

Creative Conversations in the Cloud: High School Art Students and Preservice University Art Education Students Explore Aesthetic Issues in Cyberspace

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An innovation is one of those things that society looks at and says, if we make this part of the way we live and work, it will change the way we live and work.

-Dean Kamen



Appropriation titled *Kim K's Liberation* by UT student Cristina Riggs. Original artwork is *Wolf Girl* by Kiki Smith.

(Retrieved from <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/innovation.html#ixzz1ldA5569l>)

Dean Kamen, American inventor, claims that innovations change the way we live and work. Indeed, as educators we contend that technological innovations profoundly impact our professional lives. Sometimes these changes are complicated and frustrating, while at other times they allow us to facilitate learning in ways that were unimaginable even a few short years ago. The authors of this article will describe how collaboration between a high school art class and a university preservice class using VoiceThread allowed unique learning opportunities for their students.

What is VoiceThread and Why Use it?

If you are familiar with PowerPoint, at first glance VoiceThread will seem similar. However, unlike PowerPoint, VoiceThread is a free electronic application that allows users to comment on a visual object (image, document or video) in five different ways: through voice (with a microphone or telephone), text, audio file, or video (via a webcam). VoiceThread allows users to store and hold asynchronous group conversations in one location via internet connection from anywhere in the world (VoiceThread is available at <http://voicethread.com/about/features/>).

How Did This Project Start? **(Bain's Voice)**

During the fall 2011 Texas Art Education Association conference in Galveston, I bumped into a former student, Christine Miller. She enthusiastically shared that she was incorporating an “artist of the day” YouTube video into her classroom because she wanted to expose high school students to new forms of art and exciting contemporary artists. In addition, she was blogging about her experience at <http://tagartteacher.blogspot.com>. After reading Christine’s blog, I thought it would be beneficial to share her site with my preservice students at The University of Texas at Austin. These art teachers in training would gain insight into how one art teacher successfully incorporates aesthetic issues in a high school curriculum.

My first thought after viewing her blog was that Christine would be a wonderful guest speaker for my students, but logistically, how could we do that when we teach four hours away from one another? Furthermore, I wondered if it might be possible not only for us—as teachers—to collaborate on this project, but also to connect our students in some kind of meaningful way, so that they could learn from one another. After all, what could be a more authentic learning experience than for preservice art teachers to engage in conversations with real students as they—aspiring art teachers—were learning how to structure and lead discussions about art? Means & Olson (1994) claim that technology can and should be used as a way to support authentic learning experiences with children. During a caffeine charged brainstorming meeting at Starbucks, we stumbled on the idea of using a digital technology, VoiceThread, as a way for our classes to share images and build conversations with one another.

Let the collaboration begin! **(Miller's Voice)**

I had several goals for this project. First, I was excited to be working with Dr. Bain again, this time as a colleague in art education! She was one of my preservice instructors, so joining forces would be a very meaningful and fun connection.

Secondly, Plano ISD has taken the charge of bringing 21st century learning into the classroom K-12 with renewed enthusiasm. My principal is cutting edge in her thinking and embraces new educational approaches. One tenet of 21st century learning is taking the student’s learning beyond the classroom walls into the larger world, and this cooperative project would be something she would support and get excited about (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). I was intrigued to think about how my high school students would interact with university students. Plano divides their high schools into 9th and 10th grade High Schools and 11th and 12th Senior Highs. I teach at Williams High School. Some of the students are starting to think about college, but many are still just toying with the idea. I wondered if working with university students might help spark their interest about college.

Thirdly, Plano puts their money into technology that makes a project like this more feasible. Our art department has a cart of 30 laptops dedicated for our use, which made the project seem possible. We need wonderful projects to make use of this valuable equipment!

