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# Dancing across difference: arts and community-based interventions as intercultural education

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## **Abstract**

There is an ever-present need to foster and maintain intercultural competence in today's teaching force. Although much research details how to do this, few studies document how to utilize arts and community-based (ACB) approaches to align with the goals of intercultural education. This qualitative study examines reflections from 61 teacher learners who participated in an ACB intervention with community partners while enrolled in an undergraduate or graduate course focused on serving students with immigrant/refugee backgrounds. The aim of this study was to find out what the characteristics of good intercultural education are, as well as how ACB approaches can provide students with authentic experiences working across difference. Using thematic analysis to examine written reflections on the interventions, the authors found that in various ways and to various degrees, the ACB approach allowed students to find a common language as they grew in their content knowledge, created a sense of vulnerability that led to increased empathy for their students and families, and compelled the students to begin to challenge oppression and work towards social change.

**Keywords:** Arts-based, community-based education, intercultural education

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## Introduction

Due to increased mobility of people and the globalized multicultural nature of the world (Perry and Southwell 2011, 453), the need to foster and maintain intercultural understanding and competence in the teaching force is self-evident. Although a number of studies focus on developing interculturality of preservice/in-service teachers (e.g., Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey 2002; Byram, Nichols, and Stevens 2001; Dervin and Liddicoat 2013), few studies have explored how this can be done in regular coursework through the use of arts and community-based (ACB<sup>1</sup>) education. As such, the present paper fills this gap by exploring how ACB can be employed to give novice<sup>2</sup> teachers authentic experiences in intercultural education classrooms. Our study was guided by the following research questions:

- (1) What are the characteristics of good intercultural experiences in intercultural education classrooms?
- (2) How can ACB approaches provide students with authentic experiences working across difference?

To answer these questions, we explored ACB approaches in three different courses, all related to preparing teacher learners to become interculturally competent teachers of students with immigrant/refugee backgrounds. We then collected data in the form of written reflections and used these to gauge the benefits of the different ACB experiences as well as how to make them better.

## What is good intercultural education?

*Intercultural competence* is the ability to effectively and appropriately interact in an intercultural situation or context (Bennett 2008; Deardorff 2006). *Interculturality*, which is key to fostering intercultural

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1. We coined this term to indicate the use of the arts and/or community-based learning into intercultural education.
  2. We use the term 'teacher learners' to indicate the mix of preservice and beginning teachers that were the participants.

understanding is 'the set of processes through which relations between different cultures are constructed' whereby 'the aim is to enable groups and individuals ... to forge links based on equity and mutual respect' (Leclercq 2003, 9).

Recent theories on the development of interculturality advise educators to consider a 'liquid realism approach' (Dervin 2011, 2016) in which teachers and students attend to their own prejudices (e.g., ethnocentrism, stereotypes, generalizations) as well as their emotional response to difference (called *intercultural sensitivity*) as they continue to develop intercultural competencies (Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman 2003).

Unfortunately, much of intercultural education practice in the US and abroad tends to accentuate rather than undermine existing social and political hierarchies (Gorski 2008, 516). Scholars such as Paul Gorski contend that good intercultural educators must 'avoid the sorts of cultural awareness activities that *other* or essentialize non-dominant groups or that, absent a commitment to social justice, require dominated groups to make themselves ever more vulnerable for the educational benefit of the privileged' (522). They must also forego 'acknowledge the power imbalances, both individual and systemic' and 'avoid facilitating dialogue experiences in which the least powerful participants are expected to teach their privileged counterparts about oppression' (523). Finally, intercultural educators must take a stand against domination, hegemony and marginalization and not claim to be neutral (523).

### **Arts and community-based approaches and intercultural education**

Many studies document 'the power of arts education in creating cooperative exploration and intercultural appreciation' and as a 'potential agent of change' (e.g., O'Farrell 2015, 372). John Dewey was one of the first to call attention to the role of the arts/ aesthetic experiences in enhancing perception and intensifying aspects of life to make them more meaningful (Dewey 1934, 304). Others, such as Doddington (2015, 64) note the central role that embodied aesthetic experience should have in arts education to 'shape and seek meaning from our lived experiences'.

