There were several authors who widely informed my understanding of action research and how to conduct it. Small and Hall (2005) explain that “action oriented research” assumes that valid knowledge comes from a variety of sources and that academic and community partners each possess unique and valuable knowledge and insights” (p. 938). Small (1995) further posits that “action researchers value the use of multiple methods so that this variety of viewpoints can be adequately captured and represented” (p. 941-955). According to Mettetal, steps for conducting action research include the following: identifying a question, reviewing the literature, planning a research strategy, collecting data, analyzing data, taking action based on results, and sharing discovered findings (Mettetal, 2003). These steps guided my inquiry.

My visiting artist completed a questionnaire via email consisting of questions pertaining to his art and the unit. We also had several telephone conversations preceding the day of the event. I took numerous photographs of the children working with the artist, of the artist presenting, and of their completed artwork. I also administered a questionnaire to my students and saved their answers. Following, I interview students to follow up on what they had learned and what they thought about the project and their time with Mr. Marley. All of these are considered as data.

Data Analysis Procedures

Through my data analysis I sought to determine how my students responded to certain strategies I used in my culture-based unit of study. I wanted to analyze and assess how the

strategies influenced their thoughts about what they learned about Cherokee art and culture, along with what they learned in creating their own artwork for the unit. My means of making sense of all this collected information was influenced by the writing of Maxwell (1996).

Maxwell (1996) states that analyzing data “can’t be a mechanical process, it requires thinking about how your methods can provide answers to your research questions” (p.102). I created a matrix by determining how my chosen methods could produce answers to my own research questions. As suggested by Maxwell (1996), I started with my questions and asked “what data you would need, how you would get these data, and how you could analyze them in order to answer these questions” (p. 102). I analyzed student responses and photos of completed works so that I could gauge similarities and differences in how my students responded to our Native American visiting artist as he taught about his own art, cultural history, and contemporary practices.

I also implemented advice from the *Infed Action Research* article: “having correct knowledge does not of itself lead to change, attention also needs to be paid to the matrix of cultural and psychic forces through which the subject is constituted” (n.d.). Using this strategy, I looked for and coded recurring behaviors (evidenced in my field notes, photographs, interviews, and student writings) that allowed me to then subject my data to thematic analysis. I developed a matrix that condensed thematically what happened, thus allowing me to form generalizations. While analyzing my students’ experience and completed work, I considered the fact that they knew very little about Cherokee culture before the project. I also wanted to consider how they were able to personally connect with the unit even though it was about a culture different from their own. I wanted to see how they were able to make their projects with personal content that symbolized their own backgrounds and interests. I compiled selected photos of our learning

activities and artworks into a movie, using Windows Movie Maker

(<https://vimeo.com/87331593>). My curricular plans and recommendations based on this study are self-published on ISSUU (<http://mrsmason-cablesartpage.weebly.com/capstone-research-project.html>). Everything is also accessible from my website that I created for this research project (<http://mrsmason-cablesartpage.weebly.com/capstone-research-project.html>)

Findings

My main goal through this study was to devise an effective way to implement culture-based studies in the art classroom in a sensitive, beneficial, authentic, and meaningful way. In devising this unit, I strived to consider why it was important to introduce the art of diverse cultures to students, how a culture-based unit of study could best be presented to an elementary-aged art class, how a culture-based unit in the elementary art classroom could benefit student learning, and what ways might this curricular approach encourage my students to make personal art decisions that allow them the opportunity to consider aspects of their own cultures.

My research findings are organized into five parts. I will detail three separate main findings that I discovered in my research. I will then summarize these findings and end the section with my conclusion and recommendations. One of my main findings was that culture-based studies keep cultural studies relevant and *alive*. I also discovered that utilizing artists and educators from a specific culture to share their own culture, traditions, meanings and art with students makes the unit more meaningful and authentic than if a teacher that does not share in those experiences teaches it. My last main finding was that students derive more out of culture-based studies if they make a personal connection to it.

