

# Art Education Online: Possibilities for Multicultural Art Education through International Collaboration

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## Abstract

This article presents an online, cross-cultural collaborative teaching experience involving art educators from the United States and Jamaica exploring and implementing multicultural art education. A partnership between the co-authors of this article led to the collaboration to co-teach the course on multicultural art education that represented challenges and opportunities for the same topic. Through an action research approach, we analyze the course's multicultural challenges revealed within the online context. Literature on multicultural education and online education and distance learning provides a basis through which the course was analyzed. Data analysis suggests the online context allowed for the creation of relationships across the two countries, the engagement of those relationships with one another as well as with the students' own local communities through service-learning, and the analysis of their multicultural experience through personal identity deconstruction. Challenges and outcomes are discussed relative to multicultural education goals and such possibilities through online teaching.

**Key Words: Multicultural Art Education, Service-Learning, Online Learning, Distance Education, Action Research**

During my first trip to Jamaica, I didn't see a beach or an ocean for a week. I didn't see any obvious tourists for the same amount of time. I spent the first week in Kingston, Jamaica, at the Edna Manley College for the Visual and Performing Arts. The art teachers I worked with were from different parts of the island as well as another Caribbean island, presenting me with a diversity of Jamaican lifestyles, terrain, and school communities. However, I didn't get to know or understand this diversity in those five days alone. The rich cultural heritage and experiences of Jamaica were exposed to me and other art teachers of the United States through an intense online course focused on dialogue, personal reflection, cultural identity deconstruction, and service-learning implementation (Hutzel, Personal Reflection, 2010, October).

In the Autumn of 2007, fourteen Jamaican art educators—seven female and seven male who identify as black—and twelve self-identified white female art educators in the United States of America engaged in an online course on multicultural art education. The course was co-taught by Nadine Scott, a scholar at the University of the West Indies (UWI) in Jamaica, and Karen Hutzel, a scholar at The Ohio State University (OSU) in the United States. The course was a component of OSU's Mostly Online Master's Degree Program, originally created for art teachers in the United States but expanded to include a Jamaican partnership due to the efforts of Phyllis Hill (2006). Michael Parsons initiated the online program as a Professor in the Art Education Department at OSU. Hill, a doctoral student advised by Parsons and an art educator from Jamaica, envisioned, planned, and collaborated with OSU and Edna Manley College for the Visual and Performing Arts (Edna Manley) faculty and administrators to enact the partnership. Hill's ambitious dissertation study, to develop the partnership and program, was in response to the Jamaican Ministry of Education's requirement for educators in the country to increase the level of their degrees. Without graduate level programs in art education, art teachers would have had to enroll in general education programs within the Caribbean or online in other countries. Long-range goals for the partnership include the assisted development of a graduate level art education program at Edna Manley.



Fig. 1 Art teachers/students participating from Jamaica, along with OSU instructors Karen Hutzel and Vesta Daniel.



Fig. 2 Art teachers/students participating from the United States, along with OSU instructor Karen Hutzel.

Hill's and Parsons' vision for an online degree-offering program for art teachers in Jamaica established an array of educational partnership possibilities between OSU and Edna Manley. As evidenced in this article, a partnership between Nadine and Karen led to the collaboration to co-teach

the course on multicultural art education that represented challenges and opportunities for the same topic. In essence, the course revealed real multicultural challenges within the online context that we were considering through readings and videos. It became a “live” version of the course’s content, creating very real dilemmas to consider, deconstruct, and address within our ten-week quarter. The online context allowed for the creation of relationships across the two countries, the engagement of those relationships with one another as well as with the students’ own local communities through service-learning, and the analysis of their multicultural experience through personal identity deconstruction.

## **Multicultural and Cross-Cultural Art Education**

Multicultural education as a school reform movement “originated in the 1960s as part of the Civil Rights Movement to combat racism... dedicated to providing more equitable opportunities for disenfranchised individuals and groups to gain in social, political, and especially educational arenas” (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001). Multicultural art education can deconstruct culture through a variety of personal and social identifiers, many of which generate from the work of Gollnick and Chinn (2006), including race and ethnicity (Carpenter, 2003; Buffington, 2007; Bastos & Hutzler, 2004), gender and sexuality (Garber, 2003; Desai, 2003; Mayo, 2007), class and economic status (Congdon & Blandy, 2005), religion (Green, 2000), age, geographic location, language (Williams, 1991), ability and exceptionality (Blandy, 1991; Eisanhauer, 2007), and family structures (Turner-Vorbeck & Marsh, 2007).

