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Internalizing the Other: A cross cultural understanding in arts and education

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Abstract

Education, community interactions and the experience of the inner world that we all share through the sharing of culturally specific performing arts enable the transformation of “other/foreign” to the comprehensible with which we can personally identify, without fear or apprehension and even embrace. Connecting to others, from within our own cultural background expanding out to those less familiar is essential to inhabit a world where we live at ease within our global communities. An opportunity to enter into the cultural space of others dissolves the defensiveness of fear of the “other” and enables a sense of security and the happiness of connection, understanding and even celebration of sharing a larger human landscape. Cross cultural education, interactions and carefully framed introductions to cross cultural essence through performing arts build understandings that can go beyond the intellectual to a more intrinsic, even visceral, connection.

Joseph Campbell said “*To change the world Change the metaphor*”. Another theory that stuck with him is that happiness isn't personal – it's relational. Study after study has found that the answer is – in two words – other people. While we all know this to be true, the challenge is to extend this understanding from the warm caring relationships and high levels of trust we strive for in our immediate circle of family and friends to our wider communities in ever expanding inclusiveness of world communities to strive to eliminate the reservations and suspicions of “other” as we come to appreciate diversities as not intrinsically dissimilar from ourselves.

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On a previous visit to Bhutan over 30 years ago I had the opportunity to witness a ceremony in which Bhutanese from across the country gathered in patient rows as a clairvoyant lama told each person that they had been the parent, spouse or sibling of those on either side of them in the gathering. The functional result, whether or not one believed in the spiritual truth of the exercise, was that each individual then felt the trust and care normally reserved for immediate family members for others who had been strangers from far flung communities a moment before. The differences of dialect, local custom and practices paled in the connections created.

Over the past 35 years my work as performing artist and educator has revealed the importance and possibilities of inner transformation through facilitating the sharing of cultural metaphors. The inner world that we all share can be experienced as the apparent diversities are explored, understood and appreciated. The pathways to achieve this are as varied as the cultural “onions” to be unpeeled. Here, my intention is to share a few of the pathways I have used toward this aim.

My initial belief that coming to India from the United States to study a classical performing arts genre would be an excellent way to enter into the culture was borne out by eventually having the opportunity to make it accessible to those both within and outside of the culture. As Indian classical dance traditions arose from a spiritual consciousness rather than a simple aim of entertainment, the artist has the option of going beyond the modern concert setting to create a sacred space and communicate metaphysical meaning. The shared experience of an audience, in a live performance existing in a moment of time, created in conjunction with the performing artist or artists is important enough. Beyond this, the interpretation of text through movement enables an emotional, even visceral, understanding that goes beyond intellectual understanding. The artist’s intention can be to serve as a conduit to transform the audience through an experience of metaphysical love, truth and beauty. The specifics of aesthetics

and philosophy function as a framework and palette to communicate through a living and growing tradition that has already been refined over centuries and even millennia.

Without going into technical details, the fact that classical Indian dance forms balance pure movement with dramatic interpretations of ancient, medieval and modern texts can communicate on many levels to any audience; uninitiated or connoisseurs, villagers or scholars, children or theatergoers, Western college students or devotees in a temple. The key is to express the content through the form, rather than “leaning” on the form. Ideally, the artist should be able to interpret and communicate the poetry without presuming that the audience knows or can understand the language of the text, which is quite often the case these days. A brief, clear introduction is all that is needed for audiences to have enough of a “hook” to stay involved in following the performance.

Besides the obvious importance of keeping the shared imbedded cultural metaphors present and alive within India, or any country, in a fast changing world, the performing arts can also be one of the most effective ways of communicating culture internationally. Yet it is critically important that cross-cultural performances are framed in ways to provide deeper understandings into their cultural import beyond mere colourful spectacle. Sensitive introductions can create a cultural context for the presentation of folk traditions; succinct background of philosophy and movement vocabulary of dramatic interpretations are essential for the “aha” of connection. For example, in the West dance is not commonly connected to spiritual consciousness and sacred and profane love have long been separated in the prevalent systems of belief. If the danced poetry is about a heroine making elaborate preparations to meet her lover, secretly leaving her home in the night and then pining till dawn as her beloved has a tryst with another, it is essential to add that the heroine is a metaphor for the soul seeking union with the divine and that her yearned for lover, the

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unknowable ultimate reality in the form of a charming lover, can never belong to one alone.

