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Curriculum Transformation And Art Education¹

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Abstract

‘Images and Identity’ is a research and curriculum development project, funded under the European Commission’s Comenius scheme, with partners in six EU countries. The project has developed and produced curriculum materials linking citizenship and art education. In 2010 it published on-line training materials that include: schemes of work that integrate art and citizenship learning; suggestions for facilitating lessons in which school children use digital media to represent and explore their personal and group identifications with Europe; and a visual resource of images by artists and schoolchildren that facilitates teaching about citizen identity. A book about this first stage of the project was published in 2013. In this paper the project coordinator will reflect on this initiative in the light of the position statement developed for this symposium. It will focus in particular on combining learning in the school subjects of citizenship, art making and art criticism and using digital media for visual communication.

Keywords: Art, Citizenship, Curriculum development, Digital media

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Introduction

I understand this paper as responding to the symposium theme in that it is about a curriculum development that sought to effect transformations in the content and methods of art lessons. Specifically it employed an action research model of curriculum development, utilized contemporary art as a tool for engaging children with contemporary social issues and promoted the use of digital media in classrooms for visual communication. The paper is largely descriptive since I assumed Turkish audience members are unfamiliar with the project but ends with some reflective, evaluative commentary on its strengths and weaknesses.

The Project

The project was a large-scale research and curriculum development initiative called ‘Images and identity: Improving citizenship education through digital art’ (I&I). Briefly, it was funded by the European Commission (EC), involved six EU member states and lasted from 2009-2011. (There is a second phase in progress now.) Art educators working in universities and schools in Germany, the Czech Republic, Malta, Ireland, Portugal and the United Kingdom collaborated with Citizenship educators on planning and teaching interdisciplinary lessons organised around the theme of citizen identity, resulting in the production of cross-national teacher education materials.

Method Of Curriculum Development

The approach the project adopted to curriculum development was to involve national teams in each country in classroom based action research in secondary and primary schools. University professors and teachers with expertise in art and citizenship collaborated on experimenting with integrating citizenship education content, resources and methods into art lessons organized around the theme of identity. The first step was to survey existing educational resources for this theme in Citizenship Education and collect relevant images of work by contemporary artists.

After which they developed and tested out practical strategies for engaging school children in critical reflection and discussion of these images and involved them in art making understood as a vehicle for representing and constructing their personal and group identifications within the context of Europe. The end product was teacher education materials consisting of:

- A rationale
- Teacher guidelines
- Case studies of classroom practice
- An image bank, of work by contemporary artists and images children have selected and created
- Instructional materials, (16 schemes of work with over 80 lesson plans) and,
- Supplementary resources

I do not have time to detail all these materials here, and they can all be accessed on line at <http://www.image-identity.eu/>

The Curriculum Theme

In postmodern society ‘identity’ is widely debated and theorized. Psychologists most commonly refer to personal identity, understood as the idiosyncratic things that make a person unique. Sociologists tend to focus on social identity, understood as the individual’s self-concept derived from perceived membership of a social group/s (Hogg & Vaughan, 2002). Apart from the level of self, individuals are widely understood to have multiple social identities and trigger them different social contexts can trigger us to think, feel and act on the basis of, for example, a family, ethnic or national level of self (Turner 1985). Citizen identity is an even more complex construct. Whereas it is typically defined in national terms, a range of factors influences it: it can refer to a legal status and to how people define themselves both as individuals and with a broader collective identity (Falk, 2002). The EC’s requirement that our project promote European citizen identity was challenging given that the notion of the EU as a supra national

community is widely perceived as a myth (Kerr et al., 2009). Because it is difficult to state emphatically that citizenship embodies either a personal or national identity, the project elected to encourage school children to question, express and share their own understandings of their personal and group identities within the context of Europe.

Identity is a recurring theme in both Civics and Art curricula but they interpret it differently. Art teachers typically value art making as a means for exploring experimenting with and communicating personal identity (personal feelings and ideas (Mason, Richardson & Collins 2011). Citizenship teachers prioritize civic identity understood as the legal and political status of citizens within democratic societies and rights and responsibilities of various kinds (Huddleston 2007). The citizenship educators participating in this project understood the way art educators engage with identity as overly subjective and autobiographical. On the other hand their own discipline has been widely criticized for delivering political and civic knowledge in a manner that is factual, boring, and dry (Cogan & Derricott 2000: 3). The hypothesis underpinning the curriculum experiments was that Civics and Art teachers could learn from each other.

