

Introduction

Stances for Bridging Difference



We have to restore the neighbor to the hood.¹

—Grace Lee Boggs

As a child, I was often instructed to sit quietly whenever my folklorist-parents' tape recorder flashed red, a sign that they were deep in conversation with a traditional artist. At Native American powwows, through Northern Thai craft markets, and in South African living rooms, I sat quietly listening. Immersed in their conversations, I listened as porcupine quill box makers and beading craftswomen told stories about how making art allowed them to communicate cultural values and to reveal community histories. In overheard conversations, I learned how African American step-dancing teams cultivated a sense of community and critiqued dominant historical narratives. Among NAMES Project quilters, I heard how making a quilt to memorialize someone's life was an act of resistance, advocacy, and freedom. In kitchens, church basements, backyards, and community festivals, always through the lens of various art forms, I learned of lives much different from my own.

As a young adult, I taught theater, visual art, and poetry in community centers, youth detention centers, and afterschool programs. Working with communities of people with whom I thought I had little in common, I marveled at the ways in which we could address our shared and very different identities through making art together. Tasked with the challenge to create something collaboratively, we asked questions of each other that we wouldn't typically ask, were we to meet elsewhere: What do you believe in? What are you scared of? What separates us? Making art, it seemed, offered us a chance to dive into the meaty issues of life. And with each encounter, I learned something new about someone else's perspective of

the world—and my own. I often left these encounters wondering what would be revealed next.

As a researcher and student, I began to compare my experiences with the arts in various communities with theories of learning, community development, sociology, critical pedagogy, and art education. Through countless maps and memos, qualitative studies, and reflective writing, I started to see an interconnected landscape of ideas. I looked through critical lenses that helped me see how factors of power and privilege shape this landscape. Slowly, a contextualized understanding of my world—and the worlds of my students—came into focus. With an eye toward researching the potential of the arts as a space for cross-cultural learning, I began to see connections to the practices of the arts and the educational theories I studied.

These days, I find myself in the role of educator and director of an art education program—tasked with preparing artists and educators to teach in schools, community organizations, and museums. While there is certainly much to learn about curriculum design, assessment, human development, and reflective practice, none of this will matter if educators cannot connect with their students. In a society where we struggle to relate to people who are somehow different from us, I've come to see that perhaps one of the most important skills I can nurture in my students is their capacity to know themselves, their students, and the ways in which our lives intersect across sociocultural differences. This is made even more necessary when the overwhelming majority of teachers in the United States are white, while young people under the age of eighteen are now predominantly people who do not identify as white.² Given these statistics, it is a rather safe assumption that teachers and students are often meeting each other across racial, cultural, ethnic, and gender differences. In an ideal world, this might not matter; however, as author and professor Christopher Emdin points out, "The reality is that we privilege people who look and act like us, and perceive those who don't as different and, frequently, inferior."³ We can do better. Now, more than ever, when a climate crisis looms, political divisions render friendships silent, and the social networks that have often linked us together unravel, we need each other. As educators, our responsibility is to do better—to learn how to navigate our different identities with critical awareness, empathy, and humanity and to help our students learn how to connect with people across real and perceived differences. If we can't do this, I (like many others) fear our shared future.

ABOUT THE BOOK

This book argues that the arts can play a central role—one that has long been overlooked by many in the field—in helping us develop the skills, attitudes, and strategies necessary to better understand how our identities shape who we are and how we move in the world. Drawing on the findings from my research as well as my own teaching experience, this book blends scholarship from multiple disciplines with empirical research to offer a set of arts-based *stances* focused on deepening our understanding of our multiple identities. Along the way, I'll introduce many of the students who have taken my course “Identity, Community, and Culture in Art Education” at the City College of New York and are now using art to teach and learn about identity in their own in classrooms, museums, and community organizations.⁴

Following a similar trajectory as the course, each chapter will introduce a generative *stance* to cultivate to better understand how identity shapes our lives and connections with others. Within these stances, I will highlight two arts activities that can help us *turn inward* to reflect on our own biases and assumptions as well as on how they can enable us to *lean outward* to learn about other people's experience of the world. Designed to be accessible to those with little arts experience, the creative activities rely heavily on observation, research, interaction, and reflection as the basis for creating (mostly) visual art. The example activities can be used by both educators seeking to deepen their own understandings and with younger learners to build critical understanding and community within the classroom and beyond. Teacher educators and education administrators in schools and beyond will find these activities useful in courses and professional development workshops on building community, nurturing multicultural education, and identity awareness. While the book offers a suggestion for moving through each of the stances in a scaffolded order, each chapter can stand alone for readers who are interested in focusing their attention on one area of growth. The appendixes provide additional information on relevant artists and related readings to extend the ideas offered here. Moving beyond the notion of the arts as merely an illustrative medium to express emotions or as simple warm-up activities for nurturing teamwork, this book highlights how looking at and making art serve as complex tools for deepening our understandings of ourselves, our students, and the communities we aim to nurture.

