

Instructional Innovation Title: Imaginative Thinking: Preparing Aspiring School Leaders for Social Justice by Creating Short Films

Author:

Christa Boske, Ed.D.

Originality and Rationale:

As a student, I never realized that we could learn about the people we work with through film. I have seen injustice all of my life. I live them. We never talked about them prior to this course. I guess I thought they weren't very important. I realized there are more ways to reach students than through books and articles our professors give us. The concept of filming in my community is revolutionary to me and my studies. Learning how to capture the essence of what is really happening out there is difficult. We aren't trained to do this as school leaders or teachers because we are taught to learn facts and be efficient in using our facts. I learned to use observation, and to take my time to work with images that broaden my ability to learn about my school community. The places I have gone because of this opportunity helped me to process and self-examine constantly.
(Anonymous student reflection)

Insight such as this provided me as an academic with the ardent wish to assist students in communicating ideas about social justice on film, to be a heartfelt journey, committing themselves to a long-term project through a visual medium. After working with aspiring school leaders at the University of Houston Clear Lake, I realized through their reflective journals that they often felt isolated, stressed, and overwhelmed by the demands of leadership positions, especially with the impact of changing demographics on their school districts. As I spoke with aspiring school leaders about the passion, heart, and soul of educational leadership, I advocated for school leadership reform that incorporated leading for social justice. That is, emphasizing that school leaders in the 21st century will need to utilize their innovation, imagination, passion, and courage to meet the diverse needs of the school communities they will serve. No matter how often we identified the significance of transforming school communities as aspiring school leaders, they often struggled with envisioning possibilities, expressing their perceived inability to think of alternatives and unending choices.

One aspiring school leader expressed her frustration with traditional instructional methods as well as the implications of such practice, which translated into how decisions were made in K-12 settings. She stated,

I have been trained that there are right and wrong answers. I am constantly looking to my principal, mentor, and professors to know what they think are the right ways to do things. No one thinks we can make decisions on our own. We are told what we can and cannot do. I realize now that I just perpetuate this problem

in my classroom, as well as other teachers and school leaders at my school. We don't encourage creativity. We simply squash it and seem threatened by it. What if students challenge us? Traditional ways of doing things in school seem to put students in their place. This is the first class in which I have been challenged to think on my own and use creativity that I didn't know even existed. It's been very difficult for me, but I am learning that I have experienced injustices by being told that I am not capable of thinking for myself, let alone what I have done to all the children I taught over the last nine years.

Another student who worked as an assistant principal at an inner-city high school noted how often her attempts to fight for social justice on her campus were perceived as meager. She was an educated Black woman elected to a school board in a predominantly White suburban school. For 12-14 hours a day, she served impoverished Black youth at a high school who were more likely to earn detentions, in-school suspensions or receive three-day suspensions then to progress to the next grade level. She shared common practices on her campus including overlooking roach/mice infestations, the number of Black students who did not attend school, high drop-out rates, and increasing numbers of students being arrested for drugs, theft, truancy, and assault.

During class, I asked students how they were able to overcome the challenges and stresses they faced as aspiring school leaders. After speaking with 67 students, who were enrolled in our graduate school leadership program, I discovered that students felt limited in their abilities to think creatively and to use their innovation to express their passion to lead for social justice. I investigated the potential for aspiring school leaders to utilize artmaking (in this case, photography, poetry, music, collage, and short films) to uncover and share the injustices within their surrounding school districts. Providing students with the option to release their frustrations with educational systems through artmaking encourages students to release their emotions and gain insight to their work as primary change agents. Storytelling, photography, poetry, music, and collage were all used as mediums for creating final student short film projects, linking students' rationale for social justice with their passion for change. This proposal offers four case examples of aspiring school leaders, who used artmaking, specifically the creation of short films, in their fight for social justice and implications for their practice as school leaders.

Emotions and Leading for Social Justice

The highly charged emotion associated with leading for social justice is evident in the range of emotions that surface including, anger, fear, intimidation, deep sorrow, resentment, joy and others. As a prior educational leader in impoverished urban schools, I often experienced times of frustration when I heard teachers make derogatory comments about children and their families. Listening to school leaders make homophobic comments and use derogatory terms to describe masculine girls and feminine boys. I also felt great joy when students who were identified as deficiencies had the courage to embrace leadership roles that transformed the culture and climate of school. At times, I felt great disappointment when families and children suffered because of the implications of poverty, leaving them in constant survival mode. With all of this said, I discovered that

I was not alone in attempting to find a means to address the myriad of emotions when dealing with social justice issues. I was not aware of school leadership courses or pedagogical practices that provided guidance and support to school leaders in the midst of addressing social justice work.

