



BORDER ART: A UNIT OF STUDY OF ARTWORKS RESPONDING TO THE BORDER BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND MEXICO

Level: high school / 9-12 grades

Course: art

Rationale

Our students find themselves increasingly in a “global” world, due to much developing technology and also in “global” classrooms, due to immigration. As the United States enjoys a level of freedom and economic opportunities not available in some other countries, it is often the destination of immigrants. Students are, and will continue to be, in situations reflecting this diversity. It behooves us as educators to raise issues of concern and challenge our students to identify their role in those areas. We need to encourage their full participation as intelligent problem solvers and empathic decision makers.

Immigration and migration occur for a myriad of reasons and young people need to understand these. Not all who move necessarily want to do so; sometimes they are forced by circumstances and would prefer to be in a position to return “home.” Some who move from place to place are literally trapped between two governments. Some are pursuing a better standard of living, or even just trying to pursue the basics to sustain life. Some are fleeing war-torn countries or repressive governments, and risking their lives. These are just some of the reasons, and an understanding of these motives for immigration/migration are the underpinnings of tolerance.

Nearly everyone in the United States has a history of migration in their background, although many of us are out of touch with our roots.

by
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Lesson Overview

Through readings, videos, handouts and lectures, students are given an overview of issues surrounding immigration and migration. Class discussions center on specific topics. Students are encouraged to develop opinions on these as well as identify problems and seek solutions. There are a variety of related topics which have potential to become strands of this unit, such as Proposition 187 of the state of California, media bias, funding for organizations (who challenge political “hot potatoes” such as the National Endowment for the Arts) and so forth. Students are engaged in different activities which will ultimately tie their understanding and empathy for immigrants/migrants to their own family’s experience as community “newcomers.” The culminating product of their research, thinking and progressing, will be an exhibited artwork which conveys their learning and in turn, their “teaching” of others.

Objectives

During this unit, students will:

- * demonstrate an understanding of the concepts and dynamics of immigration and migration, through discussion statements.
- * will explore their own family’s “story” as it relates to the concepts and dynamics of immigration or migration
- * learn the process of “taking” an oral history
- * demonstrate an understanding of a particular immigration or migration situation by using it as a basis for creating an artwork
- * clearly communicate their intent of this artwork through a written statement which will be displayed alongside their exhibited piece
- * explore media bias pertaining to coverage of a particular situation, by analyzing accounts from several sources on the given issue
- * explore the National Endowment for the Arts, beginning with it’s inception, to current times; the philosophy for the institution; funding concerns; and overall objections to controversial artwork
- * demonstrate an ability to clearly articulate their findings and conclusions on these issues.
- * demonstrate appropriate work skills, including a concern for cooperation, respect, honesty, and so on.
- * strive for excellence and creativity in the presentation of their artwork.
- * demonstrate the ability to communicate and instruct through their exhibited work, and so reinforce the idea of artists responding to the world in which they live.

Time Needed

One month minimum, more likely two months. This may be expanded to encompass extensive research into some of the strand issues— media bias, or N.E.A. funding, for example.

Materials

For sculpture (which is what I envision these artworks as), mixed media; that is, a variety of media may be used. Students are required in their proposals to identify what media they prefer to use. Choices include: clay, wood, found objects, metal, paint and so on.

Procedures

Part One

Initial presentation (3 class periods): Overview of immigration and migration: why, how, who, when, what, etc., discussion and selected readings.

The introduction of the concepts of immigration and migration will begin with a check of the students prior knowledge. This can be easily accomplished with a "free-write" on the topic. Students are instructed to silently write for five minutes on everything they individually know about immigration or migration. Then a list is generated on the board, and students have the opportunity to discuss and clarify their perceptions. This is a quick and discreet technique for checking perceptions and knowledge.

Part Two

Art production focus (3 class periods): Show the information: video and handouts on the 1993 Border Art Project (an N.E.A. partially-funded project which involved 38 artists in the San Diego area and was overseen by the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art). As background, students will view other works by these artists.

Particular attention will be paid to a segment in the video (a portion of the C.B.S. Sunday Morning program) which shows a controversial art piece done by artists David Avalos, Louis Hock, and Elizabeth Sisco. This video provides an overview of representative artwork from the show, as well as interviews with some of the artists who were invited to be part of this project. The intent of the exhibit was to give Latino artists an occasion to produce artwork which could accent the plight of many Mexican migrants who risk much to come into the United States for employment. One of the most moving images in this taped segment is a display of ziplock bags filled with water from the Rio Grande River. Many "illegals" cross this river to come into the U.S. In each of the bags is a shoe recovered from the river. The camera's eye rests on one tiny shoe, obviously a child's, at the conclusion of the piece. This can naturally lead to a discussion of how artists observe the world around them, and respond to it. About what issues do these artists want to inform us? Follow-up discussions on topics in this area might center on the legitimacy of the art form these artists choose for this project; the role the N.E.A. played in the controversy of their (Avalos, et al) artwork; and the aesthetics question, can money be an art medium?