SCHOLARSHIP AND FRAMEWORKS

The work of navigating the borders and bridges of identity is not new territory; artists, scholars, educators, poets, performers, and community organizers have much to teach us about how to learn and teach about identity. Much like the teaching that motivated this book, the theoretical foundation relies on several intersecting bodies of literature. Inspired by traditions of community organizing, folklore studies, intergroup dialogues, and culturally responsive and multicultural education, this book builds on existing scholarship to add an additional arts-focused layer to the conversation. Founded on my belief in the importance of talking *about* and building *across* identity divisions as a critical first step in any justice-oriented education, I have drawn knowledge and perspectives from the following bodies of scholarship.

From *community and cultural organizing* scholarship, I draw on the importance of and strategies for cross-cultural coalition building, and culture as a source of knowledge and power.⁵ Community organizers prioritize the often undervalued but ultimately imperative work of building relationships between and among groups of people as they seek to shift systemic power. They value the personal stories and connections between people both as tools for individual growth and as sources for social and cultural capital. They have much to teach us about what it takes to listen closely to people, to persist in the tough work of navigating difference and conflict, and to nurture truly multifaceted communities of people.

With roots in understanding cultural production and community knowledge, I turn to *folklore studies* for theories about the artist as a critical agent in upholding community values and traditions as well as practical suggestions for fieldwork that is sensitive to relational learning.⁶ Folklorists know the value of cultural production as it has long been used to cultivate community, share value systems, innovate within changing social landscapes, and promote a sense of connectedness. Describing this field, folklorist Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett writes, “Basket making, traditional singing, storytelling, wit and humor in conversation, needlework, cooking, games, and pastimes—these skills are learned in the academies of the street, home, the park, the woods. And the masters are the people rooted in community and history. They acquire their skills for the most part informally from others, and with those skills they acquire deeply felt values, standards of excellence, and a resonant sense of who they are and where they are.”⁷ Those who study these traditions understand what it means to research the living

and dynamic cultural contexts in which artists work. Folklore studies help us see the everyday art making that happens all around us for what it is: a source of vital human expression and social activity.

Within the rich scholarship on *multicultural education* and its more recent companion, *culturally responsive education*, there is significant research to explain why any effort to teach and learn about identity must address how power and privilege shape our own identities, our relationships with others, and our interactions with institutions.⁸ Born of the idea that education should be inclusive of all identities, multicultural education has been at times critiqued for how it is often invoked in surface-level discussions of identity. These “food and festivals” approaches serve only to draw attention to some of the basic features of who we are, without delving deeper into the social dimensions of our relationships within and across our various identities. However, these versions of multicultural education lack the depth that many scholars advise. To maintain the focus on equity, some scholars have recently shifted the conversation toward “culturally responsive education.” In their extensive writing on the subject, scholars Ana María Villegas and Tamara Lucas describe six key characteristics of the culturally responsive educator:

Such a teacher (a) is socioculturally conscious, that is, recognizes that there are multiple ways of perceiving reality and that these ways are influenced by one’s location in the social order; (b) has affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds, seeing resources for learning in all students rather than viewing differences as problems to be overcome; (c) sees himself or herself as both responsible for and capable of bringing about educational change that will make schools more responsive to all students; (d) understands how learners construct knowledge and is capable of promoting learners’ knowledge construction; (e) knows about the lives of his or her students; and (f) uses his or her knowledge about students’ lives to design instruction that builds on what they already know while stretching them beyond the familiar.⁹

This advice underscores the importance of knowing and valuing the full complexity of identity.

Finally, in *social justice art education*, we see how art can be a useful tool for critiquing and creating art about identity as a social and political tool.¹⁰ Scholarship in this domain suggests that, when paired with social justice principles, the process of making and discussing works of art can foster critical reflection and activism. Artists working in this realm create works of art

that shed light on oft-neglected narratives, analyze factors of inequality, and help audiences reimagine new ways of being in the world. Through their artwork, they can prompt individual development and encourage community and social engagement. Connecting to the disciplines I've highlighted, social justice art education suggests that art should not be overlooked as a vehicle for teaching and learning about identity.