We Are Still Here

My visiting artist, Jeffery Marley, is proud of his Cherokee heritage. I had the opportunity to informally speak to Mr. Marley several times before he visited my classroom, and I also conducted an interview with him regarding why he thinks it is important to integrate culture-based studies into the art classroom. While growing up on the Cherokee reservation, Mr. Marley was encouraged at an early age by his mother to practice the traditional arts of the Cherokee. However, his “first true experience with a traditional art form was a basketry class in kindergarten” (J. Marley, personal communication, January 2, 2014). It was because of this experience in a school setting that he was influenced to pursue the arts.

Mr. Marley stated that it is important for students to have visiting artist like himself come into the classroom because “it gives the students access to knowledge and experience they would not otherwise have. It is also an opportunity to have direct contact with a culture that they would have to leave the classroom to gain” (J. Marley, personal communication, January 2, 2014). Marley further asserted that by visiting schools, he is helping to keep the art of his culture relevant and in the forefront. During his visit, Marley proudly held up a sign that proclaimed in the Cherokee language, “We are still here.” He feels that through his work in the schools and in art, he is helping to keep the artistic traditions in his community alive and respected.



Figure 1. Visiting Cherokee artist Jeffery Marley with a sign written in the Cherokee language stating “We are still here.”

In her personal reflection on the events of the day spent with the artist, one fifth grade student proclaimed that she “loved learning about old Cherokee traditions” and that she “learned that the” Native Americans “used the gourd masks to scare away the enemy. They also used the gourd masks to make fun of their enemy” (personal communication, Jan. 15, 2013). As Mr. Marley had expressed, his time spent with students helped to pass along vital information about the art of his culture and what it was used for. Because of such information, students are now educated on Cherokee booger masks and their uses and purpose.

Bequette and Hrenko (2011) “encouraged teachers to develop critically charged arts lessons and pedagogy that gave children the confidence to eschew dominant culture perspectives when studying cultures; and when those cultures varied from their own, to accept that they are merely different-neither superior nor inferior” (p. 99). While I did not necessarily address

dominant culture or social and political issues in my project, and the artwork that my students created in my unit was not critically charged, the visiting artist did discuss some dominant culture issues with my students. While Mr. Marley finds it important to pass along such information in order to proclaim that his tribe is “still here,” he also educates people about traditional and contemporary Cherokee art as a process of decolonization. He states that “Colonialism commodifies the cultural identity as a way to create wealth (i.e. mascots, brand names, product imagery). By working from within the community, using decolonization, the art work can facilitate healing and restore dignity” (Jeffery Marley, personal communication, Jan. 2, 2014). Marley continues, “To this end, I have been exploring the booger mask as a form of performance art and a way of confronting current issues within the Cherokee community” (Jeffery Marley, personal communication, Jan.2, 2014). Through school education, Mr. Marley feels that he is teaching others to care about such issues, and to in turn, stand up and create art that deals with what they consider important. Addressing dominant culture, as well as social and political issues is a hard task to do with an elementary age group. However, the artist was able to address this in a real life way that students could better understand.



Figure 2. Visiting Cherokee artist Jeffery Marley showing the fifth grade class a traditional Cherokee gourd mask. Marley creates Booger masks as a way to focus on decolonization and to confront issues within his own community.



Figure 3. Visiting Cherokee artist Jeffery Marley shows the group of fifth grade students his clay masks that he created in honor of his mother and his father. He explained that his mother's mask was closed because she was a very quiet woman, while his father's mouth is depicted open to show that he was a talkative person.

A More Effective Way to Introduce Culture-Based Studies

My second finding suggests that incorporating artists, educators, and members of other cultures into a culture-based study can benefit students more than if the regular art educator tries to teach, convey, and explain traditions from a culture they share no other ties to. While I myself do share in Cherokee heritage, there is a disconnect between myself and this heritage. I did not grow up knowing much about my heritage, only that it existed. I grew up outside of the Cherokee reservation. While I acknowledged a deep personal desire to learn more about Cherokee art and traditions, I knew I could not authentically explain such customs to my students due to this disconnect with the culture. I felt that in order for my students to gain as much true understanding of another culture as possible, I needed to have someone from within that community share their personal knowledge.