Part Three

Discussions and journal writing (3 class periods): Attention may segue into the media's presentation of this portion of the Border Art Project. Comparisons and contrasts may be drawn between the various views of the piece in question, utilizing newspaper articles, the video presentation and information from the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art. Probably the most important reason to draw attention to the media's coverage of this portion of the project, is that some of the coverage was blatantly inciteful, both against Mexican migrant workers in the pre-Proposition 187 days of California, and also to the N.E.A. and it's tax-support. Students will be asked to identify ways in which the bias of the media may have contributed to the intolerance of the public in it's regard for migrant workers and/or N.E.A., and overall societal implications.

Students will be asked to recall from the C.B.S. video which images struck them as being powerful or shocking, and why. They will be asked what they were taught by the artwork, why it is meaningful, and what significance does it hold for them. This will be written in their journals, and kept for reference.

Once the students have seen the video and discuss the effectiveness of the art, they will receive a copy of at least one news account which is extremely negative in tone about the particular artwork done by David Avalos and two other artists. This piece is a controversial one because it utilized money as the medium and saluted migrant workers who are in the United States illegally. The article quotes politicians angry over N.E.A. tax money being used for this purpose. This leads us into a realm of discussions about the N.E.A. and it's mission. This raises an important awareness for art students who will someday pay taxes. Another related discussion is whether money can be used as an art medium and how it does actually function in this particular piece.

Part Four

Actual outcome products for this unit are suggested next. Depending upon the time available, students could be asked to work on one, both, or these could be optional. Also, obvious opportunities exist to collaborate with teachers in other disciplines, such as Social Studies, Language Arts, Foreign Language areas, and Psychology.

Assignment One (5 class periods): Select an artwork from the Border Art Project, research the circumstances upon which it is based, weigh both sides of the issue, and write a personal response to the work, which specifically addresses how the art has affected your view and perception of it's subject. Create your own piece to complement the one already done for the Project.

Assignment Two (5 class periods): Write a commentary on the media's coverage of the situation. Include research materials, identify all perceivable slants, and conclude with a balanced rewrite of the articles you are critiquing.

Part Five

This assignment would take one month: the oral history, distillation of that information, building of the commemorative piece, and exhibit statement.

The final portion of this unit, "ties it all together" and provides human common ground. Students are asked to select and research in their own family, the history and movement of individuals. At some point, someone in their background migrated from one area to another; likely, one country to another. This affords the student many fine discoveries...a sense of their family "story", information about ancestors, knowledge of other settings and situations dealt with - lessons learned, the feeling of "connectedness" with the past, and finally, the pride of having been the one to tie it all together!

Students will investigate the issues of their own family's migration history by interviewing one or more members of their family (taking oral histories) and using this record, create an art piece, a sculpture, which commemorates a memorable aspect of it. The student will write a brief piece to be displayed alongside of the artwork which describes the work done and intent of the piece. Perhaps it will also be appropriate to display

some of the quotes from the interviews. In our high school, we have the potential to hear the stories of Hmong, Serbians, Polish, Germans, Latinos, just to name a few.

Bibliography

Bolton, Richard. Cultural Wars. New York: The New Press, 1992.

A book which examines the perceptions of the N.E.A. in light of controversial artworks, the reactions of conservatives to these, as well as providing a chronology of the institution to the reader.

"Ten Dollar Bills Aren't Art, Agency Decides." *The Milwaukee Journal*, 5 Sept. 1993.

An article which is negative in its reporting of the art piece done by David Avalos and others for the Border Art Project.

"The Border Art Project." *C.B.S. Sunday Morning*, 8 Aug. 1993.

A ten minute overview of the Border Art Project commissioned by the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art. Many pieces from the show are featured, as well as interview with some of the artists.

Carlozzi, Annette. 50 Texas Artists. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1986.

A book which focuses on fifty different Texan artists, showing a representative piece by each, as well as a statement about the work of each.

Markovitz, Jonathon. "Blurring The Lines: Art On The Border," 1994.

URL: <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/pmc/issue.994/review-3.994.html>

Markovitz reviews and explains the art exhibit held along the San Diego/Tijuana border, La Frontera/The Border: Art About the Mexico/United States Border Experience. Looks at the "border" in a variety of ways.