WHY ART?

Standing on a ladder, artist Ana Teresa Fernández paints the border fence between Mexico and the United States a shade of sky blue that causes each painted section to seemingly disappear. St. Louis-based artist Damon Davis pastes giant images of the multiracial hands of Black Lives Matter protesters on boarded-up windows. Empower, a group of young LGBTQ and ally artists in Toronto, posts a series of web videos teaching other youth how to “do burlesque and drag.”¹¹ Every day, artists invite us to engage with our multiple and intersecting identities. This is nothing new. Throughout human history, the arts—visual and/or performance-based—have given people tools for narrating, shaping, and making meaning of their experiences in the world.¹² As arts educator Graeme Chalmers writes, “[A]ll groups need and use art for purposes of identity, continuity, and change and to enhance their cultural values.”¹³ People in every culture across time and place have employed the arts to document, convey, and communicate ideas about who we are and how we can relate to each other.¹⁴ Given this history, the arts offer educators an ideal tool for learning how to build relationships across the borders of our many identities.

The making of art, like the making of identity, is both a personal and social endeavor. Artist Yong Soon Min describes this process in her artwork: “Art making for me is a process of discovery and learning about myself and my relationship to the world. This art making also involves my desire to communicate and to share this exploration and understanding with others and thereby complete the dynamic.”¹⁵ Making art about what we value and how we experience the world offers opportunities for critical reflection about *why* we are who we are. Delving into these questions about the relationships we have with each other requires a certain comfort with complexity, ambiguity, vulnerability, and inquiry—all skills that many artists speak of in their work. As part of my research for this book, I asked every educator I interviewed why they thought that art offered such a potent space for learning

and teaching about identity. Their responses, many of which I include here in full and weave throughout the following chapters, speak eloquently about their decisions to use art to teach and learn about identity in their classrooms.

Art Gives Us Glimpses of Our Students

This opportunity to learn about ourselves, each other, and the ways our identities intersect, overlap, and surprise us can give educators a tool to better understand the inner lives of their students. Andy, a former student of mine who is now a teacher in a high school for those who are older than conventionally aged students, described a recent art project he completed with students that allowed him to gain a more nuanced insight into one of his students. When one student used imagery that referenced her Haitian heritage, Andy noted that “it was the only time in several years of knowing her that she shared about her Haitian heritage.” Through her artwork, Andy came to know another facet of his student’s identity.

Art Helps Students See Themselves

In talking about why she uses conversations about artworks as a teaching tool, Shannon, a museum educator and former student in my course, pointed to how in “the art, you get to build and understand in different ways which relates to your identity because you’re constantly changing.” Shannon draws our attention to an important element of making art about oneself—who we are is in a constant state of flux based on context, our own growth, and who we are with. Therefore, when we make art about ourselves, it can serve as both a mirror to our current experiences and a record of who we have been over time. Describing this, Jackie, an artist, museum educator, and former student of mine, noted how creating art can provide learners with a way to see themselves in new ways: “We need an object outside of ourselves. So that we can look at ourselves, like taking yourself and putting it into an artwork. I think when you make an artwork and you put it out there, there’s this uncertainty of ‘this is part of me, I spent time on this.’”

Art Asks Us to Reflect on Complicated, Nuanced, and Ambiguous Ideas

Few other platforms and experiences can allow learners the reflective space to think about and create work that captures who they are in the world. A

former student and novice educator, Leena echoed this sentiment: “The arts aren’t always clear cut and there’s not so much a right and wrong as there is room for interpretation and discussion . . . I think this is one of the reasons the arts are useful when it comes to learning about identity, community, and culture because they’re topics that can be a little confusing and not quite clear cut and straightforward. Also the arts allow you to reflect back on ideas.”

Art Is an Entry Point

There are works of art that connect with every single academic subject, human experience, cultural group, emotion, and perspective. We can use works of art to open the door to teach about any topic. No matter the subject, an artist somewhere at some point in time has addressed it. As Max, one of my former students, a muralist, and veteran teaching artist, declared, “[A]rt is a way . . . a kind of excuse. It’s an ‘in.’ [I]t’s a channel.” When we turn our focus to identity, art gives everyone an entry point to begin (or continue) the conversation.

