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Bringing Art to Life through Multiple Perspectives:

Pre-Service Art Educators and Social Justice:

If pre-service students engage in multicultural social justice discourse in the classroom, they are more likely to possess the skills necessary for engaging the same practice of acceptance, empowerment, and equality when participating in social settings outside of the classroom...

Alyssia Ruggiero
Southern Illinois University
Edwardsville, Illinois

Abstract

Three socially-conscious education constructs are presented as they emerged from a meaningful pre-service art education project and the student discussion that followed. Teaching and learning approaches are illuminated through a studio assignment in a secondary art education pre-service methods course. The pictorial narrative of the historical Beayeux tapestry, when compared with more recent images associated with the Iraq war, led to the creation of a contemporary 27-foot tapestry. The author dissects both the intellectual, emotional experiences of the students and the learning outcomes that were evoked by this collaborative assignment. Through her reflections, the author demonstrated an approach to education that is essential for pre-service educators; the need to teach from a multicultural perspective, to teach strategies for dealing with controversial issues, to tactfully and respectfully diffuse emotionally charged content, and to encourage social change are requirements of teaching in today's classroom. This pedagogical approach is supported by current educational research and discourse.

Keywords: pre-service education, social justice, multiculturalism, Beayeux tapestry, Iraq war imagery.

Correspondence regarding this article may be sent to Dr. Ruggiero via email: aruggie@siue.edu.

Teaching a secondary art education methods course focused on social justice concerns proved to be a challenge as well as a fruitful learning experience. In the fall of 2006 I learned first-hand the obstacles instructors face in their efforts to nurture the creation of knowledge, establish a collaborative environment with shared dialogue, and encourage expression of divergent perspectives. In previous semesters I used *Art for Life* (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005) as the text for a secondary art education methods course. My interpretation of the principles therein provided the foundation for such teaching strategies as shared dialogue and the expression of multiple experiences and perspectives on an issue or theme.

Anderson and Milbrandt explained that substantial conversation and social support were necessary for academic achievement and for the construction of knowledge; "Conversational approaches help students realize that there is more than one right answer, more than one possible meaning, and that the instructor and other authorities do not stand at the apex of knowledge" (Anderson, & Milbrandt, 2005, p.101). They suggested that constructive learning can only happen in an open and accepting environment perpetuated by an open and accepting teacher.

When re-reading this statement I had to ask myself, *how open and accepting am I as a professor?* Since that fateful fall 2006 term, this question has plagued me. Therefore, I have been exploring and dissecting my behavior and my role as a socially responsible educator. As much as I thought that I had been implementing the principles of art for life in my instructional approaches I came to realize that in the fall of 2006 my efforts to-date had just skimmed the surface. In this article, I will explore what transpired in this methods course as I attempted to broaden the dialogue regarding personal and political concerns over the war in Iraq.

Multiculturalism and Teaching for Social Justice

A strong emphasis on multiculturalism and teaching for social justice is implicit in the art for life paradigm and is as an important aspect of my teaching. I attempted to implement these principles in a practical manner because as Schoorman and Bogotch (2010) explained, multiculturalism is best integrated pragmatically in pre-service education programs. They further argued that when socially-relevant constructs are presented only theoretically, very little change in multicultural teaching and learning practices will occur. Mayhew and Deluca (2007) observed that teacher practices displayed limited or non-existent understanding of practical aspects of

multiculturalism in school-based activities in spite of the acquisition of theoretical knowledge. Higher education forums increasingly support pedagogical models that facilitate active engagement in multicultural experiences (Quin, 2009, Schoorman & Bogotch, 2010). Situations in which pre-service teachers are faced with perspectives, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes different from their own provide opportunities to learn how to implement multiculturalism in their classrooms; only then will they begin to value the learning outcomes and the social equity yielded from embracing differences. These contemporary writers make it clear that practice and experience are necessary for pre-service teachers to move beyond the implementation of trite and superficial cultural activities. In addition, my own experience has been that if future teachers are taught through a variety of active and engaging educational experiences the resulting teacher practices would likely foster deeper understandings and accepting attitudes towards differences beyond those created by culture. Such attitudes are the prerequisite of social justice (Quin, 2009, Schoorman & Bogotch, 2010).

