ETEC 532: Vignette #1 and #2

Responsibility, Bias, and Virtual Museums

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Vignette #1: Responsibility and Bias

Educators take on various responsibilities in the dynamic relationship that exists between teacher and student. The classroom should be a safe space where ideas can thrive and issues can be discussed. Educators have a responsibility to cultivate that environment. To this end, teachers must be aware of their own biases and induce students to see others' point of view. This is particularly true when discussing issues of culture, identity, and social responsibility.

The art educators from this week's vignette take these responsibilities seriously. Stacy Friedman and Sylvia Kind use art as an "invitation for a conversation" by investigating the invisible/intangible aspects of one's identity and culture or by exploring the points of view of others (Friedman, 2004). Kiran Subhani also uses art as a doorway to conversation and deeper understanding (Subhani, 2015).

Sylvia Kind (2004) uses her textile art in what could be considered a traditional sense. It is a visual piece that is meant to evoke certain themes and idea. While I find them compelling, I wonder how effective they are at conveying her intended message without her accompanying interpretation. However, in the creation of her work she is able to critically reflect on her own views. This reflection allows her to approach difficult topics more responsibly, limiting the bias she brings to the class.

Subhani and Friedman more explicitly approached the idea of bias and a teacher's responsibility to address it. Subhani facilitated an in depth activity that has

students choose images and interact with them through a series of exploratory activities. Her approach was to refrain from giving her personal viewpoints when students select images. She thereby forces the student to come to terms with their own interpretations in the face of their research findings. After personally interacting with the image, students study the photographer and consider the original bias that may have influenced decisions of subjects, juxtapositions, and omissions. They then endeavor to understand the historical/political context and glean the central struggle that the image depicts. Then they create two opposing viewpoints of the conflict and finally consider the one that best serves the subject of the picture (Subhani, 2015). The students, thus armed with facts and frames of reference, are ready to have a meaningful conversation and/or take action.

Friedman similarly used puppets as a kind of proxy that allowed students to put themselves in the shoes of another (Friedman, 2004). By creating an art credo for an ancestor, students were able to consider the viewpoints of someone connected to them in a personal way (through family) but simultaneously removed from themselves (in time). The activity is fascinating but I wonder how effective the credos were in creating understanding of the other without the kind of background research that the Subhani article describes. Are the dialogues created simply a reflection of the stereotypes that the student holds? This question aside, the creation of her documentary provided her with the evidence with which to reflect on her personal practice. Friedman realized that her choices of questions and directions created the learning environment that not all students felt comfortable participating in. Furthermore, she became aware of how

certain necessary decisions made in editing the film defacto portrayed her own interpretation of the events and conversations.

As educators, we are responsible to our students. But as people, we have bias. Critical reflection and innovative construction of learning activities can help mitigate the harm caused by them and create meaningful learning experiences.

Vignette #2: Virtual Museums

I came across an interesting quote attributed to Alan Gregg of the Mutton Birds. He said a good education should leave much to be desired. This cheeky quip means, to me, that education should inspire one to learn more. These days, 'lifelong learners' is a buzzword that educators are bouncing around, but what are they and how do we create them?

I have always loved museums. In my mind, they are the classrooms of those lifelong learners. Museums are generally more interactive than media used in the classroom and have seemingly endless layers of artifacts that one can view or connect with. How is technology changing this institution? In this short essay I use the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre as a guiding example to argue that technology, when used correctly, can only add to the experience.

The Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre (VHEC) is devoted to Holocaust and anti-racism education. Their site embodies the online presence of many world-class museums by including exhibit descriptions, hours, missions statements, and events. Where the VHEC excels is in the range of teacher resources and virtual, online components available. Some of the resources are quite low tech. Bios of survivors, such as Stanislaw Boraks and Samuel Sussel, heros such as Chiune and Yukiko Sugihara, and specific events, such as Canada's experience at the 1936 Olympics in Germany, are little more than multimedia websites. But by simply being online, they do much to improve the educational outcomes of the museum. For example, the VHEC is closed 134 days out of the year, observing many Jewish holidays, including the Sabbath. So for over a 3rd of the year, the online museum is the only access point to the resources of the institution. Needless to say, it improves access to everyone outside the Greater Vancouver area by 100%. I recently accepted a position at a school in rural Newfoundland and Labrador. The availability of online resources, particularly of the quality epitomized by the VHEC, is vital to providing my students with rich and in-depth experiences.

However, it is not simply improved access that makes online exhibits and virtual museums such a great addition to the physical spaces. The nature of the learner is changing as the available technology evolves. The president of the VHEC, Ed Lewin, says in the 2015-16 annual report that "Technology has

altered the way we communicate and to do our work in the most effective way possible we need to adapt to these realities (VHEC p.2)." The museum leadership recognizes that, "digitization projects that will make our resources accessible worldwide [are] making the VHEC an even more impactful destination for researchers, students and the general public (p.15)." Internet presence is to institutions today what a front door was for them in the past, the first point of contact. It would be poor practice to create a public place without a front door.

The nature of the content of museums adds challenges as well. The Hermitage, for example, has over 3 million items for visitors to view. That means you would have to look at over 1000 items an hour from open to close on every day the museum operates in order to see them all in a year. Furthermore, people interact with the material differently when they are in a museum than when they are online. This difference may be exacerbated by the sensitive nature of museums like the VHEC (Reading, 2003, p.77).

However, even online the user can experience the type of saturation illustrated in my Hermitage example above. Therefore, it would be the job of the teacher to ensure the students approach the virtual material with a constructive goal in mind. Some museums fear a loss of their intended narrative when users are free to consume the material on their own (Reading 2003, p.81). Proper preparation by the teacher can ensure that students are

guided to desirable outcomes. Many museums supply ample teaching resources and training to help teachers navigate the material.

Exposing students to the depth and breadth of information and experiences outside of school will inspire the lifelong learner that will continue to frequent museums, both online and off.

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