Art Humanizes Us

When I asked her why she uses art to teach about identity, Shannon replied, “The arts teach us about ‘the life stuff.’” Given how art is so interwoven with what it means to be human, it can be a reminder of what makes us who we are. Musing about his own pedagogy, Mateo, another former student who is now a seasoned art teacher, suggested in our interview that we teach something more than just the skills of making things when we teach art:

I feel as though I’m there for something more than just teaching you art. I’m here, and if today I have to share with you something important about being a human and it has nothing to do with art, then that’s fine. I think our main purpose as art educators or educators in general is to make sure that students learn to be compassionate, caring human beings who value—who value people and who value life.

Writing about the responsibility of the artist, James Baldwin notes, “The precise role of the artist, then, is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through that vast forest, so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling

place.”¹⁶ Through art, we often come to know each other as people and members of an interconnected community.

DESIGNING THE COURSE

In my first year at City College of New York in 2011, I was tasked with rewriting the curriculum for the graduate and undergraduate programs in art education. State requirements for certification provided clear guidelines for courses on human development, lesson planning, and literacy courses. However, as I thought about my own experiences in teaching and my research into youth perspectives on what makes effective educators, I realized something was missing. Certainly I could help students design lesson plans to meet specific learning goals, and there were opportunities for students to practice teaching and reflecting on their pedagogy. But how could I teach them that being an outstanding educator is so much more than lesson plans with seamless transitions and inventive strategies to assess student learning? How could I help them see that exceptional teaching requires us to value the relationships we have with our students and their communities in ways that we are rarely prepared for? How could I help them develop the tools to really get to know their students as the full, ever-changing, complex beings that we all are? How could I teach them the importance of building community? How could I prepare them to think critically about the social, cultural, economic, and political forces that shape each of us and our interactions with each other?

As I asked myself these questions, I realized that the answers were laid out in front of me. Sitting in the art education program office, surrounded by works of art—from both professional and novice artists—I remembered why I went into the arts. So often, through the production and engagement with art, people navigate the complexity, ambiguity, and messiness of what it means to be social creatures in the world together. Art both asks the question and tries to answer it: who are we (and will we be) to each other? Through poetry, imagery, movement, and performance, we learn and grapple with many of life’s most complicated moments and relationships. Suddenly, I realized that the tools to teach educators how to develop critical and authentic relationships with students were embedded in the very content area I was supposed to be teaching. The challenge emerged: how could I explicitly use the practices and processes of making and looking at art to help students

analyze who they were in relation to each other, their students, and society in order to foster real connections with their future students and the communities in which they would work?

To address these questions, I designed a course that would (hopefully) guide students through a series of activities and experiences to help them critique their own biases, while learning to connect with people who are somehow different. Like many justice-oriented educators today, I have poured over the scholarship of bell hooks, Bill Ayers, Paulo Freire, and Sonia Nieto in an effort to hone the theoretical and practical tools of critical social justice education and culturally responsive pedagogy. While reading about these important concepts has always been useful for me, I knew that the opportunity to experience building connections with real-life people would give students an even deeper understanding of how they could connect with their own future students and communities.

As I sat down to design a course that could equip arts educators with the awareness and skills to teach about and across difference, I was both sure of its necessity and nervous about how it would play out. With experiential learning in mind, I designed a semester-long “community engagement project” that I hoped would help arts educators analyze their own experiences as they practiced building a relationship with a community outside their typical social spheres. This community engagement project would provide a spine for the course by asking students to identify a community of people who they would try to get to know over the course of the semester.¹⁷ I encouraged them to focus on communities outside their typical social circles and to seek the “edge of their comfort zone.” To encourage them to foster intentional relationships with a chosen community, students in the course would complete a series of art activities ranging from looking closely at works of art, creating community maps, attending public events, visiting cultural organizations, researching local artists and community histories, reading fiction, and interviewing community members. Each activity would be interwoven with an artistic or written reflection through which students could analyze their experiences in light of theories on identity development, systemic oppression, and emancipatory education. In class, we would make art, closely observe contemporary artwork, and develop arts-based strategies for teaching about and across identity differences. Extensive readings on multicultural education, culturally relevant pedagogy, and liberatory educational theories would give students a theoretical foundation for our work. And throughout the entire experience, students would keep a journal

using text and images to capture their evolving reflections in the course. I typed the syllabus and prepared for the first day.