And lastly (though I feel there may be goals yet uncovered), I was really interested in seeing what kind of dialogue my students would have with their university counterparts. What kinds of things will they say about their work? How will they respond to the comments they receive about the work they put up on the site? Will this kind of dialogue create something meaningful for both sets of students? Relevance is another goal of 21st century learning, and my hope was that this project would be meaningful and relevant for all involved!

VoiceThread Assignment **(Bain's Voice)**

My initial directions to my university students for this lesson were quite direct: Find one artwork that you think high school students would find intriguing. I also specified that they were required to choose an artist that they did not already know a great deal about. My students were required to bring a hard copy or print of their artwork to class, in order to show and share their image.

During the next class, I asked students to find a partner and explain to them as much as they knew about the artwork, artist, and explain why they selected that particular work. After allowing students to talk for a few minutes, I asked the students to hold up their partner’s artwork and explain what they had learned about the piece. Like Francis (1999), I believe it is important that teachers in training practice

careful listening, public speaking, and reflection skills.

After this conversation, my class and I looked at a variety of Mona Lisa appropriations. While some images were simply humorous, others clearly had particular intentions ranging from political commentary to satire. The next step of the project was for my students to create an original appropriation based upon the artwork they selected.



Appropriation by UT student Mackenzie Dawson of *How to Build a Cathedral* by Cildo Meireles, original artwork located at The Blanton Museum.

Luckily, I was able to arrange some computer lab time so that in groups of three, my students could collaboratively create a VoiceThread (VT) that included all of their appropriations. One student from The University of Texas at Austin, Renai Eads, explained:

Our VoiceThread project features three artists whose work speaks towards environmental issues in some way and three appropriations of these works. I hope that our VoiceThread helps high school students to be introduced and excited about new artists and think about the work in a thematic way. I know it helps me learn about art when the person presenting the work is excited and VT is a great way to connect students with new opinions and ideas they may not have access to in their own class/school/family. (Personal communication, February 25, 2012)

Indeed, Prensky (2006) supports Renai's opinion that today's "digital natives" will benefit from integrating technology in a meaningful way into their learning. Another UT student, Thao Phan, reflected on how VoiceThread might be a helpful learning tool for quieter students like herself. She wrote:

VoiceThread is so useful and I could definitely see myself using this in a classroom. I remember being scared to speak up in class, so this way students will be able to think about what they say and using a computer will be a tool they probably will [be] comfortable using. Not only can they share their ideas on VoiceThread, they can see other ideas as well as giving advice. (Personal communication, February 25, 2012)

My students were required to include one or more questions on each page of their VoiceThread. Questions had to go beyond an identification of the media or principle/elements types of art related questions. They had to pose a question that qualified as higher level thinking and it had to address an aesthetic issue or concern. We enjoyed sharing these projects with Christine's high school class and hearing how high school students responded to our questions and images.

High School Appropriations (Miller's Voice)

My first step was to have a classroom discussion about what appropriation means. We took a "field trip" out into the hall to look at the artwork around my classroom door! Each year, I select an artwork and print out images of the original and various appropriations of that work. I rotate them year to year to keep my door fresh and interesting. One year I had Mona Lisa, another The Scream, but this year it's American Gothic. There are twenty-five appropriations that circle my entrance. We talked about the variations and I asked them which one was their favorite, and they each had one. I thought this "field trip" would help them understand the concept. In this age of cut and paste plagiarism, one point I want them to understand is the importance of not copying artist's work in its entirety: This is a problem in the art room. Even in high school they want to make art that looks like Sponge Bob, Hello Kitty and the like. I want them to understand they can significantly modify an image to make an artistic statement of their own. Quite a number of my students still struggled with this concept of appropriation throughout the selecting of the artist for their projects. I decided to let them work individually, but I was excited that the university students put their work together in themes and I hoped my students would see how their work might also be organized into themes.