Figure 4. A group of thirteen fifth graders listen intently as Cherokee artist Jeffery Marley tells them about the tradition of the Cherokee art of gourd masks and what those masks were used for in his culture.

I observed my students closely as Mr. Marley began his art session. My students were sitting directly in front of him, absolutely silent and taking in every word he said. Their hands shot into the air with questions as he began to explain the tradition of the Cherokee Booger mask, and they sat in awe as he proceeded to drape a patterned blanket around himself, put his gourd mask on and perform a traditional Cherokee Booger dance for them.



Figure 5. Cherokee artist Jeffery Marley shows the students what a traditional Cherokee booger mask might look like when being used in a Booger dance. He explained that the Booger masks and dances were once used in the Cherokee culture to make fun of enemies.

Mr. Marley explained the how the gourd masks were used during Booger dances to make fun of Cherokee enemies. Parts of the gourd which were raised or stuck out would be used to accentuate a comical part of that that particular enemy. For instance, a gourd with a long spout might be used to make fun of an enemy with a particularly long nose. My students listened intently as Mr. Marley further explained that other masks were created to represent people of

importance. He introduced his own clay masks to the students and explained that one represented his father, one represented his mother, and one represented his daughter.

In reading my students' personal written reflections and by listening to their audio recorded recounts of their day, it became apparent that they gained valuable insight into the art of the Cherokee culture, the impact the culture has on the area in which we live, and the impact it has on those who are a part of the culture. Because our visiting artist was born into and shares that culture, his deep understanding of its rich traditions and his willingness to share this with my students made the experience memorable and special for the fifth grade class. One child explained that the artist was able to convey more to him about "the seven clans" and their masks than the Cherokee museum he had visited in the prior year (personal communication, Feb.4, 2013). Another student explained that "the Cherokee make different masks, and some may make fun of their enemies. They may put blankets over their body and then put masks on to perform a dance" (personal communication, Feb. 4, 2013). He further added that after this experience, he wanted to "learn more about Cherokee history" (personal communication, Feb. 4, 2013).

Personal Connection is Key

One of my goals through this project was to explore how through having the chance to personalize their own art, my students could garner a personal connection with that art, thus increasing their positive learning experiences. While I did want my students to gain vital cultural knowledge through culture-based art studies, I also wanted them to gain knowledge about their own cultures, traditions, and preferences. If my students were to merely copy the art of another culture, it would not be relevant to them. But if they were to use that art as an inspiration for their own contemporary art project, the possibility for a positive and personal learning experience in the arts would be great.

Instead of having students create a traditional Cherokee Booger mask, my artist had students create and decorate their own gourd vessels. They learned how to cut, scoop out, and clean the gourds. Then they were able to paint and decorate their own vessels according to their preferences. When students created their own mask using contemporary materials they had free range of how they wanted to decorate their masks.

Students chose to showcase things that they enjoy. A fifth grade student stated that “I turned my cardboard mask into a bearded woman because I am a girl and I like *Duck Dynasty*”(personal communication, Jan.15, 2014). Another fifth grade student enjoyed personalizing his mask so much, he did not take it off for the remainder of the day. He stated that he “enjoyed the cardboard mask the most because we could add stuff to it” and he turned his cardboard mask into a “bull because I liked the horn idea.” He also stated that he “learned that the Cherokee’s way of art is different than ours because we think of masks as a costume but to them it was much more” (personal communication, Jan. 15, 2014).



Figure 6. A fifth grade student posing with his cardboard mask. Students had their own choice of colors, and attachments to use to turn their mask into whatever they would like to showcase something personal about them or something they enjoyed.