Social justice educators, as described by Quin, are teachers who promote teaching and learning practices that encourage anti-oppressive behavior, social equity, and empowerment in both educational and societal contexts. In order to facilitate this manner of instruction, a teacher must be self-aware. This awareness allows the teacher to monitor the explicit and implicit ways in which he or she influences the social equilibrium created among members of a learning environment. Students and members of any social group who experience empowerment, regardless of peer differences, have engaged in social justice. Educators who ascribe to social justice education hope the student's experience will extend beyond the classroom into their communities and into the larger world (Quin, 2009).

My premise for the art education course was, if pre-service students engage in multicultural social justice discourse in the classroom, they are more likely to possess the skills necessary for engaging the same practice of acceptance, empowerment, and equality when participating in social settings outside of the classroom than students whohave not had this type of learning experience. I vowed to employ both practical multicultural strategies and awareness of social justice pedagogy in creating learning environments that promote art for life in the course.

Classroom Experiences

To illustrate the above constructs and to provide a context for exploring my practice as a socially-just art educator, I will present a scenario that set the stage for this self-discovery. In the fall of 2006, I asked the students in the secondary art education methods class to read a chapter from Art for Life which focused on the Bayeux Tapestry. The 230 feet of embroidery illustrates the story of William the Conqueror's invasion of England and The Battle of Hastings in 1066. The imagery

combines a personal story, or "little-narrative" of friendship and loyalty with a more pervasive "meta-narrative" that depicts actions and events from the Battle (Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996). After reading about the Bayeux Tapestry, the students and I engaged in a general discussion about historical imagery and textual materials that communicate a limited representation of historical accounts. We explored the notion that these accounts, whether little- or meta-narratives, change as many times as different individuals or groups depict, write, or recall them. At this point in the discussion I referenced the post-modern notion that there is no one truth and that truth may be most closely obtained through a collection of narratives and multiple perspectives (Anderson, 1997 p. 71).

The class conversation continued as we examined the images and explanations given for the tapestry including depictions of beheadings, blatant acts of violence, and instances of acute agony. The "unrealistic, cartoon-like quality" of the images in the tapestry was noted by one student as "making it easier for [him] to look at such horrendous subject matter." Comparisons then began to emerge in the student dialogue between the images they were viewing in the tapestry and the then current imagery associated with the war in Iraq.

Many students offered their thoughts regarding the capabilities of modern technology and the graphic and realistic quality of the imagery we see in reference to it. I had just returned from the NAEA convention and reported that I heard Tavin (2006) explain that the war in Iraq has had more images associated with it than any other war in history. Tavin went on to describe the fear instilled by war images and how fear is commonly portrayed by a variety of media sources.

The classroom discussion turned to the ways that people have been informed, misled, and otherwise influenced by mass imagery. The students recalled examples of varying news sources and their use of powerful and often manipulative imagery. Most of the examples focused on political speeches and commercials, but in other examples students vented a dislike for the way national and global tragedies are filtered, shaped, and selectively projected through television news broadcasts. Several students expressed their belief that major televised news stations sensationalize and make real life events seem unreal, surreal, and otherwise removed from their personal lives.

Then students began to tell stories about where they were and how they felt when they first saw the televised version of a high-jacked plane crashing into New York's twin towers. Students discussed other tragedies and the way they were reported. They cited Hurricane Katrina, which caused widespread devastation to the central Gulf Coast states, and the tsunami that overcame Sri Lanka as examples of sensational media coverage. The students regarded the tens of thousands of lives lost to each as deeply tragic, yet seemingly far removed from their everyday lives. Students listed and compared a variety of news sources found on the Internet including Google®,