Together with the scholars we cite here, we believe that art, as it is experienced, has the profound power and potential to create change, and to shape realities on the individual and societal level. As Dewey contends, 'Whatever path the work of art pursues, it, just because it is a full and intense experience, keeps alive the power to experience the common world in its fullness' (1934, 133). Art is the ultimate and the 'only media of complete and unhindered communication' that can occur between people 'in a world full of gulfs and walls that limit community of experience' (Dewey 1934, 109). Hence, it is fitting that ACB education take place within teacher education programs that center the development of interculturality since aesthetic experiences can fill in the gulfs and break down the walls when communicating across difference.

One way in which ACB education can shape lived experiences in intercultural education is through bringing communities together to foster intercultural dialogue and to act as an intercultural public pedagogy (Uhlig, Lewis, and Carpenter 2016). Several studies have shown the 'power and potential of the arts in transforming communities and impacting positive changes' (e.g., Leong 2014, 283) through a variety of community arts-based projects. O'Farrell (2015, 376) found that arts-based education can be a potent way in which to counter xenophobia 'in times when fear of the other remains a destructive force'. Lopes Da Silva and Villas-Boas (2006, 95–96) found that art education can be 'an important tool for promoting the aims of intercultural education' and addressing negative stereotypes, but it can also have a significant impact on intergroup relations and contribute to teaching students 'how to live together' (Ibid, 101), which is a principle aim of democratic education. Catalano & Leonard (2016) explored the capacity that dance and movement bring to discussion of controversial topics in divisive times, particularly when migrants/refugees are vilified or marginalized by powerful members of society for political purposes.

As two teacher educators with a range of formal training in the arts, as well as formal training in critical pedagogy and intercultural communication, we align our own work with the studies cited above, yet we regret that more studies on the development of intercultural education in teacher learners have not focused on combining intercultural education with some form of arts and community engagement. As John Dewey noted so eloquently:

Every art communicates because it expresses. It enables us to share vividly and deeply in meanings ... For communication is not announcing things ... Communication is the process of creating participation, of making common what had been isolated and singular ... the conveyance of meaning gives body and definiteness to the experience of the one who utters as well as to that of those who listen. (1934, 253)

As in the case of dramatic arts for example, they are said to have the ability to 'highlight issues and bring our attention to those complex aspects of human experiences that might otherwise be overlooked or simplified' (Mulvihill and Swaminathan 2020, 39)

## **Method**

As a theoretical-methodological position for this study then, we took up Sullivan's interpretation of art; that is, 'art in and of itself should be recognized as research, and as a site of meaning-making and knowledge construction'. Therefore, if a fundamental purpose of qualitative research is to make meaning of a phenomena or experience(s), then art is a powerful tool in the hands of those who have eyes to see its' potential and the skill to weld it in its various forms.

Therefore, we engaged in what Phelan and Nunan (2018) describe as, *arts practice research*. This orientation to the process of inquiry grants freedom and loosens prescriptions for the relationship between 'art' and 'research'. In such inquiry, 'artistic practices may be a key component of the research method, a part of the final thesis, or constitute the whole work' (p. 1). Within this qualitative study, arts practices inspired the conceptualization of, the activities, and the methods we used for data collection and analysis. Utilizing iterative inductive analysis (Bhattacharya 2017) of teacher learners' open-ended reflections and our own field notes as participant observers within the learning episodes created, we sought to explore and better understand human interactions, behaviors, relationships, and problems. This type of methodology engages the researchers in sustained and intensive experiences with participants (Van Manen 1990) (rather than collecting and organizing numbers and statistics). We were drawn to

a *reflection in action* approach which calls for 'a refined intuitive and artistic approach to thinking, experimenting, wondering, questioning, and evaluating simultaneously to the doing' (Mulvihill and Swaminathan 2020, 26).

