

## Diálogos Transculturais

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**RESUMO — Diálogos Transculturais** — Diálogo Transcultural constrói relacionamentos, que se transforma em conteúdo para uma comunidade criar arte colaborativa com base no diálogo do grupo. Como professora de arte-educação nos Estados Unidos, comecei a facilitar Diálogos Transculturais em 2007 com alunos e colegas na Makerere Universidade em Kampala, Uganda, e na Universidade de Helsinki. Neste texto apresento teorias, conceitos, estratégias e exemplos de *Diálogo Transcultural* sobre cultura visual contemporânea, práticas culturais em relação a lugares particulares e uma pedagogia projetada para corroer suposições, ignorância e mal-entendidos. As estratégias pedagógicas do Diálogo Transcultural consideram posicionalidade, subjetividade, conhecimento situado, aprendizagem transformadora, intra-ação, ponto de vista especulativo, e metodologia difrativa. O processo dialógico elicit visões microculturais que são específicas e únicas, mas são compartilhadas dentro ou através do conhecimento macro-cultural. O ato de construção de significado das práticas microculturais pode sustentar bem como mudar as crenças macro-culturais. Diálogo Transcultural é crítica cultural performativa, arte colaborativa e comentário sobre obras de arte por aqueles envolvidos no Diálogo Transcultural. Desenvolvi Diálogo Transcultural como um processo que expõe condições sistêmicas e ambientais, e aborda a criatividade como um processo social.

### **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

Aprendizagem Transformadora. Conhecimento Situado. Cultura Visual.

**ABSTRACT — Transcultural Dialogue** — *Transcultural Dialogue* builds relationships, which becomes the content for a community to create collaborative art based on the group's dialogue. As an art education professor in the United States, I began facilitating Transcultural Dialogues in 2007 with students and colleagues at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, and at the University of Helsinki. In this chapter, I present theories, concepts, strategies, and examples of *Transcultural Dialogue* concerning contemporary visual culture, cultural practices in relation to particular places, and a pedagogy designed to erode assumptions, ignorance, and misunderstandings. Pedagogical strategies of Transcultural Dialogue consider positionality, subjectivity, situated knowledge, transformative learning, intra-action, speculative standpoint, and diffractive methodology. The dialogic process elicits micro-cultural views that are specific and unique (i.e., they sustain difference), yet are shared within or part of macro-cultural knowledge. The act of meaning-making from micro-cultural practices can sustain as well as change the macro-cultural beliefs. Transcultural Dialogue is conversational performative cultural critique, collaborative artmaking, and commentary surrounding artworks by those involved in Transcultural Dialogue<sup>1</sup>. I have developed Transcultural Dialogue as a process that exposes systemic and environmental conditions, and approaches creativity as a social process.

### **KEYWORDS**

Transformative Learning. Situated Knowledge. Visual Culture.

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is developed from my 2017 InSEA keynote as published in the InSEA 2017 proceedings and several publications (KABIITO, LIAO, MOTTER & KEIFER-BOYD, 2014; KEIFER-BOYD, 2012, 2016; PAATELA-NIEMINEN & KEIFER-BOYD, 2015) in which I, along with co-facilitators, reflected on our process in order to improve future Transcultural Dialogue projects and to study educational impacts in relationship to pedagogical goals.

## **Initiating *Transcultural Dialogue* through Art**

Transcultural Dialogue is about learning to be attentive to the places we inhabit and to recognize familiar cultural practices. Art pedagogy that makes this possible begins with dialogue between groups of people from different environments and cultures, and uses the dialogue as content for art making. The goal of Transcultural Dialogue is to erode assumptions, ignorance, and misunderstandings about people and places different from one's own familiar world. The strategies discussed below build from the anthropological understanding of the complex process of transculturation in which people create hybrid cultures rather than assimilate into a dominant culture (Santi, 2005). Transculturation is a multidirectional process in which dialogic encounters and shared group creative activities change perceptions by challenging previously held assumptions of all in the group (ARROYO, 2016).