By observing the students creating their art, I noticed they were all excited to start creating right away. Their ideas for how they wanted their artwork to look and what they wanted it to express seemed to come instantly. This is the type of excitement that an art project can garner when personal choice is allowed and students are given the opportunity to consider what they want to represent about themselves through their work. While they were still learning about Cherokee traditions, customs, and contemporary Cherokee art, students were able to use that information and inspiration to make something personal and exciting to them. This was more profitable to my students than simply copying the traditional gourd mask of a culture when that culture had nothing to do with them. A fifth grader wrote, “I tried to make my cardboard mask original. So I made a beard only around the mouth, gave him a mole, and a top hat. For ears, I used these little circles the artist made for us to use” (personal communication, Jan. 15, 2014).



Figure 7. A fifth grade student poses with his cardboard mask that he created after the second session with the visiting Cherokee artist Jeffery Marley. The second session focused on contemporary mask-making using contemporary materials and student personalization. Marley discussed how many Cherokee artists are being influenced by the old tradition of mask-making, but are using more current materials to create new art.

Summary Across All Findings

All of my findings reveal that having an artist come in to the classroom to teach culture-based studies when they share in said culture is an effective way to introduce such a curriculum into the classroom. Each finding reveals how an art educator can effectively craft a culture-based unit to deliver the ultimate in meaningful coursework to students. My unit utilized the visiting Cherokee artist, aiming to educate others about the art of his culture as a way to “keep it relevant,” as well allowing students to personalize their own art instead of copying as a way for them to explore their own cultures, interests, and traditions.

My findings also answered some important questions concerning culture-based studies in the art room. I had first posed the question, “Why is it important to introduce the art of diverse cultures to students?” My findings show that it is necessary to introduce this art so these cultures are “kept alive” and their art is presented as relevant.

My students were also greatly inspired by the art of the Cherokee to create their own works. By studying the works of other cultures, students can expand their knowledge and appreciation of all types of art. I also believe that my findings answered the question of how a culture-based unit of study can best be presented to an elementary aged art class. Having a Cherokee artist present the unit, using authentic materials, and allowing for student’s personal artistic choice in the art projects, all proved to be positive culture-based learning strategies.

Another question that was answered during this unit was in what ways might this curricular approach encourage my students to make personal art decisions that allow them the opportunity to consider aspects of their own culture? It was apparent that by introducing his own artworks and speaking to the students about his personal traditions and motivations behind those works, our visiting artist heavily motivated my students to come up with original and culture-

driven ideas for their unit projects. As suggested by Bequette and Hrenko (2011), my students were given the opportunity to learn about a culture different from their own, and were able to see that “they are merely different-neither superior nor inferior” (p. 99).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The goals of my research were to implement and study certain strategies of delivering a culture-based unit to determine if these were effective with my chosen group of students. The literature that I studied for this project suggested that bringing in an artist of the culture presented to share his or her art and traditions with students would be the best way to teach a culture-based unit. After taking the suggestions of such authors as Bequette and Hrenko, I was able to devise a unit similar to that of Bequette’s own *Project Intersect*.

My culture-based unit consisted of a Cherokee artist in residence, authentic materials that my students used to create their own Cherokee-inspired art, choice of materials and personal themes for students, written reflections on their unit experience, an interview with the visiting artist, a short video featuring photos and recorded sound from the day, and a culture-based unit plan published on ISSUU that suggests these strategies to other art educators. In the remainder of this section I will discuss and interpret my findings, and discuss the significance, implications, and recommendations for those findings.

Discussion and Interpretation of Findings

Based on my findings, I now believe that a culture-based unit can be a positive experience for students when certain strategies can be implemented. By trying these strategies out in my research, I was able to observe my students and their reactions to the unit, and interview them about their experiences. Each student in the class was able to easily tell me what they learned, and what they enjoyed about the time spent with their visiting artist. They also

showed excitement when explaining the personal choices that they used when creating their artwork. These strategies proved to be successful in this culture-based unit. My students were also able to make meaning through this unit. They developed new understandings of a culture different from their own, and they created artwork that was meaningful to themselves.