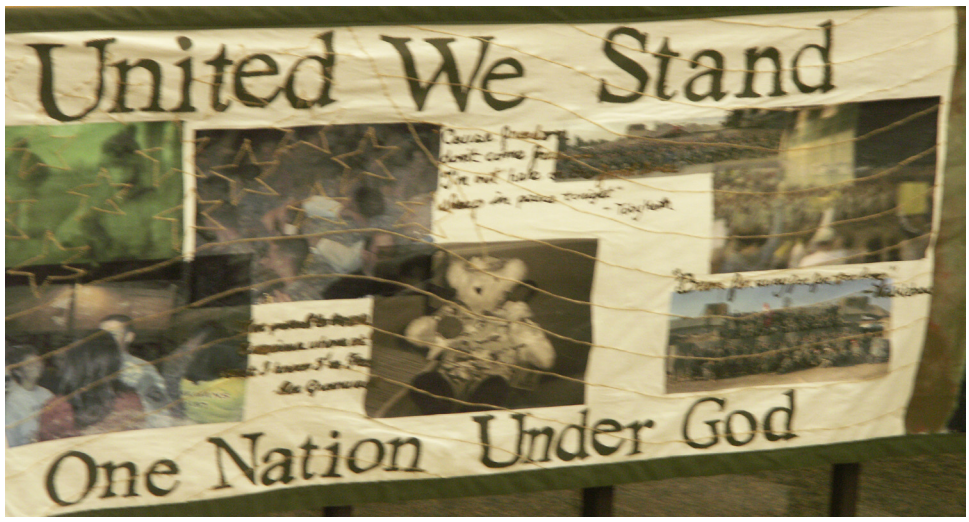

Figure 1. *Student tapestry section.*

Yahoo®, AOL®, and MSN®. Specific television networks, major newspapers and radio stations were then added to the list of news sources to be compared.

A debate occurred as to which of these sources, if any, were unbiased and trustworthy and to what degree. National Public Radio (NPR) was agreed upon by the majority of students as being at least a fairly reliable source of news. The identification of NPR as a news source was curious because as a radio service it is a resource for news that is mostly heard and consequently does not utilize visual images that illustrate the news times being broadcasted unless one goes on their website. My delivery of this point steered the classroom discussion back toward visual imagery, specifically the strength of its emotive power when compared to anything auditory or textual.

The dialogue then transitioned again toward the influential power of visual and print materials associated with the war in Iraq, which became the primary source of motivation and content for the studio project. When the conversation had reached its conclusion, I asked students to collect images from television broadcasts, newspapers, websites, and magazines that represented the events that were taking place in Iraq. These images were examined collectively during our next class meeting when students shared their collections of printed imagery and took turns pointing out the explicit and implicit messages and the emotive qualities they found in the images. Many of the images discussed were explicit in their depiction of human suffering, bloodshed, death, and discrimination. Most of them conjured feelings of fear and a desperate need for protection from terrorist activity. The students concluded that the content extracted from images was intentional and was used to endorse and support

the stance taken by the leaders of the United States to engage in the Iraq war.

From this discussion an idea for a cooperative studio project emerged. Through an initial brainstorming session the class and I decided the studio assignment would combine and utilize their collection of images to create a narrative tapestry depicting the war in Iraq. It paid homage to the Bayeux tapestry created in 1066 through the theme of war and through the grandeur of its size. The art resources and media used for creating the tapestry were different from the creators of the Bayeux Tapestry and could have included art materials made available to them in the Twenty-First Century's market. Only a few students chose to utilize embroidery as their medium to echo the artistic process used for creating the historical depictions of the Bayeux Tapestry.

The students transferred and recreated their images onto individual pieces of natural muslin that measured two and one half feet wide and two feet high. Once completed, each individual piece was sewn and connected to the others horizontally in order to reflect, on a smaller scale, the length and the grandeur of the Bayeux tapestry. The class decided on a limited color scheme of earth tones and a variety of subdued hues as a way to ensure their individual pieces would be unified once they were assembled and displayed together.

While the students became engaged in individual plans for altering the muslin, I asked whether or not the tapestry might be more compelling if the "little narrative" they were creating incorporated personal stories that each student had pertaining to the war. They were all in favor of this idea and we revisited the images contained in the Bayeux tapestry for further inspiration. The focus was on the isolated symbols depicting William, Duke of Normandy's little-narrative that illustrated the story of how he was betrayed by a close friend. Although it was clear to me that the students understood and were keen on the additional direction for the tapestry, not a single student voiced their personal stories or feelings during class. In the next class, students quietly worked at intertwining individually relevant images, recollections, and reactions with the less personal images and accounts of the war that they had collected previously.