Within the field of art education, emphasis on multicultural learning is significant because art teachers are confronted in schools and through art with diversity and difference daily. This diversity can be considered a burden to overcome or an asset through which rich, dynamic, and complex learning might take place. Internationally, continuing migrating patterns, socio-cultural factors and the dynamic changes in cultural habits of people have caused most nations to evolve into multicultural environments. For example, cultures in the United States, including African-American and pre-European Native American cultures, have always been multi-ethnic. A survey of the demographic structure of the United States of America reveals the existence

of more than 300 different ethnic groups and a myriad of social organizations within each of these (Gollnick & Chinn, 2006). In the case of Jamaica (and the Caribbean), the convergence of African, European, East Indian, Chinese, Lebanese-Syrian and other cultures has created a truly creolized, multi-ethnic and multicultural society. This multi-ethnic/multicultural mix undoubtedly influenced the Jamaican motto: *Out of many, one people*. Melting Pot and other assimilationist theories have largely negated this diversity and complexity within sociocultural groups and a dominant ideology based on Western European concepts of art has persisted. However, a renewed interest in the concerns of recent regional and continental migration patterns (i.e. Asian immigrants, Hispanic immigrants from Central and South America as well as the Caribbean) has continued to make multiculturalism an important school reform movement. The Caribbean similarly addresses the notion of multiculturalism as it relates to “the discourse on the contentious issue of perception of civil society tenanted by persons from different cultures, whether as a result of ancient migration or the more recent movements of people ... and multi-racial communities” (Nettleford, 2003, p.xix). Social constructions of both the United States and Jamaica provide similar and different realities, which students analyzed in the online course on multicultural art education in relationship to their particular school and community locations and in reference to their own biases and beliefs.

## Online Education and Distance Learning

Online education has existed in higher education for many years. In some ways, it symbolizes the tension in higher education to promote scholarship while maintaining economic efficiency. Online education has been subject to harsh criticism as economic efficiency and capitalist goals can supersede quality teaching and learning practices. However, online education can also provide new opportunities for education. Studies suggest that educators believe the quality of online education is improving and will meet or exceed the quality of traditional education in the future (Allen & Seaman, 2004; Kim & Bonk, 2006). Importantly, online education can create environments that are student-directed, cross-cultural, inclusive of various learning styles, and purposely reflective when framed by Habermas’ (1984,

1987) theory of communicative action, constructivist learning theory (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996), community inquiry (Lipman, 1991) and collaborative learning (Cecez-Kecemanovic & Webb, 2000), stemming from the works of Piaget (1926) and Vygotsky (1978). A recent study unveiled many possibilities for the future of online education through increased attention to quality of instruction (Kim & Bonk, 2006).

...There is a need for CMS [course management system] environments that foster deeper student learning and engagement.... Such environments might foster student choice among various activities, reflection, apprenticeship, synthesis, real-world problem solving, and rich, timely feedback.... The next-generation CMS should foster a more learner-centered environment that is rich in critical thinking, student exploration, peer learning and knowledge construction, interdisciplinary experiences incorporating a community of educators..., and educational opportunities. (Kim & Bonk, 2006, p. 27)

Results of their study, however, reveal online instructors' emphasis on content-driven improvements through technology, as opposed to opportunities for cross-cultural and collaborative opportunities. Kim and Bonk (2007) call for training in online delivery on how "to successfully embed creative and generative online tasks and activities" (p. 28) as opposed to solely focusing "on consumption and evaluation of knowledge" (p. 28). Their research reveals, similar to traditional education, significant lack of and opportunity for multicultural education theories to inform online teaching practices.

