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Self as Text: Adaptations of Honors Practice

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City as Text™, the experiential learning program developed by the NCHC Honors Semesters Committee, has been adopted and adapted by hundreds if not thousands of educational institutions throughout the United States and beyond. Having served on the Honors Semesters Committee, I exported this learning strategy to Switzerland when I took a teaching position in the International Baccalaureate Program of the Collège du Léman in Geneva. I adapted City as Text™ for multi-disciplinary college preparatory students in Europe, and that adaptation might now serve in turn as a model for experiential learning in honors programs and colleges back in the United States. The focus and link between the City as Text™ experiences on two different continents and at two different levels of education will be what I call "Self as Text." The experiential learning experience that is the extension of and variation on NCHC's City as Text™ involved an educational trip from Geneva to Zürich taken by eighty-five International Baccalaureate Theory of Knowledge students accompanied by eight multi-disciplinary teachers. The Theory of Knowledge course serves to encourage eleventh- and twelfth-grade students, through an interdisciplinary inquiry into "what it means to know," to gain both a summative and forward-looking perspective on their education and on themselves as knowers. The course is most effectively taught by means of active learning, exploring essential questions that challenge students to discover and analyze the major ways in which we know and to make interconnections between these modes of knowing and the subject areas they have been studying.

The trip served the purpose of initiating the eleventh-graders into the course. The students had been told that they would be going to two exhibits. The first was Gunther von Hagens' *Body Worlds*, an exhibit of artfully displayed plasticized human cadavers, skinned to reveal (as the exhibit brochure announced) their "interior faces" of skeleton, muscles, nerves, and organs. The second was *Buddha's Paradise* at the Rietberg Museum in Zürich, displaying two-thousand-year-old Buddhist art. The students also knew that most of us would be eating dinner at a restaurant in Zürich where you eat in the dark. Finally, the students knew that they would be required to produce a criteria-based, graded, reflective essay on the trip activities.

The students, generally between sixteen and seventeen years old, were a multi-lingual and multi-cultural group, and for the most part they were used to

that context. All spoke English but in many cases not as their mother tongue and generally in addition to several other languages. As IB students, they were an academically select group. The challenge for us teachers in planning the trip curriculum was to determine what kinds of tasks would engage students already well-versed in diversity and difference. What kinds of activities would challenge them to step even further outside of themselves and gain a yet wider perspective on self/other/world? Martha Nussbaum has expressed this challenge eloquently in her concept of "narrative imagination" or "the invitation to become, to a certain extent, philosophical exiles from our own ways of life, seeing them from the vantage point of the outsiders and asking the questions an outsider is likely to ask about their meaning and function" (Gillison 34). I see this questioning of self, what I call "Self as Text," as also the end goal of the mapping done in NCHC's City as Text™.

In planning the trip curriculum, we were fortunate to have a large choice of exhibits in Zürich to select from, including both *Body Worlds* and *Buddha's Paradise*, but as a creative and motivated team of teachers we would also like to take some credit for having chosen to juxtapose these two exhibits. As is the case in many team initiatives to develop a curriculum, a blending of ideas and possibilities took place among us, a creative and seemingly magical process that was not random but intensely purposeful work. As soon as we learned of these two exhibits, we saw the potential the combination held. How many of our students, we asked ourselves, had already been to any of the controversial *Body Worlds* exhibits? None, as it turned out. How many were familiar with Buddhism in the context of Gandhara, Pakistan, and Bamiyan, Afghanistan, two thousand years ago? Several knew that giant Buddha statues had been destroyed by the Taliban, a fact that was also a central component of the exhibition; however, learning about the earlier historical context of these sculptures and engaging with issues of who decides whether to destroy or preserve the past, and according to what criteria, was something new. Newer still was comparing and contrasting this exhibit with that of *Body Worlds* and issues it raised about the preservation and/or destruction of the human body and, some would say, the soul.