While they worked, I played Neil Young's (2006), *Living with War*. His songs about peace, national greed, and impeaching the president contributed to the ambience of the classroom and exposed some of my personal and political perspectives, and beliefs about the war. I observed the students while they created the visual imagery that appeared to be either neutral in content (see Figure 1), supportive of peace and an ending of the war, or raised questions about the incentives behind our nation's troops being sent to Iraq. These observations worked to strengthen my assumption that most of my art education students were liberal in their politics. What was not obvious to me at the time was that I made an assumption about student beliefs. They had all contributed to classroom discussions on the subjects of media, mass imagery, and war, and had

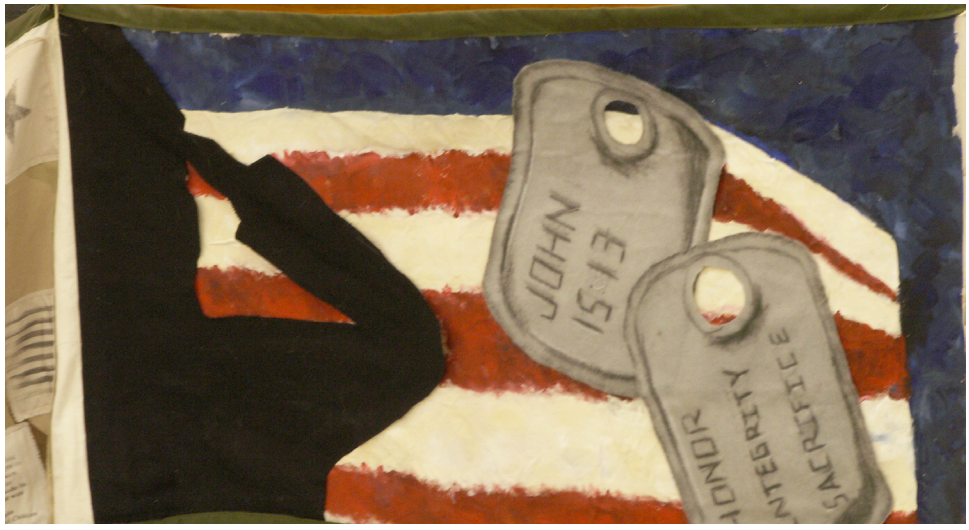

Figure 2. *Student Tapestry Section of a Deceased Soldier's "dog tags."*

displayed enthusiasm while planning the project and toward the tapestry assignment overall. I heard nothing from the students to date that made me think their political ideas were different than mine.

Dialogue and Critique

It was not until the day of the final critique, when the tapestry was finished, that I realized I was naïve, and in many instances blind to the fact that my assumptions were wrong. Strong and differing beliefs, personal perspectives, and substantial experiences came to the surface. Several of my students were politically conservative and their designs expressed support for the Iraq war and the Bush administration's military policies. Other students were more reserved and their contributions to the tapestry were carefully patriotic and supportive of our nations' soldiers. One of the emotionally sensitive narratives depicted the silhouette of a saluting soldier and the identity tags that he had been wearing at the time of his death (see Figure 2). This soldier referenced the older brother of one of the students in this course. Another student referenced religious beliefs and quotes from the bible that caused her to support the war efforts (see Figure 3). Others blatantly challenged the causes of the war and the associated acts of violence and death (see Figures 4 & 5). An expression of support for the lives of soldiers was the only topic unanimously agreed upon, and was also apparent in the artwork and in the culminating critique.

The combination of artistic expressions, passionate stories, and opposing opinions that had been connected together and unveiled in class resulted in the most controversial and emotionally charged critique I had ever facilitated. In the first part of the critique students de-