FIRST SEMESTER

That spring, I somewhat anxiously greeted the first group of graduate students to enroll in “Identity, Community, and Culture in Art Education” at the City College of New York. The graduate students in the required course were a mix of current and preservice teachers. In many ways, they represented the cross-section of students in New York City schools, with the exception that almost all were women: several were Latina; there were some recent immigrants and some second- or third-generation transplants; a few identified as black or multiracial; a third or so identified as white; most were first-generation college and graduate students; many spoke more than one language; the majority identified as working, middle, or just-below-middle class; several were parents; all were eager to be the best teachers they could be to New York City’s diverse population of students. Like almost every passionate educator I have met, these students were aware of the importance of their role as teachers and hungry to learn as many skills to help them succeed as champions of their students.

On the first day of class, I prepared the students for the semester ahead. As on any first day, the students were rather quiet as they took in the syllabus, my teaching style, and their classmates. We ran through some icebreakers and introductions. Together, we discussed a work of art for an hour. Finally, I introduced the premise of the semester-long “community engagement project.” Fumbling my description of the project, I warned them that this was no anthropological endeavor; we were not studying “other” communities from afar. Rather, we were going to practice building relationships with people outside our regular circles, just as they would need to do as teachers. Suddenly the mood shifted. As we moved from theoretical conversations about how art can help us think about identity, difference, power, and community to the prospect of actually meeting and interacting with people different from them, the reality of the assignment sunk in: they were going to have to talk to strangers and it would likely be uncomfortable.

Despite their initial nervousness, students quickly warmed to the task. By the second session, they had written short essays about why they had selected the communities of people they hoped to get to know. Many of their responses were deeply personal:

- “My grandfather was a Holocaust survivor but I don’t identify as Jewish, so I’m going to try to get to know people of the Jewish faith.”
- “I teach in a school where almost all of my students are Dominican and I don’t actually know much about their lives.”
- “My best friend is transitioning from a female to male identity, and I’d like to be supportive, so I’m going to try to connect with people who identify as transgender.”
- “I’ve lived in Bed-Stuy for six years and still don’t know my neighbors.”
- “My mother is Puerto Rican but she wouldn’t let me speak Spanish at home. I’d like to know more about the local Puerto Rican community.”
- “My father is in a nursing home and I have no idea what his life—or other seniors lives—are like!”

Others aimed at filling in blind spots related to their professional lives:

- “I’ve never really thought about what it means to teach art to people with vision impairments, so I’d like to gain a deep awareness of what it means to be blind.”
- “I’m curious about the formal market-based art world since I never interact with people outside of art education.”
- “I’ve always wondered why people choose to homeschool their children, so I’m going to try to hear their perspectives.”
- “I think I often stereotype people who are devoutly religious, so I’d like to try to understand their faith more since I am sure I will have students who are religious.”

As we discussed in class, a core function of their role as teachers is to be able to get to know their students and the families and communities of their students. Why not take the time to think about *how* to do this in ways that are affirming, honest, and critically compassionate? In naming the people they wanted to learn more about, the students grew excited. In reflection responses and class discussions, we talked about what their choices and trepidations told them about themselves. I asked them to consider why they had never reached out to these communities of people before. We talked about the nature of difference as a way of socially classifying and separating people and the many ways in which those lines are codified in our media, cultural practices, laws, economics, housing, and politics. Throughout the first three

weeks, we had long discussions about works of art, such as Bernard Williams's *Charting America* and Carmen Lomas Garza's *Quinceñera*, to analyze artists' grappling with how we are taught about identity and difference in our culture. We created personal prints, blind contour drawings, and small collages, as we tried to unearth our own assumptions about the people the students would get to know—and about ourselves. Soon, the students were all immersed in getting to know people outside their typical social circles.

Halfway through that first semester of the course, I sat on the subway reading students' reflection papers and feeling a sense of relief. In getting to know people different from themselves, the students described small and seismic shifts in how they saw their roles as educators, artists, and citizens. While there was much in the course to tweak and revise, we were getting somewhere. At the midpoint of the fifteen-week semester, I made three columns on the board labeled "ah ha!" "surprised" and "puzzled." Neon-colored Post-it notes filled the space below each statement. I read them off one by one as we reflected on the progress of the course: "It wasn't as hard as I thought it would be." "I felt awkward at first, but then people were so warm and friendly to me." "My hands were sweaty and I wanted to turn around to leave, but then someone came over and welcomed me: 'We're glad you've joined us.'" Around the room, almost every comment was some variation on a theme: I did not want to intrude, reach out, or otherwise leave my comfort zone, but when I did, it was actually transformative for me (and maybe for the people I met). "Why is this?" I pondered aloud. Again, the comments echoed each other: "It's hard to break out of our social circles to meet people outside." "I didn't think we'd have anything in common." "We're taught to fear each other." "I never even thought to do it." In a country becoming increasingly segregated in our neighborhoods, media, schools, politics, and social interactions, the lines—both real and imaginary—that separate us prevent us from not only knowing each other, but also fully knowing ourselves.