Very little scholarship exists for school leaders regarding the intensity of emotions and their work. Beatty (2000) argues that emotions are regulated through power positions, which suggest that being professional and carefully controlled is the ideal demeanor for school leaders. Controlling for emotion can impact, and perhaps shut down intense emotions, which could have detrimental effects for those who work towards social justice (Larson & Ovando, 2001). Repressing or controlling emotions leaves school leaders feeling undervalued or dismissed, especially for women school leaders (Hackney & Runnestrand, 2003). Women who lead in traditional pervasively male structured school communities feel emotionally exhausted (Hackney & Runnestrand, 2003).

By openly expressing intense emotions regarding social justice, school leaders have the power to improve awareness, dialogue, and practices of those who will serve marginalized groups (lower class, racial, native language, culture/norms of behavior, gender, disabilities, immigrant status, and sexual orientation, and others). Expressing such emotion might have its share of consequences. Challenging unjust circumstances has the potential to create disruption in systems that promote the status quo. Restrictive and repressive emotional responses in these settings might be perceived as interruptions and disturbances, suggesting that showing emotions diminishes our ability to be truly intellectual (hooks, 1994). If schools embrace democratic ideals and practices that support our ability to be truly intellectual, then schools need to reconsider the role of emotion and expression in supporting and nurturing human experiences. The health and welfare of a school community is dependent on the leaders to be able to lead with their “full body and soul” (p. 155).

The Significance of Artmaking

For the purpose of this proposal, artmaking is defined as creating short films (through photography, video, poetry, music, and collage). Creating opportunities for students to engage in inquiry through artmaking might elicit what Carey (1998) identifies as dangerous knowledge. Dangerous knowledge examines lived experiences and allows for alternative ways of thinking. Dangerous knowledge has the potential for critical re-examinations of self, which has the potential to transform self identities and practice. Utilizing artmaking is one means of expressing feelings, investigating social injustice, and gaining insight to personal practice (Shapiro, 2006). Such transformations, as Freire (1998) reminds us, are essential to creating democratic and socially just schools that “create possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge” (p. 30). Self-transformation occurs through emergent and relational interactions between artist and medium, between process and product, and between individuals as they share and exchange knowledge (Carey, 1998).

Choosing short films as an art media for artmaking provides opportunities to express human experiences, school life, and emotions. In the process of creating a short film, students should consider how the significance of ethics when transferring observations in the field to film (American Anthropological Association, 1971). It is important for students to note that committed choices to film people should be heartfelt, authentic, and genuine (Barbash & Taylor, 1997). Considering location, rapport, and image making are critical to using the art medium of film. Ethical issues should be considered, including the audience's perception that film is truth (Barbash & Taylor, 1997). When considering issues like these, filmmakers should investigate ethical issues, including, participants' consent to being filmed or permission for their pictures used in this manner. Cinematic representations are constructed by the filmmaker, and should examine to what extent audience members might leave with narrow interpretations about the people and location.

Transformation

The history of education in the United States perpetuates the "reproduction of socially sanctioned knowledge...representing dominant attitudes and behaviors (Nieto, 1999, p. 3). Because pre-service programs tend to perpetuate negative and racist attitudes, these beliefs translate into teaching approaches that perpetuate inequitable education (Nieto, 1999). I suggest that creating short films provide avenues for school leaders and researchers to explore emergence, relationality, and transformation as a means to help us understand our realities more clearly and believe in what we are doing in order to aspire to what we might achieve (See Shapiro, 1999). Self-transformation begins when students find connections between artistic materials, emotions, and knowledge (See Carey, 1998). Possibilities emerge when students can make changes in how they understand their experiences, which results in a transformation of their identity (Block, 1992).