Cross-cultural and multicultural education opportunities become considerably more available through the web. The presence of these opportunities, however, does not ensure successful or meaningful interactions and experiences. Strategies for interaction and collaboration via the Web are significant for the mutual benefit of these experiences. Cross-cultural web-mediated educational experiences that promote cultural inclusivity require "systematic attention be given to particular design guidelines, which include responsiveness to learner needs, community

based learning and cultural contextualization of learning activities” (McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000). Multicultural education advocates promote such goals in traditional education, however when considering possibilities for multicultural education online, opportunities and challenges become heightened.

Cecez-Kecemanovic and Webb (2000) propose “learning as a social interaction process” (p. 73) where web-mediated learning might enhance and extend collaboration and communication. They offer particular characteristics of this space, including “permanent recording of student interactions, including flow of interactions in a period of time, either with (asynchronous interaction) or without (synchronous interaction), and any time any place access to these records by participants, learners and instructors alike” (p. 75). In other words, online, students seemingly have free and equal access and opportunity for contribution. This freedom does not necessarily extend itself widely, however access to the Web is beginning to spread wider and deeper, allowing for greater connection to parts of the world not easily accessible. This presents many opportunities for practicing multicultural education through cross-cultural/country/continent shared learning environments, such as the partnership between The Ohio State University Department of Art Education and the Edna Manley College for the Visual and Performing Arts.

## **Overview of the Online Course on Multicultural Art Education**

Art Education 767 is a course on multicultural theories and practices in art education. The course is taught online each Autumn quarter at The Ohio State University to (primarily) U.S. students enrolled in the Mostly Online Master’s Degree Program. Through the partnership with Edna Manley College for the Visual and Performing Arts, Jamaican art educators comprised one cohort of students in the online program. The Autumn quarter of 2007 presented the opportunity to engage both cohorts of students—those from the United States and Jamaica—in one course. In an effort to promote culturally specific and sensitive teaching, the course was co-taught by the two authors of this article, each of us representing each of

the two countries. The course introduced students to multiple cultural identifiers, engaging them in deconstructing their own cultural identifiers as well as those of their students. Multicultural theories, issues, and strategies in general and in art education were critically investigated through literature, videos and films, online discussions and activities based on course topics, and a service-learning project<sup>1</sup>. Topics and cultural identifiers addressed in the course included culture and pluralism, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, communication, sex and gender, religion, and strategies for multicultural education. Students explored their own teaching situations while comparing their experiences with each other primarily through online dialogue.

The major assignment for the course, beyond course readings, videos and online dialogue, was the development and implementation of a relatively short multicultural service-learning project within their own schools. The course assignment included developing a lesson plan that involved their K-12 students in a community engagement activity addressing multiculturalism and art. After implementing the lesson plan in their schools, the college students shared images of their students and the art and critically reflected on the experience in the online course, considering outcomes related to multicultural education.

## Course Results and Emergent Themes

Ultimately, the cross-cultural online course represented a unique case study by providing rich data through which to analyze possibilities for multicultural online instruction. Through an action research approach (Stringer, 2007) to critically and reflectively assess course outcomes, we considered major themes, challenges, and successes that resulted from the cross-cultural online teaching and learning collaboration. Areas of data analysis include: (1) the various responses students had to particular cultural identifiers introduced in the course (such as race, religion, sexuality, and

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<sup>1</sup> Service-learning is a teaching strategy that enhances “student learning and academic rigor through the practice of intentional reflective thinking and responsible civic action” (Duncan & Kopperud, 2008). Service-learning has become a popular teaching method in the United States at both the K-12 level and the higher education level.



language); (2) communication patterns of the course that exposed some students' avoidance of uncomfortable online discourses; and (3) outcomes of the students' service-learning experiences.

### **Responses to Various Cultural Identifies**

Through the course textbook, Gollnick and Chinn's (2006) *Multicultural Education in a Pluralistic Society*, additional readings within the field of art education, and videos, the students deconstructed their own cultural identifiers while considering their biases and beliefs relative to other students in the course and their school teaching sites. Typically, the course is taught to a group of predominately white women with occasional male participants. Discussions within such a relatively homogenous group do not provide many contrasting or challenging views to the students. In the partnership with Edna Manley, however, the Jamaican students' perspectives provided significant variety, and occasional similarities, among the students, contributing to a more critical online dialogue experience for all of the students. The students' cultural identifiers were complex, however, revealing for both cohorts the variety of multiculturalism present in each country. For example, one of the Jamaican students was of African heritage, and provided a significantly different perspective to some of the issues that seemed to have Western congruency. Another student was of half-Chinese-half-African descent and valued greatly her Chinese heritage as expressed within the Jamaican/Caribbean context.