At the end of the semester, as students reflected on their experiences with the community engagement project, their reactions were at turns emotional and analytical. Some participants talked about how their experiences prepared them to critically consider the importance of self-awareness and of creating caring, yet challenging spaces for talking about race, gender, and other identity factors. For example, a white museum educator reflected on the moments when she decides to bring up racial inequality and when she avoids it. Through discussing works of art, she realized that her decision is shaped by her own racial identity, which has caused her to talk explicitly

about racial justice with her audiences. Other participants shared strategies for connecting with families via the arts and the simple importance of listening to what students create. Another former student, an African American teacher in Harlem, said she had realized that her portraiture assignments were threatening her Muslim students, whose religious beliefs forbade representations of the human form. She described her revised assignment and how she now researches the artwork from each student's cultural heritage in order to design more culturally relevant curricula. Still other participants described how creating art about identity raised their awareness of the structural inequalities linked to how we are labeled in our society. In thinking about when and why students are labeled as "students with learning disabilities," Paul, a white teacher and parent himself, described his own realization that the labeling of students is often tied to racial and economic power—or the lack thereof.

Nearly every student described some kind of growth. Several realized that their assumptions about the people they were getting to know were wildly off base. Many felt relieved that they had survived talking to strangers and reported a new sense of confidence in initiating conversations. Most described newly gained skills and strategies to connect with their future students, families, and communities. And everyone articulated clear connections to their teaching: they were more aware of their own biases, began to critically analyze structures of oppression that affect groups of people differently, knew how to break the ice with strangers, and recognized the importance of getting to know people in all of their complexity.

CRITIQUING THE COURSE

Since that first semester in 2011, I have taught the course ten times to almost 180 graduate and undergraduate students. While I alter the course each time, the core community engagement project has remained largely the same. Over fifteen weeks, students identify a community of people they would like to get to know better—preferably one they have had little previous connection to. I guide them through a series of scaffolded activities that help them connect with their community: they must go to a public event, talk with an insider, create a community map, read fiction, identify artists who emerge from the community, make a historical timeline, visit a public space of importance to the community, and finally, create a collaborative work of art. They follow each task with a written or artistic reflection on

their experience. Meanwhile, the students read extensively about how difference, power, and privilege play out in education and in the arts and participate in facilitated conversations in which they unpack their experiences.

This experience is by no means perfect or flawless. It is actually, in many ways, a fraught exercise to intentionally foster connections across different social and cultural differences. As I describe when I discuss the challenges in the next chapter, there is great risk for harm when asking students to seek out people based on an assumed community or identity affiliation in an effort to learn more. We cannot ignore the history of othering people. And in this way, this entire project is inherently troubled. However, as educators, we are called to reach across various cultural and identity differences to teach. Even if we were to find ourselves in classrooms where students share our race, class, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and so forth, we would still likely be older or at least more academically trained than our students. Navigating difference of some sort will always be a part of our work as educators who seek to support our students' intellectual and social development. As many scholars have pointed out, we cannot *not* talk about it. Neutrality in education does not exist. So, we wade into what one student called the "uncharted waters" of trying to teach in ways that honor the unique social and cultural identities of our students (and ourselves). We cannot do this well if we don't take the time to consciously practice and hone our skills in teaching about and across difference.

MY BLIND SPOTS

Facilitating this course has taught me much about the ways in which we awkwardly bump into each other as we learn to understand, analyze, and connect with our many identities. I regularly make mistakes in teaching this course (more on those throughout the book). If I'm lucky, I recognize them myself or have a student or colleague point them out so I can try to read-just. But certainly many mistakes are caught in my own blind spots. I am a straight, able-bodied (for now), white, Christian-raised, cis-woman from an academically rich background, born in Michigan to rising middle-class American citizens, and living in New York City; my blind spots are admittedly large. Like many people from dominant identity groups who work toward racial, gender, and social justice, I struggle to unravel the privileges and powers given to me by a society built on oppressing people based on their race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, citizenship, class,

ability, and whatever other categories it can find. To engage students in conversations about power and privilege, I too must be willing to be vulnerable, honest, and ever critical of the work we are trying to do. The courses I teach often involve high emotions. Sometimes people cry or leave the room, occasionally with hurt feelings. I try to be supportive while also holding us all—myself included—accountable to each other and to the communities with which we work. But however hard I try to be flexible, nimble, responsive, compassionate, patient, self-critical, analytical, and loving, I am, like my students, a product of the social systems that dominate our society. As I've tried to do in class, in writing this book I will do my best to point out my mistakes and those I try to avoid. I invite readers to shed light on any of the blind spots I've neglected.