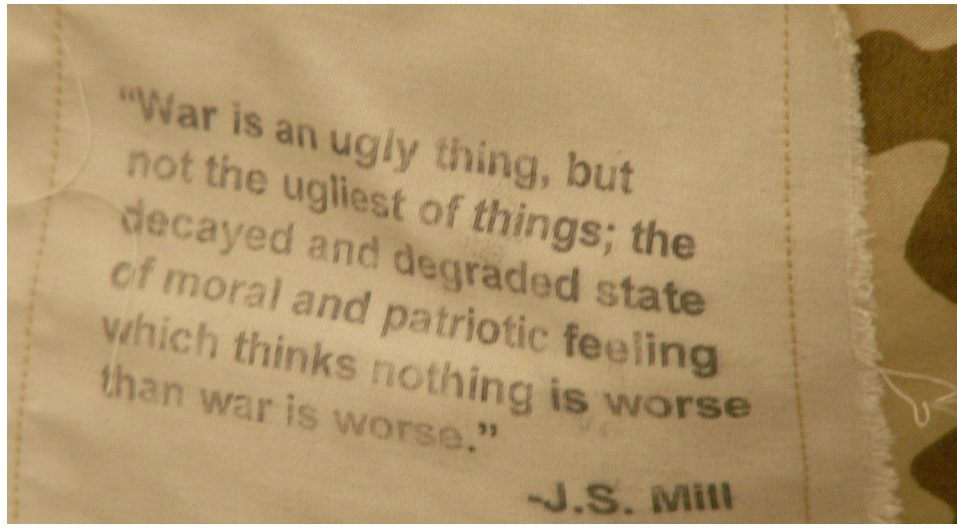

Figure 3. *Student Tapestry Section of a philosophical statement.*

cided how to arrange the segments of the tapestry. These decisions were made using both design elements and the themes embodied in the content of the images. Because of the large size of the tapestry, and the inability to closely view the work in its entirety, the students were given ample time for this process. Once satisfied with the arrangement, the students were asked to critique their work by describing the created images and then interpreting the meaning in both the individual sections of the tapestry and the combined finished product. I became dismayed as the discussion became increasingly emotionally-charged. While nobody displayed mean or disrespectful behavior, the controversial nature of the discussion, and the opposing viewpoints that were avidly expressed, brought about anger, tears, frustration, as well as indifference among students.

The critique took on a life of its own that loomed larger than I had anticipated and for which I was unprepared. In several instances I felt like I was no longer the professor in charge but instead became an observer trying to keep up with a dynamic dispersion of emotions and a circulation of opposing opinions. The content embodied within the tapestry simultaneously broadcasted a multitude of perspectives and conflicting points of view. The tapestry had become a container of universally controversial themes including war, politics, religion, and discrimination that took over the fabric of the tapestry and conjured intense reactions from the sixteen creators and viewers.

The critique ended because the class period was over, yet before the discussion was completed. A few students left class without saying anything, a few voiced their support for the way I handled things, and one student expressed

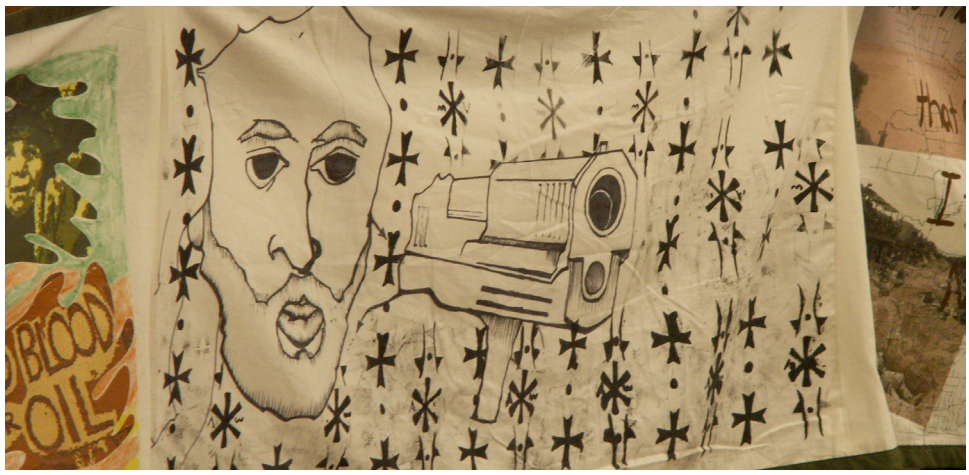

Figure 4. *Student Tapestry Section Regarding the Violence of War*

her opinion that I shouldn't have let it go that far. Still a few others stayed behind to talk more about the tapestry and to try and debrief from the critique that had not been given the time to de-escalate.

Once all of the students had left and I was finally alone, I tried to coherently process the events that had just taken place. That evening and for several days following, I felt overwhelmed and contemplated whether or not I had been reckless in my role as a teacher and mentor and with my responsibility in creating a positive student learning experience. Because I expressed my political beliefs and perspectives regarding the war, I was in opposition to many of my students whose opinions and beliefs I value. I was grateful that it would be several days before I would meet with the students again. I needed time to think about how I would face them. I wanted to salvage the positive and educational aspects of the project. I felt an urgent desire to make some sense out of it all in order to inform my practice and to aid my students in the development of their own reflective teaching behaviors. I wondered how my students were feeling, and if they were still thinking about the tapestry project and the conversations that took place during the final critique.