In positioning ourselves as qualitative researchers and social agents within intercultural learning environments, it is essential that we reflect on our own biases and values that may shape our interpretations. I (Theresa Catalano) am a White woman, born and raised in the US. As a language teacher (and former elementary English as an additional language teacher), I speak multiple languages, am married to an immigrant, and have multilingual children who speak a language other than English at home. I have lived and worked in other countries, but always from a point of privilege. I am currently a professor of applied linguistics and second language education and I teach courses that focus on language education/linguistics, education and migration, and multilingualism. I (Amanda Morales) am a bicultural Latina, born to a Mexican American migrant worker father and a white mother who grew up in rural poverty. I was raised in the Midwest during a time when diasporic families sought assimilation to avoid discrimination; therefore, English was the dominant language in the home. And though I often am assumed to be a native Spanish speaker, I have struggled to develop fluency in my heritage language as an adult. I am currently a professor of multicultural and multilingual education that centers issues of social justice within PK-20 classrooms.

### ***Participants/context***

The participants from this study were students in three courses (one undergraduate, two graduate) the University of Nebraska-Lincoln which focused on students with immigrant/refugee backgrounds. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln is a middle-sized university located in the Midwest of the United States, and as a public land grant institution, it serves the state of Nebraska as well as many out of state and international students from around the world. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln is located in the city of Lincoln, which is a US government designated refugee resettlement site and hence the city has a

large refugee population for which it has gained national attention (see Mary Pipher's book *The Middle of Everywhere*). The first course (Intercultural Communication) took place in Spring 2017 and 2018. Both classes consisted of teacher learners, who were (or were preparing to be) either English as a second/additional language, world language, or K-12 teachers of various subject areas. The main goal of the course was to learn strategies for successful intercultural interactions with their students and families.

Theresa Catalano taught the course in 2017 (5 males/14 females). Of the 19 students, ages ranged from 19-mid-30s with one student in her early 50s. One identified as \*Moroccan with home languages (from hereon we will just list the languages) of Arabic and French), one as Black (English), one \*Guatemalan (Spanish), two \*Chinese (Mandarin), one South African American (Afrikaans/English), one Spanish (Spanish), and the rest as White, monolingual speakers of English. Amanda Morales taught the course in 2018. Her class was made up of 14 females and 4 males, ranging in age from 19 to mid-30's. Of the 18 students, one identified as \*Columbian (Spanish), one as Black (English), one as \*Chinese (Mandarin), one as \*Bahraini (Arabic), and two as \*Brazilian (Portuguese). The third group of participants (7 males, 17 females) were enrolled in the undergraduate course 'Teaching Multilingual Learners in the Content Areas'. Of the 24 students, most were between the ages of 19 and 24 with one student in her 40s. Two students identified as Latina, one Latino (all three Spanish), one Black (English), one Filipina (Filipino/English), one Iraqi-American (Arabic/English), and the rest as White, monolingual speakers of English. All of the students were proficient in English.

Students with asterisks by their name have lived in the US for 10 years or less, and the rest of the students lived most of their lives in the US. None of the students had taught before, and they came from a variety of content areas. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at our institution approved the project. In addition to the students enrolled in the courses described above, there were participants from the local or international community that also participated in the interventions, but this paper will focus only on data from students enrolled in the courses who gave their consent to be included in the study.



## ***Data collection***

All teacher learner participants were required to engage in one or more intercultural experiences in which they interacted with people from different cultural/ linguistic backgrounds from their own and to reflect on this experience as part of their regular coursework. The written reflections from these students as well as our field notes as participant observers, constitutes the data for this paper.

### *Dancing with Yazidi girls*

Yazidis are a Kurdish-speaking ethno-religious group indigenous to Northern Iraq, (as well as Syria and Iran) who were targeted for genocide by ISIS in 2014. I (Theresa Catalano) began volunteering with a local non-profit (Yezidi<sup>3</sup> International) in Fall 2016, where I worked with Yazidi girls in their *Dance Away* program (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJKw-n6JozE>). Through my interactions with the girls in the program, I saw potential for my students to volunteer and help the girls but also gain intercultural knowledge and skills. Therefore (with the approval of the program directors) I incorporated the Dance Away program as a required workshop activity for my intercultural communication class for Spring 2017.