Most course topics found cross-cultural similarities in students' beliefs while specific topics revealed cultural differences that shed light on the reality of living and teaching in a multicultural society. For students in the United States, for instance, issues around race and language were most challenging to face, which brought up conversations about immigration. Jamaican students challenged their American peers to revisit their notions of race and language through sharing the racial history and current multilingualism of their country. Meanwhile, several Jamaican students expressed concern over conversations about religion and sexuality. Several students from the U.S. expressed similar religious convictions, and could bond over their common religious beliefs. At the same time, U.S. students

were able to confront students, particularly male students, from Jamaica who expressed real concern over the topic of homosexuality.

Many of the topics covered provided new concepts to the students, such as considerations of age, gender, ethnicity, race, class, religion, sexuality, and language. In many ways, the U.S. students were careful in their language to be politically correct while many of the Jamaican students seemed more uninhibited in their discussions, especially related to race and ethnicity. The Jamaican students' frankness caused many U.S. students to avoid engaging in dialogue directly with them. A Jamaican student brought to our attention the feeling that the U.S. students had begun to avoid them in the online discussion board. We addressed the issue, reminding students of the value of confrontation and dialogue across the two groups, and in some cases the U.S. students heightened their participation with the Jamaican students. In one example, readings around sexual orientation and gender inequalities sparked a significant debate as several of the Jamaican, primarily male, students' reactions were challenged by many of the women, especially those from the U.S. Such culturally-formed biases revealed significant cultural differences between Jamaica and the U.S., allowing the students to practice tolerance through their online exchanges.

### **Communication Styles Across Cultures**

The online dialogue revealed vast difference in communication styles between the U.S. and Jamaican students. As discussed earlier, many of the U.S. students desired to avoid uncomfortable exchanges or responded with guarded, politically correct statements. Jamaican students, on the other hand, often communicated through storytelling and long narratives, a cultural style that was even challenged by the co-instructors to encourage them to write more concisely. Students from the U.S. tended to participate in the dialogue enough to receive an acceptable grade, while the Jamaican students would carry on the conversation many weeks beyond the grading period. This example of cultural difference placed the Jamaican students at a disadvantage, as the assessment system was not arranged to reward their extra effort. At the same time, while some students did confront one another on issues in which they held differing beliefs, many of the students

responded only to those whom they shared similar beliefs on the particular topic.

Students from both countries seemed apprehensive at first to discuss many of the sensitive issues. However, as the discussions developed they became more relaxed and in some cases were genuinely interested in learning about each others' cultures. Interestingly, one Jamaican student had recently immigrated to the U.S., but retained her Jamaican cohort. She found this course and her classmates very helpful as she was trying to adjust to a new culture, and shared many of her experiences teaching in a U.S. school. Overall, the students expressed personal and professional growth as a result of participating in the course, claiming they look at life a little differently now and feel better prepared to teach students who have different cultural beliefs and experiences.

An important aspect of the collaboration was that the instructors were representative of each of the cohorts (American and Jamaican) and were able to address cultural understandings/misunderstandings in a more direct and analytical manner by having an "insider" perspective from which to formulate explanations and generate debate. More importantly, the instructors spent two weeks together in the U.S. to finalize preparations for the course as well as begin the first week of the course together. This face-to-face time was significant to the development of the course and allowed us to work out issues such as assessment strategies and communication patterns. Although we each had different management styles as we approached course content, developed assessment instruments and grading systems, we fed off each others' strengths and generally came to consensus around course practices.