I relived pertinent components of the classroom discussions and isolated the specific topics of conversation that most engaged the students. It occurred to me that the several topics covered in class (the Battle of Hastings during 1066, historical imagery and its limited representation, the emotive power of imagery, and major tragic events as they have been portrayed by national television news networks) were all potentially controversial in nature and yet none of the discussions prior to the final critique had raised conflict among the students. I wondered if this was because these topics were distant from the students' personal and lived experiences that they were able to converse with one another in a

general way that avoided the provocation of conflict. However, imagery does contain emotive powers (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005) and news stories containing imagery can modify information and present events in such a way that impacts people's thoughts and influences their behavior. I suspected that like me, most people feel some level of detachment to tragic events that have occurred in geographically distant places. It may be when people have a personal connection to an event, emotions and opinions about this event are revealed.

By asking the students to incorporate their personal stories about and connections with the war in the tapestry may have been the catalyst that challenged them to express personal beliefs and ultimately reveal their strongly held beliefs. It became clear to me that through the critique the students were confronted with a portrayal of their differences for the first time. It was not surprising that conflicting and highly charged emotions were aroused in the face of these differences.

Bringing Closure to a Difficult Discussion

I began the following the class stating I had not stopped thinking about our tapestry since the critique had taken place. I guessed by the looks on each of their faces, that they hadn't stopped either. They looked at me eagerly in anticipation of what I might say next. I thanked them all for participating in the critique and congratulated them for being respectful and brave in their expressions. I conveyed to them the great extent to which I valued and respected their perspectives and their collective knowledge. I apologized for my assumptions and for the imposition of my own perspectives. The students acknowledged my apology and then discussed the various roles a teacher can play in a critique with many layers of emotive and controversial themes. It was agreed that the primary responsibility of a teacher during such critiques is to guide the dialogue and to keep it focused on relevant content. In the case of emerging conflict it

Figure 5. *Student Tapestry Section Depicting the Violence of War*

was suggested that the teacher should act as a mediator and ensure that everyone involved is given equal opportunities to voice and defend their thoughts and opinion's.

As mediator, the teacher would also take opportunities to reiterate and validate each of the varied opinions and perspectives expressed. The importance of de-escalating a charged critique, before its conclusion, was also emphasized by many of the students. Focusing on the strengths of the art work was also suggested as one way to arrive at a positive conclusion. The students then expressed feelings of accomplishment in having created a 27-foot tapestry.

One student sewed the individual sections of the tapestry together and framed the edges of it with a green ribbon. She brought it into the class. We looked at the tapestry together for a final time and the conversation, this time, focused on the remarkable sense of unity and the aesthetically pleasing qualities that worked to connect the charged and controversial content of the work. Collectively we had achieved the creation of a visual composite of little narratives and multiple perspectives.

For my closing lecture that day, I drew from the ideas of bell hooks. Hooks (1994) explained that as teachers we have the choice to welcome and address emotionally charged and controversial topics as they arise in our classrooms or to ignore them (hooks, 1994, 2004). Controversial topics may arise in our classrooms.

Students engaged with such experiences learn and can practice ways to effectively engage in an environment of multiple perspectives and conflict that are responsible, accepting, and sensitive. It is, however, difficult for teachers to embrace multifarious topics, as it involves a significantly greater amount of risk (hooks, 1994).

When teachers facilitate the expression of passionate, emotional, and controversial material, the experiences and outcomes can be lasting.

Concluding Remarks

It was I who learned the most about risk. I risked facilitating an environment in which students became engaged in emotionally charged content and controversial issues associated with the topic of war. Because I took this risk, I made my first significant and authentic attempt at implementing the theories in *Art For Life* (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005) and the pedagogical methodologies of multiculturalism, and social Justice that into practice. The experience marked the beginning of my journey toward a deeper, more authentic understanding of multiculturalism and the educational practices that contribute toward social justice. As a teacher of teachers, I believe it to be essential for my students to engage in these practices so they may internalize the experience and knowledge necessary for creating their own socially equitable classrooms. Social justice must be part of educating future teachers. For me, the events described herein led to a deeper understanding of both social justice theory and practice.

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