The Artworks

Contemporary art was chosen as a stimulus for curriculum experiments because identity is a central theme for many artists today that search for, define and question what it means. (For example, the individuality of people in an anonymous crowd, what lies behind a name, relationships between physical manifestations and ideas of self.) The project compiled an image bank of contemporary artworks understood to have potential to motivate relevant lesson ideas. Contemporary art (presently being produced by professional artists) was an appropriate choice because it is an experimental symbolic field characterized by creating open situations in which new forms of signs and symbolic meanings are brought to light. Moreover it is neglected in most school curricula. In hindsight it turned out to be a very good analogy for the complex

debates about identity that are ongoing today. As the following brief discussion of some images in the project data bank shows, it offers complex, multi-layered interpretations of identity that can be utilized to interrogate it in diverse ways.

Antony Gormley's *Field Sculptures*, consisting of 40,000 anonymous terracotta figures with small holes for eyes, poses the fundamental question, 'Who am I?' Gillian Wearing's videos and photographs, for which she uses masks and silicon prosthetics to conceal her subjects' identities, are useful for stimulating discussion about physical appearance, identity and self-image. (They could also be used to explore public expectations, peer pressure and culturally imposed standards of beauty.) Dutch artist Rene Dijsktra's photographs of adolescents attending nightclubs in the UK represent them as anonymous, vulnerable individuals. They can be used to explore the crisis of identity that takes place at this critical life stage (Cote & Levine 2002). The Portuguese artist Rui Noronha's photographic portraits of circus people depicting them as a social group set apart from mainstream society, offer possibilities for exploring intergroup conflict and the role in-group and out-group self definitions play in identity formation.

Many contemporary artworks challenge commonsense assumptions about identity, gender, ethnicity and race. Some examples, explored in a previous paper (Mason & Vella 2013), are Valie Export's early guerrilla performances; Yinka Shonibare's photographic series entitled *Victorian Dandy* and Sylvia Sleigh's paintings of nude males. According to Phinney (1996), ethnic identification refers to an individual's sense of belonging to a particular ethnic or racial group – usually the one in which they claim heritage. The phrase 'identity politics' is frequently used to signify a range of artistic activities and discourse rooted in the experiences of oppression and injustice shared by members of marginalised ethnic or racial groups. Whereas some artists simply explore ways of understanding a particular group's distinctiveness, others are more confrontational. Their work draws on critical theory to actively engage with the

politics of difference by challenging gender and racial stereotypes and/or seeking out strategies with which to destabilize confining representations of self².

The focus of lessons about citizen identity in most EU member states is national (Ross 2003). Saunders (2009:9-11) suggests that an individual's national identity has a collective component that refers to so-called national characteristics and traits, and another that refers to an individual's sense of self as a national (i.e. as German French, Maltese or Dutch). The feeling of national identity is not an inborn trait but is shared with a group of people regardless of citizenship status and as a direct result of the presence of common points of reference in daily life. Artworks such as Chris Saint Fournier's photograph *Tourists*, (date) deliberately set out to question these shared feelings of national identifications. In this instance, it is the fair skinned complexions of the Maltese couple the photograph depicts (who are in fact nationals) that conflicts with the stereotype Maltese citizens hold of a physical norm.



Figure 1: Chris Saint Fournier Tourists (2007) Photograph

Baljit Balrow's artworks are more overtly political. Her series of *Self-portraits* (1998) representing her British-Asian cultural identities is helpful for facilitating discussion of hybridity and the significant changes taking place in the traditional project of nationalism across Europe. Generally speaking school children find political constructs like 'the State', 'democracy', 'citizenship' and 'government' difficult to comprehend. But project team members in Germany used *De Bevolkerung* (1998), Hans Haacke's controversial installation in the German Parliament building, effectively to engage secondary school students critically with the concept of national identity and consider how civic, political, and personal identity sometimes collide³.