Despite the messiness of trying to help educators gain the confidence and skills to navigate identity with their students and communities, the experience is well worth the risks. Like many education scholars, I believe it is our responsibility as educators to help each other navigate the uncharted and often turbulent waters of learning how to connect with each other across difference—with all the riptides and swells that come with the endeavor. In designing and teaching this course, I have witnessed profound changes in how students—preservice and veteran teachers—see themselves, their work, and their students. Alumni of the course consistently describe the ways in which they grew as people and educators as they learned to connect with people different from them. Ironically, by the end of the course, they often began to see those differences as socially constructed. By establishing real relationships with people from the communities they sought to know better, the fears about “others” dissipated; they often expressed a new excitement to find ways to learn more about their students' lives. According to their final reflections and the continued conversations I have with alumni of the course, students leave with the confidence and skills to nurture relationships with people across difference.

RESEARCHING THE BENEFITS

After that first semester of teaching “Identity, Community, and Culture in Art Education,” I began to tell more people about my experience in the class. I was consistently curious about how students would describe their changing perceptions of themselves, their students, communities, and even professional responsibilities as educators and artists. The more I shared, the more

I wanted to know. Interested colleagues approached me for insight in using the arts to facilitate conversations about identity and community in their classrooms. Arts organizations began to inquire about professional development opportunities to build community among their staff and audiences. I realized I needed a better understanding of how the arts were helping my students develop the skills and sensibilities to connect with people across different social and cultural identities.

In 2015, I initiated a small qualitative research study to examine how current and preservice educators use the arts to deepen their understandings of themselves, their students, and their approach to teaching about and across identity. Working with alumni of the course, I conducted a series of in-depth, open-ended interviews about educators' reflections on using the arts to learn and teach about identity. In addition to the interviews, I analyzed student-generated writing and artwork as well as my own reflective notes from class discussions. The interviews with thirty-two alumni included a representative selection of students who typically take the course—from veteran educators to preservice teachers—and included some from every iteration of the course. Many participants were currently teaching art in schools, museums, and community centers in New York City.

Findings from this small study pointed to several emerging ideas for how the arts support learning about identity for both educators and their students.¹⁸ Perhaps most importantly, in this arts-based course, nearly all participants described how their awareness of their own identity and the ways in which they could teach others about identity expanded and changed:

- “Professionally, my awareness of social and racial injustices, and my complicity in them, has been heightened. This has fostered important conversations with colleagues, and has made me more conscious of how I think about and speak to the audiences with whom I work.”
- “This course opened my eyes to many of my own blind spots. I always considered myself someone socially, culturally aware, but . . . I am now always asking myself what am I missing because of my own positionality and how can I move beyond stereotypes and quick judgment to the individual.”
- “I think that after taking this course . . . I have grown into a person who is able to stand my ground and react to racial comments either directed towards myself or others. I was less likely to do this in the past.”

As course alumni described in greater detail how these changes unfolded, I began to see some key contributions that the arts offer to the endeavor of teaching about and across different social and cultural identities. Comparing these themes with existing scholarship, as I do in the following chapters, paints a compelling argument for the use of art—both making it and observing it—as a useful tool for teaching about identity and helping people learn to build critical and culturally responsive communities.

INTRODUCING STANCES

I played basketball and soccer as a child. In both sports, I spent countless hours practicing the right *stance* to be ready for the ball. My coaches trained me to lean in, keep my peripheral vision on both the ball and my teammates, and maintain near-constant motion. In sports, coaching about physical stance is a part of nurturing skilled athletes.