I draw insights from my experiences in initiating, collaborating, and facilitating transcultural dialogue (KABIITO, LIAO, MOTTER, & KEIFER-BOYD, 2014; KEIFER-BOYD, 2015, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2013a, 2013b, 2017; PAATELA-NIEMINEN, & KEIFER-BOYD, 2015). All examples are from many semesters, most often with Richard Kabiito at Makerere University in Uganda and Martina Paatela-Nieminen in Finland. To begin, then, is to find another art educator from a place far away from the environment and culture that the students you teach are familiar. The InSEA World Congress is an ideal place to meet and plan to join students in your classes in Transcultural Dialogue. With online translators, it is possible for each group to write in their own language.

### **Search for Topics Absent or Avoided**

Ask students to dialogue about something familiar to them and then in looking at the posts from all to identify which topics are absent or avoided; and to then provide speculations regarding the silence on specific topics. One strategy that has worked well is for participants to have time to meet and greet each other with a prompt such as:

**MEET & GREET:** Communicate to each other regarding metaphors, beliefs, experiences, and familiar sayings or folklore as content from which to question

assumptions of the neutrality of knowledge. Explain what it means and how you see the meaning played out in your experiences. Provide a link to a website with an image that you feel conveys the idea.

**DIALOGIC RESPONSE:** For response to another there are so many possibilities. The dialogic task is not to see something in a negative way but to see beyond the surface layer of the website selected to communicate multiple meanings of the saying. Focus more on the linked site and interpret the visual culture of that site in terms of messages (without setting up a dualism of negative and positive) in regards to race, gender, and/or social class. Find new ways to interpret what may appear as familiar visual culture of the linked website, that is, construct narratives about the visual culture speculating on what it might suggest to various intersections of race, gender, sexuality, age, socio-economic class, and other positionalities.

### **Question Assumptions and Beliefs: Making Familiar Unfamiliar**

Qualitative researcher, Nancy Naples (2003) posits “a reflective dialogic process can offer a context in which conflicts in interpretation are revealed and, more importantly, renegotiated in a more egalitarian fashion than is found in traditional social science methodology or in other approaches to activist research” (p. 201). Two excerpts from the dialogue of preservice art educators in 2010 provide an example of how the dialogue itself functioned to question beliefs and assumptions.

**Ugandan participant:** *I always had two impressions of the USA: My first impression of the USA was a place dogged with violence, shootings, and intolerance towards minorities. ... The other side was an ideal place to live, whereby everyone seemed well off. ... PARADOX indeed. I have always torn myself between what impression to go by and which one to discard.*

**United States participant:** *I too find myself making certain assumptions of places I have never been. For some reason, I always seem to put the United States above everyone else but I know this is wrong of me to do because I do not have the experiences to do so. ... I hope that someday I will be able to rid my uninformed views of other countries and get the chance to travel and experience a different culture.*

My use of terms *Ugandan* and *United States* are oversimplifications of the subjectivity of each participant, but is used here to emphasize dialogue about perceptions of two countries by those who had not traveled or lived in the other country,

and, in some cases, had not previously had a conversation with anyone from the nation, not a resident.

### **Marabou Stork Example**

As a facilitator of Transcultural Dialogue, I posted photos that I took of a large bird on the Makerere University campus in Kampala, Uganda, where I taught in 2010; and the photos elicited dialogue. Those on the Kampala campus, familiar with the Marabou Stork, described that the Marabou Stork is a menace with its natural process of creating toxicity as a *supertaster*, yet co-exists with the students. The Ugandan students know not to sit, stand, or walk under the huge nests of the Marabou Stork as its droppings burn human skin.

Photographs of the Marabou Stork included in the art by one team became symbolic of perceptions expressed in the dialogue of the United States as a superpower. The analogy was that the U.S. consumes, like the Marabou Stork, and then discards what is not useful. Unintentionally, yet due to the United States' size and appetite, the lack of discernment poisons the earth and relationships with others.

### **Dialogue is the Content: Whose Subjectivity? What Knowledge is Assumed?**

The dialogue generates the content for collaborative artworks. Organize participants into small groups of four with a minimum of two from each place to collaboratively create art.

After the work is created and posted online for further dialogue, in this case we used the free application *VoiceThread* to have audio and text comments surround the art, participants specifically responded to these two questions:

- How is subjectivity constructed in the image, and whose subjectivity is constructed?
- What prior knowledge is assumed?