Once we had realized the potential of the exhibits, the rest of the planning soon followed. Since the two exhibits conveyed information first of all through the sense of sight, we imagined a third activity that could not be experienced visually. We decided to take them to a restaurant in Zürich called "Blindekuh," or "Blind Man's Bluff." The restaurant is completely dark. You enter, are led to your table, and are served a three-course meal in total darkness. We chose not to reveal to the students in advance that the waiters and waitresses were all blind. We were sure that the "Blindekuh" would require some intense and unfamiliar mapping on the part of the students.

In subsequent reflections on our experience of both the trip and its planning, I have repeatedly come back to the process of mapping. In the NCHC monograph *Place as Text: Approaches to Active Learning*, Bernice Braid

addresses the crucial role of mapping, by now a core concept of honors teaching and learning. Students and teachers engaged in a City as Text™ assignment, she says, are asked to observe a place and its people in their given context—what Braid calls "focused observation" (16). She says that the questions are: "Whom do I watch? Why? What do I expect? Why? Am I ever surprised? By what?" (15). Braid stresses the importance of knowing how I, the observer, respond. In the end, mapping becomes a metaphor for a personal voyage of discovery, of learning how to stand on foreign ground and find a new touchstone, a place on which to stand, a new perspective from which to see. True learning brings forth a paradigm shift in our own journeys of discovery—a new way of seeing that is a new way of thinking and of being within ourselves, with others, and in the world. This magic worked itself out through our mapping and planning of the trip to Zürich as well as the transformations the trip brought forth in our students, who, like their college counterparts, learned how to ask new questions, re-learned how to be surprised by the unexpected, and responded with their own magic mirror of "Self as Text."

But let's go back to those students on the train. As background information for their voyage of discovery, we had provided students with a handout to orient them to the two exhibits and the restaurant. The handout began with the introduction to the *Buddha's Paradise* exhibit from the webpage, followed by a list of orienting yet largely open-ended questions and a page of key ideas or "unifying themes" about Buddhism. We also provided a set of questions to use for reflection on the Buddha exhibit, focusing on the ethics of destruction or preservation of the past.

After having seen *Buddha's Paradise* and looked into her magic mirror of "Self as Text," my student Ethar Abd Al-Shakour wrote: "The past should be left for the future generations to look back to and reflect. . . . As for me, I wouldn't want to destroy any part of me for the future me because everything I have and am is what makes me *me* and what makes me unique and different from everyone else." Ethar's words demonstrate the active, engaged learning that went on for this sixteen-year-old student. She reflected on the impact of the contemporary destruction of an over two-thousand-year-old tradition and made a personal connection between the ethics of the preserving or destroying the past and the value of sustaining her own identity; this is important learning at any age.

Another student, Rebecca, always a strong defender of her faith, reflected: "I learned a lot about the religion itself, as well, and what I learned from it is not to agree or disagree, but to understand and accept different beliefs." This was no trivial statement for Rebecca, who was empowered through her active learning experience to lead others not only from the perspective of her traditional faith but also from a perspective of tolerance that is vital to twenty-first-century global citizenship.

Second on our background handout was a copy of the *Body Worlds* exhibit's mission statement, followed by a page I had put together called "An Assembly of Random Thoughts," which could or could not apply to this exhibit.

These thoughts included: "Is it art? Is it science? Is it awesome? Is it disturbing? 'The Devil made me do it,' said Faust. Cultural perspectives on THE DEAD—are you grateful?" The juxtaposition of these ideas was meant to be jarring and to trigger creative reflection on the part of the students.

Diana Baranga responded: "The extent to which science has driven human knowledge is admirable. . . . However, the exhibition was also disturbing. . . . It is true that we use technology for the progression of humankind, but how far should we be allowed to go?" Her question echoes many like it that have been asked about this controversial exhibit and asked throughout history, often after a horrendous event like the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The key to knowledge is learning how to ask the right questions, and Diana ranks as an outstanding student in the questions she raises. I often feel humbled by her philosophical, ethical, and deeply felt contributions to class discussions. She did not ask her essential question about human knowledge lightly.