### **Outcomes of the Service-Learning Experiences**

I have found the concept of service learning to be very potent, particularly for the fact that this method is not instructive but rather one that captures the essence of a truly multicultural approach to learning through explorations, discussions and planning. Parallel to the potency of a non-instructive approach to learning is the active inclusion of community members and the consequent interactions between students and community members in the learning process. There were some

interesting revelations resulting from such interconnectivity, amongst the revelations were the fact that students and members of the ancillary staff of a school with a student population of only 700, never had any previous interaction in any meaningful ways. Also, I was pleasantly surprised at the wealth of knowledge displayed by the janitorial workers and I was equally surprised to find out that they had serious and reasoned objections to the teaching styles of some members of the academic staff, the concerns of which I will discretely pass on to my colleagues in an attempt to improve possible flaws in pedagogical approaches as well as the psychosocial atmosphere of the school. Working in groups is not a new phenomenon, but the seriousness and the genuine participation of non-students really diversified the experience and brought an everyday practicality and wisdom to the concepts discussed that will resound with me for a long time to come. Many of the ideas that we worked with did not originate with me nor my students, but rather through chemistry of the uncommon relationship between the naivety of youth and the experience of the aged. (Jamaican student, online discussion, 2007)

Students' service-learning projects in their schools varied greatly, attended to multicultural issues at differing levels, and resulted in varying levels of success and failure. Assessment of students' service-learning assignments, however, was not based on the level of success of the project, rather the criticality of their reflection about the experience relative to multicultural goals. Several examples of students' service-learning projects highlight these differences. The examples presented here were selected to represent the range of success students experienced implementing service-learning. Several examples demonstrated significant outcomes for the students, the school, and ultimately the teacher. A few examples failed to meet service-learning goals due to failed partnerships. We present this range through the examples shared below.

**Jamaica example.** Students at a low-income school in Jamaica decided to address the issue of abandoned cars, which result from cars being flooded during hurricanes. The students' plan included placing an abandoned car on school grounds to paint and turn into a planter, to symbolize life from something considered dead. As the students worked, in partnership with janitorial staff and other adults in the school and community, they discovered the cars were used to store weapons and drugs, presenting a dangerous

plan to remove one of them. In response to their research, the students instead carved out a garden in the shape of a car and planted “tree of life” plants within the outlining stones. The art teachers’ reflection on the project, presented as a vignette at the beginning of this section, relates several multicultural goals within the learning process, particularly recognition of knowledge from lower-class janitors and older adults. Additionally, the students’ research into the issue revealed issues related to the life of cars otherwise seen as useless, but made useful through illegal activity. The representations of death related to the abandoned cars, drugs, and weapons secured for the students their desire to symbolize and represent life through plants.



Fig. 3 Students in Jamaica prepare a garden in the shape of a car.



Fig. 4 The final “Car Garden” with plant of life planted between the surrounding stones.

**U.S. example.** Elementary students in the U.S. interviewed residents of a local elderly home to develop a puppet show for them. Students developed their puppets and the script based on their research through interviewing the elderly people. On their second visit, many weeks later, the students performed the play for the residents. The art teacher described her students' confidence when acting through a puppet, as opposed to performance on a stage. She claimed several of the elementary students portrayed a significant increase in comfort upon their second visit to the nursing home, despite great reservations on their first visit. Multicultural goals in this example include age particularly, while issues around health and ability were also present.



Fig. 5 Students finishing their puppet show at a local nursing home in the U.S.

**A failed example across Jamaica and the U.S.** An elementary art teacher in the U.S. partnered with a college-level art teacher in Jamaica through the course, in attempting a cross-cultural collaborative service-learning experience. Through e-mail they shared their goals for the collaboration and developed a plan for sharing their students' artwork and letters through the mail and shipping. The elementary students sent letters and drawings, but never received a response back from the college-aged students. The partnership ultimately failed, and the elementary students questioned why they did not hear back from the older Jamaican students. Further reflection in

the course revealed a lack of commitment on the part of the Jamaican art teacher and her four students. Such failures are a significant possibility when attempting partnerships in service-learning projects, and should be approached for their lessons as opposed to avoided for fear of failure. In this case, the U.S. art teacher taught future service-learning assignments, and felt capable of working through the challenges based on this experience. The Jamaican art teacher became aware of the level of commitment needed by her students in pursuing future partnerships, as well. This example represents a partnership attempted by two students in the same online course which ultimately failed due to poor communication. Both students learned from the failure, however, and are each continuing to pursue service-learning activities with their students.