European identity is a contested concept, even though the Council of Europe has promoted it for over three decades (Osler 2011). *Entropa*, the massive sculpture Czech artist David Cerny created for the European Council headquarters in Brussels in 2009 exemplifies this scepticism about European citizen identity. (The member states found it so insulting it had to be removed.) A more positive response to the EU initiative would be to consider the work of socially activist artists who promote shared humanitarian values enshrined in the European constitution. Examples discussed in the paper mentioned previously include Mark Wallinger's *State Britain* (2006), a recreation of a peace campaigners protest; *Towards a Promised Land* (2005), Wendy Ewald's interactive photography project aimed at empowering disenfranchised migrant children in Britain; and the site specific actions of contemporary Situationist artists in the Czech Republic intended to activate local groups to effect their own forms of social change⁴.

Examples Of Schemes Of Work

This last section of this paper summarises three schemes of work developed by project team members in schools⁵. In the first, Michael de Brito's oil paintings provided a stimulus for

Portuguese middle school students to consider identity formation within the family. In the second, at-risk students in Ireland explored their national and European identifications whilst comparing tourist postcards and Seán Hillan's photomontages. In the third example, students at a German Gymnasium engaged with the concept of citizen identity stimulated (at least in part) by consideration of political posters, together with the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. This part of the text draws directly on case studies written by the teachers concerned and a critical analysis of the project schemes by Collins and Ogier (in Mason & Buschkühle 2013).

Family and Citizenship



Figure 2: Michael de Brito: Dinner Guests (2007) Oil on canvas

Michael De Brito is a contemporary realist painter, whose parents migrated from Portugal to New York. European masters like Rembrandt, Manet and Velázquez influence his large oil paintings. Their subject matter is moments of everyday life, especially kitchen scenes, in which

his family and guests sit around a table sharing conversation, food and drink. The Portuguese national team used them to encourage students, aged 10-11, to reflect on the changing nature of family as an agent of socialization and how this influences citizen identity. (One reason the paintings are relevant for this theme is that children can compare what they see in them with their own family backgrounds. In so doing they may discover aspects of family life they can and cannot associate with). The teachers concerned drew on postmodern critiques that problematize mythical and stereotypical representations of childhood and family relations to challenge the students internalised conceptions of normal family life and awareness of multiple viewpoints.⁶ Moura and Sá's case study (2013) explains how this scheme unfolded.



Figure 3: Puppets created by students at Escola EB 1,2 &3, Viana Do Castelo

Family was selected as a topic with the aim of advancing education for citizenship and learner awareness of “the fundamental values of co-operation, solidarity and respect for others” (p. 180). Patrimony and family values are deeply embedded in societal structure in Northern Portugal and initial discussions suggested the students held ethnocentric and “stereotypical

perceptions of identity” (p. 183). Engaging with de Brito’s paintings greatly facilitated discussion of their preconceptions and development of their “critical thinking skills” (p. 183). De Brito’s images of his Portuguese family in the Diaspora stimulated enquiry-based conversations in which, the students exchanged stories of their own family lives, customs and traditions. Sharing these experiences and ideas, alongside exploring the artworks, enabled them to come to terms with the idea that family is not the same for everyone. Consideration of a broader concept of family was enhanced through the practical activity of making puppets representing family members. In the process of creating the puppets they were encouraged to reflect on their changing perceptions of family and challenge stereotypical views of how it is experienced. In the final activity they photographed the puppets and created picture postcards from them using digital media for the first time.

Greetings from Europe

Postcards featured centrally in the second scheme developed at a Special Education Centre in Ireland that engaged with ways in which space and place are intrinsic to our being in the world. As Holt-Jensen (1999: 216-27) and Knox & Marston (2004:505) point out, dominant images of landscape frequently function as icons of national identity and quite specific vistas sometimes turn into deifications of a ‘national landscape’ conjuring up ideas of distinctive national pasts. In the mid 1990s The Irish artist Seán Hillen produced a body of elaborate paper collages known collectively as *Irelantis*, from fragments of postcards and other found materials, depicting seemingly impossible landscapes that challenge stereotypical Irish representations of place.



Figure 4: Seán Hillen. Colosseum of Cork (1994) Photomontage

Tourist postcards often transmit idyllic or picturesque impressions of real places that represent what tourists ‘should’ rather than actually do see. Hillen accentuated their myth-making qualities by adding images of edifices that appeared to have gone astray in a land to which they do not belong. For example, in his *Great Pyramids of Carlingford Loch* (1994), three Egyptian pyramids rise up out of lush green Irish landscape. In this scheme students aged between 13-16 studied tourist postcards and compared them with Hillan’s artworks. In her case study report, Keogh (2013) summarised what happened as follows.