Significance, Implications, and Recommendations

The implications of my findings are informative and of great value to other art educators who seek to give their students meaningful culture-based art experiences in the classroom. My goal is to share these strategies that I employed in this unit with other art educators in my ISSUU unit plan and through the video showcased on my website so that others may try them in their own culture-based units. My recommendation for future professional practice in art education is that we shift away from asking students to replicate the art of another culture and place the emphasis on gaining inspiration through the study of that culture and its art to create projects with personal meaning to the students themselves.

In conclusion, I plan to implement my research into my own professional practice for the future. When I plan culture-based units, I will make an extra effort to seek out local artists who can lend their expertise and background experiences to the unit. I understand that such artists are not always available, but other strategies will be utilized in culture-based studies, such as allowing for personal student choice and using cultural art as an inspiration for art projects, as opposed to copying that art work and style.

My research will be visible online for others who might want to implement the same ideas into their curriculum. My personal website, listed below, features my documentary video as well as links to my published ISSUU culture-based unit and a Pinterest board and Scoop.it page

on contemporary Native American art: <http://mrsmason-cablesartpage.weebly.com/capstone-research-project.html>

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List of Figures with Figure Captions

Figure 8. Visiting Cherokee artist Jeffery Marley with a sign written in the Cherokee language stating “We are still here.”

Figure 9. Visiting Cherokee artist Jeffery Marley showing the fifth grade class a traditional Cherokee gourd mask. Marley creates booger masks as a way to focus on decolonization and to confront issues within his own community.

Figure 10. Visiting Cherokee artist Jeffery Marley shows the group of fifth grade students clay masks that he created in honor of his mother and his father. He explained his mother’s mask was closed because she was a very quiet woman, while his father’s mouth is depicted as open to show that he was a talkative person.

Figure 11. A group of thirteen fifth graders listen intently as Cherokee artist Jeffery Marley tells them about the tradition of the Cherokee art of gourd masks and what those masks were used for in his culture.

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Figure 13. A fifth grade student posing with his cardboard mask. Students had their own choice of colors, and attachments to use to turn their mask into whatever they would like to showcase something personal about them or something that they enjoyed or liked.

Figure 14. A fifth grade student poses with his cardboard mask that he created after the second session with the visiting Cherokee artist Jeffery Marley. The second session focused on contemporary mask making using contemporary materials and student personalization. He

discussed how many Cherokee artists are being influenced by the old tradition of mask making, but are using more current materials to create new art.

Author Biography

Cicely Mason Cable comes from a long line of educators. Both her grandmother and her mother passed down their love for teaching to her. From the time that she was young, she showed a talent in the arts. She had a special art teacher in elementary and high school, who never ceased to stop encouraging her and cultivating her talent.

When Cicely was a freshman in college, she volunteered in her mother's first grade class and did art projects with the students once a week. Through this volunteer work, Cicely was able to see that art education was the career path for her. Cicely returned to her alma mater, Andrews Elementary/High School, in 2004, where she completed her student teaching with her own art teacher. She achieved her undergraduate degree in art education from Western Carolina University later that same year. Cicely's first job was working as an art teacher at Murphy Elementary and Martins Creek Schools in 2005. Later that year, she took a full time art education position at Robbinsville Elementary School in Graham County, N.C. where she stayed and taught for five years. In 2010, she had the opportunity to come back to her native Cherokee county to teach high school art at Murphy High School. The same year, Cicely achieved her National Boards certification in Early/Middle Childhood Art. She is currently teaching once again at Murphy Elementary School, and also at Marble Elementary School, and is pursuing her Master's degree in Art Education through the University of Florida. Cicely has a distinct love for drawing. Lately, her creative efforts center on the novel that she is writing. She is working to develop illustrations for her 375- page novel, and hopes to self- publish it in eBook format. She feels that art and writing are closely related and steeped in creativity. Cicely's research interests are centered on elementary art education, the importance of art programs in an elementary setting, using art as a vehicle to teach other subjects, and multicultural art education.