For the class workshop activity, (between 12–15<sup>4</sup>) girls ages 6–12 were given a set of interview questions (See Appendix A) asking their parents to talk about why they left Iraq and about their experiences migrating to the United States. The girls shared the interview responses with the teacher learners (see Appendix B for instructions). We formed groups of several girls and several teacher learners and chose one story of focus (per group) to re-create in the form of dance. Group members then set out choreographing the dance together, taking care to represent abstract concepts such as emotions (e.g. sadness and fear) through their bodies.

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3. There are two possible spellings of this ethno-religious group — ‘Yazidi’ is the spelling is used by Yazda, another non-profit organization established in Lincoln, while ‘Yezidi’ is used by Yazidi International, the group with which the class interacted for the project.

4. Some girls came late, and others left early, so there was some confusion as to the number of girls present for the entire workshop.

In order to prepare participants for the activity, I provided both the Dance Away girls and the teacher learners (separately, several weeks before the project) with warm-up exercises demonstrating how to take concepts such as emotions and feelings and map them onto their bodies (Catalano and Leonard 2016). In addition, participants were shown how to get across an idea or message subtly, through the use of nuanced movements of their legs, feet, hands, and torso, and through teamwork in which they relied on each other's bodies for physical support and collaboration in meaning-making.

As in all the activities showcased in this study, the teacher educators (Theresa Catalano and Amanda Morales) participated with the students in order to ground them in Freirian (1997) notions of the student-teacher and teacher-student. In a sincere effort to counter the power imbalance between us as the researchers (teacher educators) and the participants (our students and guests), we utilized tenets of hooks', engaged pedagogy. This reciprocal dynamic in which teachers invite vulnerability by becoming students of their own pupils, simultaneously requires *and* fosters trust (Hooks 1994; Berry 2010). Similarly, the art-making process (its whimsy, uncertainty, and performativity) often functions to 'level the field', as it makes everyone involved, to some extent, vulnerable under the observing eye of others.

Once we re-created the dances, we performed them for each other and talked about them as a group, discussing various issues related to immigration in the process, some of which the teacher learners had been discussing already in our class. The teacher learners were then assigned to take a week to reflect on the experience, explaining how the activity contributed to the development of intercultural competence (see Appendix C).

### *2018: intercultural engagement with intensive English program students*

The Intensive English Program (IEP) supports international students in developing English language skills. In 2018, I (Amanda Morales) worked with the IEP coordinator to design a meaningful intercultural experience for both my teacher learners and a cohort of 30 IEP students from mainland China, Vietnam, Thailand and Columbia.

Given our time, and transportation constraints we hosted a single, 1.5 hour evening event on campus. On the night of the event, I

greeted the IEP students (who arrived first) and encouraged them to spread out in small clusters across the room. Soon after, the teacher learners arrived and were encouraged to sit in and around the IEP students. It is important to note here that in many cases, the teacher learners were one of only two non-IEP students at their tables. This forced even the most reticent teacher learners to engage with the IEP students.

Participants were welcomed, introduced to each other, and I then explained the goals (to practice communication, to be gracious, to listen closely, to share ideas) and the activities for the evening. The first activity, human BINGO, served as an ice breaker, as participants moved about the room finding people to talk to who fit descriptions within the squares on their BINGO cards. In the second activity, they were asked to engage in authentic conversations in table groups. They were given semi-structured prompts that asked them to respond – first, to surface level questions – then to increasingly more personal questions. For example as starter prompts, participants could show where they were born on a map, they could share their favorite songs from their phones, or teach their tablemates a common gesture or dance. As an example of a deeper level question, they asked each other to talk about their biggest challenge adjusting to life as a student on campus. These types of questions allowed for multiple entry points and did not position the IEP students as *exotic others*. All students had something to share from their personal experience.

This activity pushed teacher learners out of their comfort zones in many ways; particularly because the space was filled with many languages. The IEP students utilized their ability to translanguage (i.e. utilize all their languages in communication) and clarify concepts with peers before, during and after posing or answering questions. The activity generated dynamic dialog and joy as students made their best efforts to communicate ideas using their emerging language and intercultural communication skills. At the close of the evening, many participants exchanged contact information and committed to continuing future interactions. A week later the graduate students were asked to turn in a written reflection on the experience (see Appendix D for assignment instructions/ guidelines).