Throughout this scheme classroom discussion focused on national identity and on diversity and interdependence across Europe. The brief the students were given was to “create an innovative greetings postcard that incorporated image and text and represented their own perceptions of contemporary European culture” (p. 205). Initially they rejected the idea that postcards are a relevant form of communication and a visit to a local tourist shop was arranged. Keogh reports

that they were shocked by the images of Irishness the postcards portrayed, accusing them of failing to reflect present day Ireland or the views of their age group. “A great discussion of Irish identity and stereotypes” followed as a result (p. 207). The lessons in which they considered national identity, diversity and interdependence within EU countries were less successful because the students’ knowledge of Europe was very limited and they had to undertake a lot of research. After this, the group collected images from the Internet and magazines that “looked Irish or European” (p. 208), and each student made a selection from this pool to incorporate into a composition for a greetings postcard. Their final task was to employ digital photomontage techniques to create an image of “new, strange place in Europe they would like to visit themselves” to send to a named recipient.” (p. 209)



Figure 5: Student Greeting Card. Dylan O' Connor

Freedom and Identity

This scheme of work was developed in a Benedictine school in Germany with students aged 14--15 years. As Ogier and Collins (2013) point out, it demonstrates the educational strengths of combining discussion and image-based learning very well. In his case study Buschkühle (2013: 255) informs us that the students comfortable home backgrounds and disinterest in politics was a significant factor influencing the strategy he developed to extend their perceptions of identity and engage them with political themes. The first task was to photograph themselves out of school and although the resulting self-portraits were of “an astonishingly high quality” (p.255) they revealed limited socialization with other cultural groups. Next, he showed them historical posters of youngsters involved in the Hitler Youth and Young Pioneers movements “as a way of confronting the unknown?” (p.259). Comparison of these images with the students’ photographic self-portraits stimulated intense discussion about what it means to be free in the context of European society today. Questioning images and challenging the students’ ideas stimulated some rich discourse about European identity. Whereas the students existing knowledge provided the starting point it was the questioning and whole-class discussions of unfamiliar images and ideas that moved their thinking forward. One such dialogue centered on the meaning of these words from the first Article of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in the spirit of brotherhood (1948).

The concepts of ‘freedom and dignity’ were explored further during a discussion of a poster by Urs Grünig that featured in an Amnesty International campaign. The students’ initial understanding of this image of a woman’s face with red tape over her mouth and eyes was naïve, but through careful, supportive questioning, they began to grasp its metaphorical meaning. The students’ final task in this scheme was to create their own posters representing

freedom and dignity digitally.

Discussion

This paper ends with some evaluative comments on the strengths and weaknesses of the Images and Identity project and the curriculum approach. The commentary focuses mainly on the interdisciplinary nature of these curriculum experiments, and presents alternative viewpoints on the project outcomes.

Combining learning in art and citizenship

The project proposal submitted to the EC argued that art education has potential to improve citizenship because:

- (i) Art teachers use art criticism to help learners interpret the messages conveyed by visual images in the environment that strongly influence identity formation;
- (ii) In art making they encourage learners to express their own ideas about themselves and the world.

The use of digital media was grounded in the project team's awareness of its pervasiveness in visual culture and contemporary art.

An art education perspective⁷

1. Art and citizenship education are natural allies. Traditionally art and politics are linked. "Whereas Modern Art severed this. Art in the past was closely connected to political power and functioned as a medium for transporting religious and cultural values. Since the Baroque period it has provided insights in society.

2. The Images and Identity project confirmed that art is a fruitful medium for raising political, societal and cultural issues in schools. Studying artworks facilitates discussion of abstract, theoretical concepts and social issues because they offer sensory impressions, stimulate empathy and imagination. They inspire curiosity and open up possibilities for critical reflection. Thus they can achieve what abstract verbal texts might not.

3. Manipulation through images (a political and cultural power) is more ubiquitous than ever today in the age of digital media. Thus learning to deal critically with images and considering how they influence personal identity is a crucial competence in times of global culture.