The third component of the background handout related to the restaurant, and it was a page of questions leading to reflections on sight and light followed by a nineteenth-century poem by John Godfrey Saxe entitled "The Blind Men and the Elephant." While the ancient story that this poem is based on is well-known, not all of the students had heard this tale that underscores a basic honors education call to consider claims as well as counter-claims, to understand that our knowledge and indeed our 'truths' are interpretive in nature, and to realize that any interpretation is one among many and capable of being changed.

In his reflection on the restaurant experience, Jeremy Dejardin noted: "In fact, the only people capable of serving the food in pitch black are blind people. . . . I started having images projected into my mind's eye of who and what was there. I think my hearing was the sense that deceived me the most because I was focusing too much on it so that I heard things which weren't real." Through his experiential learning at the "Blindekuh," Jeremy looked at the reflection in the mirror of self/other/world and no longer found in it the same conventional images. Instead, like many artistic and literary counterparts, he had somehow gone through the magic mirror and come out the other side, where "who and what was there" were "images projected into . . . [his] mind's eye" and he heard things that "weren't real." In this dark yet quite vivid and marvelous world, only the blind could "see." For Jeremy, Self as Text took on mythical proportions in the "Blindekuh."

I think all who went to the "Blindekuh" during our discovery tour to Zürich would agree that, along with the exhibits, it offered stunning new perspectives. Most of us who went on the trip came back with the sense of having learned an incredible amount about ourselves, others, and the world. Long past the debriefings in our large group and in our various small classes, the Zürich experiences lived on as a reference point in many different contexts. The bonds that had been formed remained strong as well and continued to work their magic for students and teachers.

As teachers we felt that we had succeeded in what we had set out to do. The students had come through their experiential learning orientation to the course and its emphasis on critical, reflective, and transformative thinking with flying colors. In the spirit of a City as Text™ "voyage of discovery" (Braid 14) and of Nussbaum's "narrative imagination" (Gillison 34), the students had brought about their own paradigm shifts and found new touchstones of reality, new eyes with which to see themselves and the world. We could indeed call this process "Self as Text," which is a life-long process that both college honors education and pre-college adaptations of it aim to promote. At all stages of our lives, responsible knowers can never stop seeking new perspectives, new eyes from which to see. Through our adaptation of an NCHC practice, our college preparatory students had successfully gone on a communal and individual voyage of discovery. In their reflective essays they later articulated, recollected, and preserved this particular voyage in their narrative imagination. Through their adventure in experiential learning they had ventured outside of themselves, scrutinized evidence and considered multiple points of view. In dialogue with community and through personal reflection, they had questioned their basic values and integrated new ways of thinking and being into their lives.

As their teachers, we felt rewarded for our efforts. We had stimulated and supported our students' intellectual, social, moral, and emotional growth, helping prepare them well for the future journey of higher education, college honors, and continued life-long learning. All it had taken was work and dedication on the part of a group of teachers who, like our students, were willing to embark on a journey of "Self as Text" and make the most of it. In the spirit of honors teaching and learning at any level, everyone had come home the richer for having left. Together we had forged strong communal bonds, charted exciting new intellectual territory, and set new personal goals. We had deepened our understanding of ourselves, of each other, and of the global culture that calls on us to be capable and effective leaders.

City as Text™ is innately a tripartite process that encompasses Self as Text, City as Text™, and World as Text. In honors practices and their many adaptations, we are empowering future leaders of a new, demanding, socially just, and globally sustainable tomorrow. Part of the magic of "Self as Text" is that the mirror is large and multi-faceted; it invites us to embark on a life-long journey where all of us can find and re-find, invent and re-invent, ways of learning and seeing and knowing in ever-expanding contexts.

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