Materials/Equipment

For the purpose of this proposal, students were encouraged to find meaning and purpose through artmaking, specifically in the creation of a short film using Microsoft MovieMaker. This software is available throughout the University of Houston Clear Lake's campus computer labs. At the onset of the course, students were asked about access to the following equipment/software:

- Digital recorders
- Digital cameras
- Digital movie recorder
- Internet/Google Searches for Images
- Headsets/microphones

Students worked together to identify equipment needs as well as planning when students could meet in small groups to work on the short film projects. After identifying how to meet equipment/software needs, students participated in an action continuum discussion (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997). This action continuum survey assisted

students in identifying how they serve their communities. After assessing their current status, students were asked to consider the potential of serving their school communities through documenting contemporary curriculum issues. Only one student used Microsoft MovieMaker prior to this course. I spent time documenting step by step how to create a short film without a digital camera or microphone. I posted this short film as well as the steps on WebCt for the students. I worked with students individually and as small groups throughout the process.

Students identified their areas of interest regarding curriculum and educational reform. Students had the option of working as individuals, as pairs, or as a small group. Afterwards, students worked collaboratively to identify the needs within specific school communities, which were based on the interests of the students. Students conducted needs assessments to identify the educational needs within their community, which were aligned with their curriculum interest area. Students focused on a myriad of issues ranging from meeting the needs of special education students to creating inclusive spaces to the influence of discipline issues on academic performance. Students were provided guiding questions for the creation of their film:

- 1) What is the purpose of the film?
- 2) What are the needs of the community?
- 3) How are the needs aligned to the purpose of the film?
- 4) What resources will you gather to illustrate the needs of the school community?
- 5) How will you visually capture the areas of concern?
- 6) How will you visually capture the strengths of the community?
- 7) Who represents the community's issues?
- 8) What questions do you have for the community?
- 9) How will you collect this data?
- 10) How will illustrate your findings in the film?
- 11) How will illustrate your analysis?
- 12) What scholarship supports this analysis?
- 13) How will you visually construct an authentic view of the people within this school community?
- 14) How involved will the school community be in creating/editing the film?
- 15) Will you show this to the community? How might they respond?
- 16) How have you addressed the needs of the community through film?
- 17) What message(s) is the audience left with when they leave?
- 18) To what extent did you serve the community through this medium?

Four Case Examples

In 2007, I conducted a study and critical arts-informed inquiry in order to consider three basic ideas: (1) How constructing short films could be useful or meaningful to aspiring leaders' understanding(s) of leading for social justice, (2) How creating short film artmaking activities might be applied on school leaders' campuses, curricula, and activities, and, (3) Implications of this instructional approach for using art methods of analyzing and representing student outcomes. Using various combinations of visual and

written materials and artistic techniques, aspiring school leaders including (pseudonyms) Mikeal, Tomas, Margarita, Jessica, Angela, Jasmine, and Lionel made short films (10-15 minutes) using Microsoft MovieMaker, photographs, collages, music, and narratives.

This project was a required assignment for the course. Throughout the course, students addressed concerns regarding the relationship between ways of knowing, creativity, social justice, and education. The four case examples comprise students who were all between the ages of 29-45, were selected by random sample. The names of potential participants (a total of 56 students) were correlated with numbers 1-56. Four of those numbers were then randomly selected, which created selected three short films created by individuals and one short film created by a small group of four students. The purpose of selecting four short film projects randomly was to emphasize the idea that creating short films could be a means of illustrating that not all students need to identify themselves as artistic in order to find value, information, and insights to knowledge gained regarding social justice issues. Qualifying their short films for this study was evident through student-designed rubrics. Students created a rubric for the short film assignment that promoted a multimedia reflection (visual, auditory narrative, and scholarship) that provided a unique perspective regarding to contemporary curriculum issues within the context of educational leadership (aligned with ELCC standards). Students critiqued each other's work using the rubric and provided feedback throughout the process including: (1) Focus of the short film and its relevance to contemporary curriculum issues; (2) Ensuring that students were faithful to their participants/school community; (3) All filming should reflect the true nature of the community and the issues; and (4) Drawing conclusions that are aligned with the vision and mission of the film.