The question on subjectivity concerns looking at oneself in relation to the image, and recognizing that a position of subjectivity is constructed in the relational spaces between viewer, image, maker, and context. The feminist epistemological quest is to

stimulate difference in interpretations and to situate knowledge within specific contexts from which meanings or significations reside. Thus process aligns with transformational multicultural educator and scholar Ana Louise Keating's (2007) work in which she advocates for "interconnectivity as a theoretical and pedagogical framework for social change" (p. 2). Difference defined within this framework is not "a deviation *from* an unmarked norm but as interrelated *with* this norm" (KEATING, 2007, p. 18). Moreover, transcultural dialogue can "use these differences to generate complex commonalities" (KEATING, 2007, p. 16).

### **Empowerment Emerges from Opportunities to be Heard and to Choose, Becoming Self-aware, and Exerting Agency through Meta-tagging**

As critical methodology, the purpose of Transcultural Dialogue is for "a reflexive discourse constantly in search of an open-ended, subversive, multivoiced, participatory epistemology" (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 2008, p. x). For a pedagogical process to stimulate reflexive dialogue, validation through dialogic activities and art creation in the learning environment of the cultural knowledge and experiences of individual difference is necessary. Valuing experiential knowledge and reflexivity, while centering difference and challenging assumptions and stereotypes, can lead to transformative learning and empowerment in the collaborative and reflective process of the Transcultural Dialogue project. Empowerment emerges from a sense of self-worth, and opportunities to be heard and to choose. Transformative learning theory (CRANTON & KUCUKAYDIN, 2012; HOGGAN, 2014) defines emancipatory knowledge as self-awareness through critical self-reflection that liberates from societal inscriptions of gender, race, and socio-economic class stereotypes.

Working with theoretical understandings of transformative learning and empowerment as curricular goals, I designed the Transcultural Dialogue project to elicit self-awareness from the process of challenging others' representations of how participants in the project see themselves. An example of my own experience of self-awareness came from visiting a friend's family in southern Uganda, in which I was clearly referred to as White (muzungu), but my gender was not defined by the village's cultural practices segregating men and women from spaces and activities. I was outside the gender constructions and treated as androgynous because, as a foreigner

and professor, I could not be situated within the traditional female gender roles in this cultural context. Placing myself in an unfamiliar cultural context challenged my familiar self-knowing. The facilitation of Transcultural Dialogue, by participating in the dialogue, can model and guide revelations of self-awareness from the cultural practices that inscribe, confine, and, at times, oppress some people and privilege others. The process of facilitation is to find and reveal connections, contentions, and cultural contexts in the participants' posts. This can be done with meta-tagging.

Most social networking applications such as blogs, Twitter, Instagram, FlickrR, Google+, and many others, enable meta-tagging the commentary such as with a hashtag, which is a kind of metadata tag marked by the prefix # and referred to as the "hash" symbol, followed by a word, phrase or hyperlink. Participatory tagging of content in the online dialogue requested of Transcultural Dialogue participants will produce new epistemological constellations that can lead to transformative learning. The multilogues involve reflection and agency in naming through acts of tagging text and images to reveal taboo or *unmarked* social constructs.

### **Transformative Learning**

The prompts for Transcultural Dialogue generate transformative learning such as evident in this student response:

*I am obviously not very good at taking someone else's perspective. It seems that my interpretation of someone else's ideas and beliefs reveals more about my own beliefs than theirs. Even in my effort not to stereotype I have never-the-less done exactly that. My history and experiences have influenced my opinions of others and my ignorance has become clear. Thank you for sharing those details about your family; it makes [me] reconsider completely my previous response. (October 2011)*

Transformative learning involves an activating event that exposes a discrepancy between what a person has assumed to be true and what has been experienced (CRANTON & KUCUKAYDIN, 2012). Transcultural Dialogue with prompts to discuss metaphors and sayings that participants are familiar and discussing how the metaphors relate or do not relate to their lives is a way to interpret new meanings to what is familiar to the students and their everyday activities (HOGGAN, 2014). Embodied and relational art developed by small groups participating in Transcultural Dialogue from their meta-analysis through tagging and intra-action, makes privilege,

power, and oppression visible by reframing and, thereby, transforming what seems normal in participants' daily lives.