*2019: SLAM Poetry with Pakistani English teachers*

In September 2019 I (Theresa Catalano) was contacted by a student that worked in our university's intensive English program who was in charge of the U.S. Department of State's English Works! Program for visiting Pakistani English teachers as to whether I would allow them to come and observe my class. Seeing an opportunity for both groups to benefit, I asked if they could not just observe, but be part of the class. I then planned a three-hour class time which began with a cultural exchange in which students from both groups had the opportunity to ask any question they wanted about education or about cultural/ national differences, and get to know each other. Teacher learners (together with Pakistani visitors) were then divided into groups of 5–7 to discuss class readings on translanguaging pedagogy (García, Johnson, and Seltzer 2017) which encourages teachers to draw on the linguistic resources of their students as part of the learning process. Teacher learners talked with their Pakistani visitors about translanguaging (most were unfamiliar with this) and then were shown an example of translanguaging in slam poetry ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vkc\\_jfBUImk&t=49s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vkc_jfBUImk&t=49s)). They were then instructed to brainstorm themes from all conversations that day so far, and come up with a SLAM poem of their own using translanguaging in some way during the preparation and/or performance of the poem. Participants then spent an hour creating their poems and then performed them for each other.

Several unplanned events occurred during this three-hour time frame that contributed greatly to the participants' experiences. First, during the break, I played some Pakistani music. To my surprise, I had chosen a popular song and many of the Pakistani teachers began singing and dancing and my students clapped along. This added to the group dynamics and friendly atmosphere. In addition, after the SLAM poetry performances, the Pakistani visitors asked if they could have the last 10 minutes of the day to teach my students a Pakistani dance. This dancing ended the activity on a euphoric note, leaving many of the teacher learners with a positive reaction of the experience. They were then required to upload a reflection of their experiences one week after the activity (see Appendix E for assignment instructions/ guidelines).

### ***Data analysis***

Reflections on the above experiences were uploaded to the course website by the teacher learners. Both authors reviewed reflections from their courses separately after the courses were completed, and collected comments into a file for each course, inductively coding the data (Bhattacharya 2017), and highlighting narratives they felt revealed important aspects of the experiences. On 30 January 2020, the authors met to discuss codes and highlighted narratives, and to conduct a broader thematic analysis (Saldaña 2015) across data, in relation to the specific research questions.

### **Findings: what about engaged, arts-based education makes for good intercultural education?**

Six major themes were found, but due to the limited scope of this paper, we will focus on the three most prevalent; *ACB as a Common Language for Understanding Content, Empathy and Vulnerability*, and *Challenging Inequality and Oppression*. In our discussion below, we circle back to our research questions that consider the characteristics of authentic intercultural experiences working across difference and the ways in which ACB contributes to this, reflecting on ways in which we could make these experiences better gleaned from the data.

### ***ACB as a common language for understanding content***

Our first theme provides evidence of the way in which embodied experiences can create authentic relationships between beings that deepen equity literacies among participants. This speaks to the power of social experience through 'the lived body' (Leavy 2009; Merleau-Ponty 1962). Through the process of co-creating dance stories based on lived experiences of the participants, the following examples demonstrate the way in which this *common language* of the body brought very different participants together and helped them understand each other. In this first comment, Yousuf notes the way in which dancing the story led to a deeper understanding of the events:

... Expressing by dancing and body movements seems like releasing yourself from the boundaries of the linguistic codes ... Furthermore, trying to perform a story physically leads to a deep understanding through the active interaction and reproduction. (Yusuf, 14 February 2017, Intercultural Experience Reflection)

As Yusuf notes, the fact that he had to convey the story with his body forced him to return to the story to really understand the essence and emotional impact. It is especially revealing that Yusuf mentions *releasing yourself from the boundaries of the linguistic codes*. This speaks to issues of equity, and the fact that although some of the Yazidi girls in his group were in the early stages of English language development, using their bodies to tell the stories acted as a great equalizer in their relationship with teacher learners who had a much higher level of English proficiency. In fact, in some cases the tables were turned as some of the girls were very comfortable dancing while some of the teacher learners were not. Furthermore, use of the word *releasing* exposes the burden that language learning can take on learners. That is, linguistic codes are like ropes binding us to a certain way of thinking and expressing ourselves and hence through dance, participants were able to free themselves from these restrictions and move to a deeper and more emotional level.