The cross-cultural understanding through performance can be greatly enhanced by sponsoring arts bodies, universities, museums, government bodies, etc. making the effort to schedule lecture-demonstrations as another interaction that draws on both right and left sides of the brain to reach both heart and mind for more levels of connection. A one hour workshop for school children or university dance students will lead to discovery of muscles and different ways to feel energy and space that they will never forget. Just as seeing a craft making process enables an individual from another culture to “see” the craft, attempting to move within another physical tradition creates a respect and understanding that no amount of words could communicate.

When we begin to understand the “other” we, of course, learn about ourselves. This is a vital part of seeing that what we unreflectively consider innate may well be one of a variety of cultural choices, not the “givens” we have taken them for. It is easy to imagine the delight of school children seeing their peers and teachers struggling in an unfamiliar movement language, or college dance majors discovering that their coordination, strength and flexibility are actually culture specific; something they never would have considered before. A wonderful set of circumstances allowed me to have an academic group in Pakistan make an effort to perform some Odissi classical Indian dance movements and gestures. Afterwards I discovered that a few of the male participants from Peshawar had never even seen dance in their lives, let alone danced themselves. The shining eyes of a veiled participant, and her greeting of “*Namaste*” when we passed, exemplify the happiness of cross cultural connection in many ways.

The younger the age that awareness and education about other cultures starts, the more likely one is to incorporate empathy, and potentially even trans national cultural identities, into one’s own

internal landscape. Sesame Street, which airs in 120 countries, has Big Bird and South Africa's Zikwe promoting cultures across the globe with a new Putumayo Kids CD of songs and Muppets from every corner of the world. If you were fortunate enough to grow up in a country that already had Sesame Street, then Kermit the Frog and Cookie Monster are part of your internal world. Children growing up with the new global Sesame Street may be happier in the world they inhabit with the new metaphor of Muppets from all over the world.

Cultural performances for children have a profound effect of their connection to the world in which they inhabit and therefore their sense of unity with others. If they “discover” cultures other than their own only at the young adult or college level, these cultures are unlikely to enter into seeds of a shared mythology and aesthetics with the greater world. Being able to identify/empathize with another’s culture widens ones ability to understand ones own and is quite different from experiencing other’s as exotica. Crossing over from exotica to “like me but different” extends ones sense of self. Parents, schools, governments and N.G.O.’s should multiply to opportunities to include children in experiencing and understanding cultural performances and it would create a world community based on more intrinsic values than offered as part of globalized consumer values.

Around 30 years ago, the United States provided national funding for cross-cultural education for the arts in the schools. Primarily aimed at reducing tensions through cultural performances by the predominant minority communities, Afro-American and Hispanic, other cultures were widely represented wherever capable artists were available. Once a soloist or group auditioned a presentation tailored for school age children in front of educational specialists and a willing school’s audience, they would be scheduled for approximately fifty presentations over six weeks with pre and post performance materials created for schools to broaden the experience.

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Over two or three years the Los Angeles Unified School District program sent me to over 200 schools to introduce Indian culture through dance to approximately 70,000 students. Every school had 8 different cultural performances per school year. These India through its Dance lecture demonstrations hopefully left the understanding that India had a rich and varied culture with textiles, ornaments, crafts and performing arts changing across neighboring regions. While teachers may have harbored stereotypes of a land of poverty and beggars, their students came away from this celebration of wonder and diversity with knowledge of a place where the Gods dance; where the earth is formally respected before we perform on "Her"; where the desire for wisdom to smooth our path before new endeavors or studies is articulated through the metaphor of a chubby young elephant; where dances may move in continuous circles, curves and elegant figure eights or another classical genre may accent sculptural poses with ankle bells adding to orchestral accompaniment of the dance. Masks, embroideries, marionettes, percussion instruments and costumes inspired by 200 year old royal visions "Change the metaphor", as Joseph Campbell said, "To change the world".