4. A project finding was that contemporary art inspires lively classroom discussions about citizenship and stimulates reflection on personal and social identity. Engaging with the complex and diverse aspects of identity this art communicates stimulates students' reflection on personal and social identity at local, national and global levels. But analysing these artworks is not enough. Competences in both art criticism and art making are essential.

5. The key to successful learning is to combine knowledge about citizenship with creation, research and expression. Students must discuss and reflect on citizenship themes with peers, teachers and a general public to whom they present finished their pieces of art. Understood this way, the creative process activates cognitive learning as well as emotion and imagination. Art making becomes an active individual form of inquiry in which the students assume responsibility for their own images and learning.

6. Unfortunately the symbols, drawings and photographs students participating in the project selected and the artwork they created tended towards clichés.⁸ (Many of them represented their identity by showing aspects of popular consumer culture like sports cars, Manga-figures, mobile phones, etc.) The most successful schemes moved away from concentrating on personal identity. Students reflected on a political/social issue, researched appropriate images and developed position statements they expressed/presented in artwork. To achieve this end they conducted image-research on the internet, analyzed images, reflected on a social issue or theme and formulated, then experimented with, ways of developing and realising a position statement in visual form.—During this process they learned something about citizenship identity and their personal identity changed as well.

7. Using the Internet to research images and information and digital media (photo, video and computer-tools), and as means to create images is a central aspect of the Images & Identity project. A key finding was that these media are democratic in enabling students without mastery of traditional art making skills (like drawing and/or painting) to engage in pictorial communication.

8. But competences in both in analyzing and creating images are crucial. In the *Images & Identity* project, art making was linked to in-depth examination of a particular citizenship

issue/theme. In this respect the project gained valuable insights into interdisciplinary learning in these two school subjects.

The citizenship education viewpoint (Afterword)

Broadly speaking, the citizenship educators participating in the project concluded that the project's art based learning strategies achieved some positive results; and successfully countered the criticism that their school subject is demotivating and dull. However they expressed concern about the continuing emphasis on personal and/or individual identity in the majority of schemes of work and the paucity of political, civic and legal curriculum content. For Gearon (2013) for example, the project outcomes show only limited consciousness of citizenship issues and concepts and the implication is that art educators do not possess the necessary critical tools to interrogate them in sufficient depth.

Notes

1. For a fuller discussion of these artworks see Mason, R. & Vella, R. (2013) *Lessons about Identity from Contemporary Art*. For copyright reasons it is not possible to reproduce images of these artworks here and readers are recommended to refer to the individual artist's websites.
2. Yinka Shonibare's *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* for example, inverts the traditional status of black people in the history of European art by depicting himself as an aristocratic 'gentleman' surrounded by white servants.
3. The words 'De Bevölkerung,' lit up as neon signs in Haacke's installation, reworked and contested an earlier expression of German national sentiment carved into the portal of the original building in 1916.
4. Mark Wallinger's *State Britain* (2006) is a faithful replication of a peace camp Brian Haw set up outside the British Parliament in June 2001 as a protest against economic sanctions in Iraq. In 2006, following the passing by Parliament of an act prohibiting unauthorized

demonstrations within a one-kilometre radius of Parliament Square' the majority of his protest was removed. Wendy Ewald's photographs of refugee children in Margate from the project *Promised Land* are political in the sense that they raise questions about UK policies for asylum seekers. Situationist artists like Katerina Sedá stress the importance of human freedom without political and economic boundaries. Their artistic projects resemble social experiments and are staged interventions in everyday life that involve active collaboration with local people.

5. For full accounts of all three schemes, see the case studies by Moura & Sá, Keogh and Buschkühle, published on the project website.

6. Adhering to postmodern theory implies recognition and acceptance of children's voices in determining their own world-views. It places children's expectations and the concept of childhood itself in conflict with many established institutions such as the traditional family or the authoritarian school. This view is accompanied also by a new vision of children's rights apart from and even in opposition to their parents. See *Theories of Childhood*. <http://www.faqs.org/childhood/So-Th/Theories-of-Childhood.html>. Accessed 01/02/14.

7. I have Carl Peter Buschkühle to thank for this position statement. It was developed for a joint paper presented at an InSEA Regional Conference held in Canterbury, June 2013.

8. Clichés are symbols or pictures that show an issue in a superficial manner or repeat common aspects without questioning them, or deeper reflection on them.

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