Despite the success of this activity, some of the teacher learners noted that the girls expressed that they wanted more time to learn about them and their lives. This made me (Theresa Catalano) reflect on Gorski's point about how teacher educators need to avoid requiring marginalized groups to make themselves vulnerable for the benefit of the privileged group (2008, 522). Sadly, in the process of trying to get the teacher learners to understand experiences of students with immigrant backgrounds, I failed to make the activity reciprocal and a true learning experience for the girls, who were genuinely curious about their partners and their experiences.

The next comment speaks to the way in which the teacher learners developed their understanding of translanguaging, which was a difficult concept for teacher learners to grasp before they participated in the slam poetry.

Other activities could have also been beneficial and fun, but there is something about slam poetry that just goes hand-in-hand with translanguaging. It is all about meaning-making, and allowed us to blend all of our different perspectives to convey a message .... and stories of the human experience really seemed to embody the concept. (Johanna, 7 November 2019, Reflection on Pakistani Visit)

As Johanna notes above, the way in which some of the multilingual teacher learners and their Pakistani counterparts incorporated their own languages into the poetry became a vivid depiction of what translanguaging really looked like. Without their Pakistani co-creators, many of the teacher learners did not gain a true understanding of the joy that multilinguals often feel in being able to use their home languages as part of their learning. Even though many of the teacher learners did not understand everything their Pakistani collaborators said when they translanguaged in the poems, this creative mode of meaning-making allowed them to *experience* it, not just learn about it.

In their reflections, several students noted that they felt rushed, and needed more time to produce their poems so they felt less pressure. For many of the participants (teacher learners and Pakistani visitors) creating slam poetry was new, and scary. Hence, they felt pressure to produce something beautiful within the time constraints. So, when possible, it is important in these kinds of aesthetic experiences that we do not add to students' discomfort by rushing them through the process. When I (Theresa Catalano) planned this activity, I deliberately did not tell them what they would be doing because I was afraid they would begin to worry and become unnecessarily stressed. However, some students noted in their reflections that they would have liked to have been informed ahead of time of what they would be doing (aka slam poetry) so they could be mentally prepared; hence, my not telling them appeared to have the opposite effect than I had intended.

This final example below illustrates how the teacher learners were able to put intercultural strategies into practice in their intercultural exchange with the IEP students and thus, improve their content knowledge of intercultural communication skills:



As I was interacting with our international students, I tried to use different intercultural strategies we have been learning in class. I listened closely, reflected back what students were saying, and paid close attention to my eye contact and other nonverbal communication. (Jaden, February, 2018, Intercultural Reflection)

This excerpt demonstrates how community-based experiences in which teacher learners engaged with international students on campus extended the learning of the classroom into the international (but still campus) community, and created a reciprocal activity in which both the IEP students (who had an opportunity to practice their English and learn about their counterparts, some of which were international students themselves) and the teacher learners had an opportunity to ask questions and share personal stories. In this way, the activity exemplified Gorski's notions about not making minoritized groups vulnerable for the benefit of the teacher learners. On the other hand, the experience did not include the co-creation of art, which as you can see in some of the previous examples, was a powerful equalizer that broke down defenses and led to more intimate bonds among participants.

### ***Empathy and vulnerability***

As we mentioned above regarding the slam poetry, it was clear from our observations during the various ACB activities that many of the students were experiencing discomfort on a visceral level when being asked to produce creative works such as dances or slam poetry, but also when engaged in interactions with people they perceived as unlike them. Yet, in all three situations, they made connections between their immediate discomfort and what they were learning (Zembylas 2012). Carrie's comment (below) shows how she experienced vulnerability which led to empathy for the Yazidi girls (and their families).