### **Intra-action of Dialogue**

Intra-action refers to understanding the world from within and as part of it, an intra-dependence of actions (BARAD, 2007). Evident from the intra-action of dialogue about cultural practices by a group of people from different cultures, it can become apparent how differences materialize. Intra-action is inclusive of differences and reveals interdependence.

### **Positionality and Situated Knowledge in Transcultural Dialogue**

Gender, race, socio-economic class, and sexuality, among other socio and biological conditions, position individuals according to dominant societal inscriptions regardless of how individuals perceive themselves (ALCOFF, 1988; KNIGHT & DENG, 2016; WALDRON, 2017). Because one's positionality is in relationship to situations and locations of power and privilege in any given situation, being aware of how one is positioned (e.g., superpower/disenfranchised; centered/marginalized, privileged/oppressed) can be useful in creating art as a means to recognize and counter injustice. A visual example of positionality are two gray rectangles, one inside the other in which the gradient reverses on the larger encompassing rectangle. While the inside rectangle is the same gray, in different contexts the gray appears to be darker on one end and lighter on the other end.

Transcultural Dialogue in consideration of positionality and situated knowledge intentionally includes the vantage points of those who have been excluded from knowledge production, reveals the perspectives of those in positions of power, and explains and accounts for differences between situated vantage points. To do so, facilitator strategies include prompting participants to expose the unmarked, re-envision how marked, and reveal what is absent.

### **Speculative Standpoint**

Speculative standpoint is to understand where you are situated or positioned, along with speculating on trajectories if things continue as they are, and imagining

embodying futures and different ways of knowing through art. Creativity as a social process in Transcultural Dialogue projects, which collaboratively create art from dialogue, is a form of visual translation and can convey many different *ways of knowing* micro and macro cultural practices; and to envision sustainable futures. For example, from the standpoint of a numerical system in which 10 is the base,  $1 + 1 = 2$ . However, from a base two digital computational system of “on or off”,  $1 + 1 = 10$ . From a social science heterosexual procreation system  $1 + 1 = 3$ . In an incorporating system, if understood to join together  $1 + 1 = 1$ . In a conflict system in which there is mutual destruction  $1 + 1 = 0$ . Sharing these mathematical configurations based in different systems help to alert participants in Transcultural Dialogue to search for cultural systems in which what may seem like objective fact is, in fact, only true within that cultural system and from a specific positionality. Thus, knowledge is situated in cultural systems.

### **Different Ways of Knowing**

Place, memory, and sensory experiences are different ways of knowing that offer rich sources for Transcultural Dialogue. Facilitators might introduce art such as the examples on this slide of Australian Aboriginal paintings of relationships to past, present, and future; Chilean *arpilleras* made from sewing and gluing fabrics to convey injustice, and Lynne Hull’s environmental art that provides habitats for birds. These examples, among many others, encourage participants to collaboratively create art as intra-actions of relationships of different worldviews mined from their dialogue.

### **Diffraction Methodology**

By attending to diffractive patterns of difference, it is possible to discern what the differences are, how they matter, and for what and for whom (PRITCHARD & PROPHET, 2015). Critical to diffractive methodology is feminist performative rendering that makes visible through deflecting, as a means of interrupting, narrowly circumscribed normalizing effects of iterative social processes (BARAD, 2007). Such agency, that is a power to deflect socially enforced inscriptions, requires joining forces with others. An entanglement of difference, when welcomed, provides a strength that is similar to how single threads when woven together create a porous mesh that is

always in a state of flux shaped by the materiality, signification, and knowledges within and out of a specific place. This presentation on Transcultural Dialogue is important to theorizing creativity in place-based art education as performative rendering, entanglements, and intra-actions of relationships.

## Seeking to Understand

To conclude, I invite readers to consider the value of Transcultural Dialogue for eliciting micro cultural views that are specific and unique (i.e., they sustain difference), yet also are shared within or part of macro-cultural knowledge. The act of meaning-making from micro-cultural practices sustains as well as changes the macro-cultural systems. The process of seeking to understand is what is important in Transcultural Dialogue.

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