The student films focused on aesthetic qualities that were relational, emergent and transformative. Participants' short films drew from their ongoing interests in promoting socially just conditions, as well as lived experiences within the communities in which their films were being created. Finally, transformation took place through dialogue and interaction between artistic processes and the life processes where the concerns of a community were negotiated. The students' short films were significant to pieces in understanding the power of arts-informed inquiry to help transform the socio-political landscapes of schools. The titles and general outlines for the students' films were as follows:

- *You See Math, I See Parts*
Focus on creating inclusive spaces for students in special education, and working with students from a strengths perspective by incorporating multiple intelligences throughout the curriculum.
- *Don't Forget About the Children*
Focus on a problem-based learning project in which the student addressed urban educational school reform for an impoverished inner-city school, working to improve school safety and overcoming the injustices faced by this impoverished school community.

- *Take a Walk with Me*
Focus on a problem-based learning project in which the student addressed the significance of building bridges between schools and impoverished communities through home visits.
- *The Power of Parents*
Focus on redefining parent involvement for an impoverished school community, which positively impacted student success.

At the completion of the short films, students noted that they did not realize the potential use of film as a means of reaching and serving their school communities. Several students noted the complexities associated with demonstrating how to apply new knowledge into practice through the creation of a short film. Students realized that they needed to support their claims, observations, and analysis through data collection and application of research in the field. All of the students made copies of their short films for the communities they served in addition to copies for future interviews. Students started the project feeling anxious and overwhelmed, because they were not familiar with the technology or process of problem-solving through artmaking. Students noted that they completed the course feeling confident in their ability to find alternative ways to express their learning and professional growth. Students also noted that they did not have the opportunity to integrate technology with their learning in prior courses, with the exception of PowerPoint presentations. Providing students with an alternative means of demonstrating their new knowledge base, skill set, and transformation inspired many of them to collaborate with colleagues on their individual K-12 campuses in an effort to afford students these opportunities.

Transferability

Using various art media provides students with alternatives to expressing how they understand content, application, relevance, and service to their communities. Artmaking challenges notions of how students understand their experiences and learning. Diamond and Mullen (1999) suggest, “retelling and expressing in our own words (and images) means learning to speak on our own behalf and no longer relying on authority and forms of others” (p. 58). Providing students with this alternative medium allowed them to look deeper into who they were and how they planned to connect their learning, emotions, and thoughts (Heck, 1998). Through this process, students were able to integrate their knowledge base, skill set, and sense of self into a medium that empowered students to lead for social justice. Although there are many ways to integrate artmaking into courses, I suggest the following strategies:

- Students reflecting on the meaning of artmaking, in this case, short films.
- Build film projects based on students’ prior experiences.
- Ask students how they could demonstrate to what extent they have internalized new knowledge and applied this new knowledge into practice.

- Reconsider how art can be used to assess student growth and understanding.
- Consider the possibility of reaching large audiences through short films.
- Engage students in recording their learning communities, encouraging students to consider how their learning is connected to the real world.
- Discover how short films represent human realities, and the possibility of influencing policy-making.

References

- Adams, M., Bell, L. A., & Griffin, P. (1997). *Teaching for diversity and social justice*. New York: Routledge.
- American Anthropological Association (1971). *Statements on ethics: Principles of professional responsibility*. Retrieved on February 29, 2008, <http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/ethstmnt.htm>
- Barbash, I. & Taylor, L. (1997). *Cross-cultural filmmaking: A handbook for making documentary and ethnographic films and videos*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Beatty, B. (2000). The emotions of educational leadership. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 3(4), 331-357.
- Booth, E. (1997). *The everyday work of art: How artistic experience can transform your life*. Source-books.
- Carey, R. (1998). *Critical art pedagogy: Foundations for a postmodern art education*. New York: Garland.
- Diamond, C. T. P., & Mullen, C. A. (Eds.). (1999). *The postmodern educator: Arts-based inquiries and teacher development*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civic courage*. Oxford, England: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers.
- Hackney, C., Runnestrand, D. (2003). *Struggling for authentic human synergy and a robust democratic culture: The wellspring community for women*. Retrieved February 28, 2008, <http://advancingwomen.com/awl/spring2003/HACKNEW-1.HTML>
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress*. New York: Routledge.
- Larson, C. & Ovando, C. (2001). *The color of bureaucracy: The politics of equity in multicultural school communities*. New York: Wadsworth.

Shapiro, L. (2006). Releasing emotion: Artmaking and leadership for social justice. In Marshall, C. & Oliva, M. (Eds.), *Leadership for social justice: Making revolutions in education* (pp. 233-250). Boston: Pearson.