When I started listening to educators speak about their experiences learning to connect with people, I was taken back to my basketball and soccer years. As students talked about honing the skills they needed to teach about identity, they described actions such as “really listening” and “looking closely” that sound remarkably basic. Yet, they came to realize that there are specific ways of listening and looking that supported better relationships with their students. Just as my coaches showed me how to alter my center of gravity to help me become a more nimble athlete, the educators I spoke to saw the usefulness of seemingly subtle shifts in how they approached thinking, understanding, and teaching about identity. In adjusting their stances toward the work of getting to know themselves and their students, they were able to build stronger relationships. They described greater confidence in their ability to build supportive communities within their classrooms. Just as learning to correct my defensive stance and be a stronger ballplayer, educators can practice particular stances to become more effective educators.

This book introduces several stances for educators to practice on their own and with their colleagues, students, and members of the wider community. I chose the idea of stances for many reasons. First, I hope to highlight action; these are not simply mind-sets to bring to the work of teaching and learning about identity. My coaches didn’t yell at me to just “be a good defender” or “score more”; they gave me specific activities to practice—even seemingly simple ones. To master a stance requires thoughtfulness. Second, to practice a stance is to develop a way of being. When we ask someone,

“What’s your stance on this topic?” we’re asking for their particular perspective. When we tend to our stances, we focus in on our unique position in the world—whether that’s our physical stance in a soccer game or our emotional stance within a debate. Finally, I look to stances as a reminder of the need to practice and reflect on how we interact with each other. I think of being poised for action—ready to engage with the world.

Turning Inward and Leaning Outward

As I describe the stances we must cultivate to effectively teach and learn about identity, I draw from conversations with educators and my own experiences in teaching to highlight several art strategies for practicing these stances. I offer two kinds of strategies within each section. The first kind helps us turn a reflective eye on our own identities, assumptions, and biases. In *turning inward*, I encourage educators to become more critically aware of how their own identities shape their view of the world. Reflecting on this key move, Avery, a former student of mine, offered her thoughts: “My advice is for educators to start with themselves before asking students to consider identity, community and culture. Educators need to know where they stand within societal constructs and how that may affect their students, especially when bringing up topics of race, gender, oppression, and inclusion.” Likewise, veteran educator Mateo encourages educators to begin with this work: “I would say first, deeply, richly, and profoundly explore your own identity, your core values, your belief system . . . I think if people truly know who they are and share from a loving point of view, that is going to be more contagious.” Nearly every student I spoke with stressed the necessity of continually reflecting on our own selves if we are to effectively connect with and teach our students about and across our different identities. As writer Sonia Sanchez reminds us, “[Y]ou can’t have relationships with other people until you give birth to yourself.”¹⁹

Educators and scholars who work in fields such as multicultural education, critical race and queer theory, culturally responsive education, and social justice education advocate for critical self-reflection as a core component of effective teaching. They argue that educators must confront their own assumptions about their students if they hope to teach effectively. As Christopher Emdin writes, “Without teachers recognizing the biases they hold and how these biases impact the ways they see and teach students, there is no starting point to changing the dismal statistics related to the academic

underperformance of urban youth.”²⁰ Without this self-awareness, we risk reinforcing the very walls we aim to dismantle when we try to get to know each other. Extending the architectural metaphor, this double-edged work asks us to build connective bridges, while simultaneously deconstructing the borders those bridges span. If this task sounds figuratively challenging, it’s because it is.

Once we have begun the work of turning inward to analyze our own perspectives on identity, then we can shift into *leaning outward*, the second kind of strategy, to better understand how we relate to those around us. In the second set of activities I include within each stance, I provide art-based strategies to help educators and students consider the relationships and connections they have with people, particularly those outside their typical social spheres. Through interacting directly with the world outside—the people, environments, and narratives—they come to see themselves and their interactions in a new light. I encourage educators, in leaning outward, to pay attention to how they move in the world, what they notice, who they encounter, and why. The combination of these two kinds of activities—turning inward and leaning outward—helps us nurture effective stances for teaching and learning about identity. Working together, the inward- and outward-facing stances provide a more complex awareness of how we relate with our students and how we can build culturally responsive communities that honor all of our identities.



Quoting activist Grace Lee Boggs, writer Jeff Chang describes how Boggs envisioned the next revolution and what this asks of us: “As Grace Lee Boggs has put it, the next revolution might be better thought of as ‘advancing humankind to a new stage of consciousness, creativity, and social and political responsibility.’ Her revolution would require us to move away from finding new ways to divide and rule, and instead move toward honoring and transforming ourselves and our relations to each other.”²¹ While it may sound presumptuous to call getting to know each other better a revolutionary act, in a world where the socially constructed barriers between us seem to multiply and intensify each day, perhaps it is the best place to start if we have any hope of transforming barriers into bridges between us.