**Jamaica example.** High school students in a low-income port-town in Jamaica collaboratively constructed a mural on exterior school walls, leading teachers and other students in their participation. The art teacher, a renowned ceramic artist whose work is displayed in the Jamaican National Gallery, described the impact of the project on his students with emotion. He focuses his story on one boy in particular, who had been in trouble with the law and was considered dangerous by many of his classmates. This boy took on a leadership role with the mural, gaining the trust and respect of his classmates and other teachers, who often turned to him for guidance in working on the mural. When trying to gain access to school grounds on a weekend, in order to work on the mural, he was faced with a security guard preventing his access. His immediate response was to become physical, and left to get a weapon. Before returning, he went to his art teacher, laid down his weapon, and told him what he had planned to do. His leadership role with the mural, and the responsibility he felt for it and his peers, caused him to make a different decision in this case, one his art teacher feels is a direct result of the mural. The art teacher has now completed a second mural on the school property, convinced that such service-learning activities have greater impact on student behavior than discipline measures. In this case, multicultural goals seem to focus around this particular boy, who was welcomed into his community through collaborative artmaking, and who learned to see his peers and teachers as valuable to him.



Fig. 6 Students in Jamaica work on a mural on an exterior wall of their school, which honors the community as a port town.

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## Discussion and Conclusion

The cross-cultural online multicultural course provided significant learning opportunities for both groups of students. The collaboration was impactful for Edna Manley and Jamaica as it provided an opportunity for art educators to pursue graduate-level work in their field of art education (as these specializations are not readily available to them in the Caribbean). There is also the added dimension within the university partnership that intends to develop a graduate-level art education program in Jamaica. This extends higher education outreach discussions, which tend to focus on non-degree granting educational opportunities, to include degree-granting opportunities for community partners. With the training of over a dozen art educators at the Master's degree level in art education, it has widened the pool of expertise in this subject area in Jamaica and has resulted in more persons being able to contribute significantly to curriculum reform in art education, be exposed to varying pedagogical strategies and learning styles, and be better mentors from a more informed, academic perspective. The service-learning project invited new collaborations within and outside the learning community; created a more positive attitude toward art in the school's community, particularly as in some instances teachers and administrators became involved with the project; enhanced spaces through



honoring local assets; developed a feeling of self-worth when students were provided leadership opportunities; and engendered civic responsibility.

As importantly, however, is the impact on the U.S. students through the shared online learning environment. Typically, the multicultural course, as with all the courses in the online program, are taught to students who are generally white female, with the occasional white male. Course discussions around cultural identifiers are often stale in such homogenous groups as students do not have significant cultural differences through which to challenge one another's beliefs. The addition of the Jamaican students to the course provided significant differences in cultural beliefs to discuss in relationship to course topics. In essence, the experience forced the U.S. students to respond to differences in reality in addition to considering multiculturalism theoretically. The practice of engaging in dialogue and debate over multicultural topics revealed complexities inherent in teaching multiculturally.

As co-instructors of the course, we recognize our own significant learning through this collaboration. Each of us brought our own teaching style, skill set, and cultural experiences through which the course was taught, also causing each of us to reflect deeply on our own teaching. This required a lot of negotiation and compromise, an inherent component in teaching multiculturally for which we had to model for our students. Operationally, we have identified several important components to our perceived success in teaching collaboratively online. Having each culture of students represented through each instructor was significant as there were times when each of us had to explain our culture to the students who were from the other culture. Each of us as instructors were exposed to both cultures, although to varying degrees. We constantly interacted with each other and made an effort to communicate with all members of the class. We operated as one class with two instructors, as opposed to each of us "owning" our own cultural group. Finally, we developed a grading system where each of us submitted grades independently (except for the first assignment, which we marked together in Ohio) using the same criteria.

The course suggests great possibilities for international collaborations via the web through emphasis on multicultural education. However,

traditional ways of teaching will not directly apply to online learning environments. It becomes necessary to re-envision art education through possibilities online. For instance, experiential education is quite different in classrooms than online. The opportunity for online environments, however, is in experiencing multiculturalism through cross-cultural collaboration not readily available in face-to-face classrooms. Relationship building online could also lead to future in-person collaborations, a possibility yet to be seen in the case of OSU and Edna Manley. This might be an area for future research, by considering the possibility for using online international learning partnerships to lead to international travel and learning exchanges between the groups.

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