We were off and running! One of the university groups put a post up which helped me show my high school students more concretely how this collaboration project would unfold. After viewing the first group's work, I asked my students to write down what they hoped to get out of this collaborative project. Here are a couple of their remarks:

What I think would be interesting about this project is working with students older than us. These students would be more knowledgeable in art than

us because they study it at college. Another interesting thing about doing this project would be critiquing each other's projects in a way we haven't done in the classroom, with people we don't know. (Personal communication, February 26, 2012)

It will be interesting to see how other people appropriate their pieces and what materials they use. It will also be interesting to read the feedback they give.

(Personal communication, February 26, 2012)

I was really excited to see what would come out of this project. Some understood the project and raced off to start with an excellent grasp of what they would do, others had trouble staying in their seats long enough to get a project done! I encouraged them all to do their best work since they would be showing it to the college students.

Conclusions

As the school year quickly drew to a close, we took a moment to reflect on this project. Although incorporating technology into the art classroom can be challenging, we both feel as though the time and effort was well worth it. Our students agreed that our project with VoiceThread, although not perfect, provided some excellent learning and interactive opportunities. One university student, Adair Ewin, enthusiastically explained why she would use VoiceThread in her future classroom. Adair said,

I loved using VoiceThread with the high school students because using technology as a medium for art criticism is accessible and quick. For this generation especially, using technology in the classroom is a fantastic way to connect with students.

(Personal communication, April 24, 2012)

Another university student, Shelby Childress, however expressed some mixed feelings about using VoiceThread. She reflected:

Overall, working with VoiceThread was an interesting experience and could be an exciting tool for the students to use, especially in this day and age when children are wired to the Internet and electronics. I think that VoiceThread effectively provides a voice to students that tend to be shy or quiet in the classroom. With VoiceThread, these reserved students can assert their own opinions or ask questions in a comfortable manner and through a medium with which they are more likely familiar, the Internet. Furthermore, I found VoiceThread extremely easy to operate and navigate, appropriate for students of a variety of ages to use. However, I feel the connection between the students and us was one-dimensional. I understand that their school and the administrators would like to protect them as much as possible, but I felt very awkward commenting on work of people that I have never met face to face (this is merely a personal preference).

(Personal communication, April 24, 2012)



Appropriation by UT student Shelby Childress. The title is *Fast Food, No Food* and the original image is *Red Stripe Kitchen* from the *Bringing the War Home* series, 1967-72 by Martha Rosler.



My Idea of Beauty – by student from Williams HS

For the high school students, the appropriation aspect of our collaborative project seemed to be more meaningful than the technological connection. They collectively expressed an interest in getting feedback from college students on their work, which the technology allowed, but the bigger lesson that seemed to be learned was how many different approaches and mediums the appropriations fostered. One student wrote:

We were aware of what an appropriation meant and how to demonstrate one too, but there are an immense amount of ways one can take a piece of art and get widely different feelings to it. What we did was change the original art in a way that is more like us. (Personal communication, April 27, 2012)

Finally, university student Ellen Simmons contends that learning to talk about art, whether through face-to-face or electronic interactions, could have a long term impact on a student. She explained:

I never got the chance to have intellectual conversations about art when I was in grade school, and I really wish I had, because I was in for a rude awakening when I became an art student and was a little fish in a big pond. After three years of learning proper vocabulary and learning to study a piece of art deeper than face value, I am just now feeling comfortable about talking about art. I think that this project, along with others like it are important, even if the kids do not end up furthering their education in the art field, because it helps instill an appreciation of art that will probably last them the rest of their lives. (Personal communication, April 24, 2012)

In conclusion, we hope that our article helps art

educators consider the following points: 1. Collaborations between teachers take time and energy, but are well worth the investment; 2. Technology can allow new forms of collaboration to exist between students in different locations; 3. Innovations do change the way we live and work, and art teachers should not only embrace changes, but lead them as well. It is our hope that readers will adapt VoiceThread to their own unique classrooms, students, and projects.

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Personal Closure – by student from Williams HS

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