Witnessing pre-pubescent Balinese dancers perform a subtle and sophisticated dance that they would be too old to perform in a few years taught me, at the age of 9, that the age restrictions on sophistication of cultural expression in my own culture were just that, limited to my own culture and not universal. The school program introducing American school children to Indian Culture through Dances of India was presented to another 200 schools across rural Michigan and urban Detroit, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, up scale Beaverton, Oregon, Louisiana's Shreveport and New Orleans Schools and San Diego's Mexican border schools of Chula Vista hopefully changed some metaphors for young minds. So many artists in every part of the world would be as thrilled to share their art with young audiences as the youth would value experiencing them. This is fertile ground to enhance the happiness, quality of life and connection to other peoples of the world we share.

A parallel path of promoting cross cultural understanding is by integrating cross curricular material woven into all academic subjects in schools, with vertical articulation to build these grade by grade. A model K-12 program has been created at the American Embassy School, New Delhi to introduce the host country-India's culture. This is an interactive and dynamic curriculum designed to impart a comprehensive knowledge base and develop positive attitudes about India, a “new” country with a 5000 year old history. Based on an articulated K-12 scope and sequence, the curriculum is taught through scheduled classes, interdisciplinary integration at all levels, and proactive community partnerships.

The purpose of this cultural integration is to:

- Foster an understanding and appreciation of India,
- Create an awareness of cultural diversity and commonality,
- Enhance students’ understanding of their roles as global citizens.

Classroom and special subject teachers have access to an Indian Studies Resource Center which has a wealth of realia and resources for classes as well as being an idea bank of resources for parents. Cultural programs, films, guest speakers, museum and other field trips, interactions with children of other cultures, are made available for every age level. There is an annual Discover India Focus Week for the Elementary School that offers exhibitions, hands-on craft, drama, dance and music activities, an Indian book fair and other appropriate curriculum based changing themes that have included in past years: Textiles of India, India's Contribution to the World, Performing Arts of India, Science and Technology: Old and New, Crafts of India, Regions of India, Architecture Designs of India, India Through Stories and Legends, and Animals and The Natural Habitat.

K-12 Indian studies program outcomes

All students will:

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- Develop appreciation of geographical and cultural diversity as well as unifying features of India.
- Understand the history and beliefs related to major festivals and celebrations.
- Explore the traditional and contemporary literary, visual and performing arts.
- Understand the impact of significant individuals and historical events on India.
- Communicate in basic Hindi.
- Pursue individual interests using India as a focus.
- Understand basic systems of belief in India.
- Recognize ecological and environmental issues as they relate to India.
- Understand the government and political system.
- Become aware of India's current issues
- Gain an understanding of India's contribution to the world.
- Understand the importance of and be involved in community service.
- Gain understanding of Indian economic factors.
- Make connections between home and host country.
- Experience India through activities outside the school.
- Recognize continuity (traditions) and change (modern systems) in India

A wonderful starting point to enable the transformation of "other/foreign" to the comprehensible is sharing examples of how strange we may appear to other communities when we lay in the sun for hours until we turn red and peel, bathe in bathtubs immersed in the grime of our entire body, and other examples. This shift of perspective, without clear right or wrong can eliminate the presumptions and even hostilities toward practices that we don't understand.

Permission to question, wonder and understand frees us to tolerate what we don't appreciate and to connect and enjoy what

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we do appreciate once we understand. Cross cultural education, interactions and carefully framed introductions to cross cultural essence through performing arts throughout our lives increases the happiness of an expanding internalization of other.