I think dance added vulnerability to the experience, which acted as a catalyst in forming relationships with the girls ... It is through dance and movement, that we got to feel and



express the feelings and difficulties that this Yazidi community has gone through. (Carrie, 14 February 2017, Intercultural Experience Reflection)

From this excerpt it is clear that something about the way in which the body became a tool 'through which meaning is created' (Leavy 2009, 183) had the effect of helping the teacher learner build empathy for the *feelings and difficulties* that the girl and her family had experienced. This marked the beginning of the development of intercultural sensitivity because of her emotional response to difference (Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman 2003). Additionally, the dance acted as a *catalyst* to forge relationships based on 'equity and respect' (Leclercq 2003, 9). Below, Similarly, Henry speaks of the way he felt after the activity:

The feeling I felt when I drove home from the church was of humility. This activity was trying to strip my power, which is actualized in my comfort, and it is a humbling experience to be forced unto another level with other human beings that experience a world unlike mine ... What this activity does is it removes all these foundational social bricks and forces us to become part of a motion in time and space that is centered on the experiences of others. It's a fantastic way to build empathy, and chips away at our tendencies to "other" and close off to people. (Henry, 14 February 2017, Intercultural Experience Reflection)

Several important elements are evident from the above excerpt. First, Henry notes that the activity stripped him of his power which calls to mind Gorski's point about 'acknowledging power imbalances' (2008, 523). That is, in order to say that his power has been stripped, he must recognize that in the relationship with his partners, he is the one that has the power.

Second, his illustrative statement about becoming *part of a motion in time and space that is centered on the experience of others* is evidence of the way in which the activity helped the teacher learners see their partners as equals and not the essentialize 'Other' (Gorski 2008, 522). With the phrase *part of a motion in time and space* he illustrates how dance both 'literally and figuratively moves people'

(Shapiro 1998, 11). Furthermore, Henry's statements about *levels* and *removing foundational societal bricks* demonstrates how he is seeing (possibly for the first time) existing inequitable social structures in a more critical way. For him, the ACB experience made the invisible visible. Far from providing a white savior narrative, here, Henry articulates how the dance (because he was not a dancer, and thus was uncomfortable) humbled him, making him vulnerable in a way that allowed him to create empathy for his partner. This is a compelling example of how ACB education can be an effective tool to challenge and transform teacher learners' ambivalence towards minoritized students and families (Reeves 2006).

The creation and performance of the slam poetry also touched the emotions of the students in a way that led to empathy, as seen in this example:

The slam poetry added a lot of emotion. Body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice worked together to convey a message that would not have been able to be received by just writing it down ... Also, these types of arts-based activities make our brain think a different way than what we are used to in a classroom. It makes us think beyond the topic because we have to think of a way we can portray this with our body and words. (Carissa, 7 November 2019)

Above, Carissa notes the affordances of the embodied slam poetry experience (e.g., body language, facial expressions, tone of voice) that contributed to their emotional responses to the poetry. Not only did these elements affect the viewers, but they affected the performers. In addition, she notes how the arts-based activities tap into or utilize a different part of their brain, something that has been confirmed by science (Hogenboom 2014) and connects to intercultural education goals of seeing things from different perspectives (which leads to empathy). Below, Adam builds on this connection of the arts, emotion, and intercultural education:

I found doing slam poetry with people from different backgrounds more heartwarming for me, as I felt their genuine energy along with ours that truly made that whole

experience special. This activity added unity, meaning we all come from our own cultures and life experiences, but have a lot of similarities and appreciate the same qualities. Numerous times throughout this exchanged I shed some tears, as I was completely moved by the experiences from not just from the video shown, but from people in the room whose families had to persevere through adversity in order to better their lives. (Adam, 7 November 2019)

Adam's comments on how performing the poems was 'heartwarming' and how he felt the 'energy' of others underscore the value of arts-based approaches like this in which learners work in close proximity and feed off each others' intensity and human force. Through his comment about shedding 'some tears' because he was 'moved by the experiences' he highlights the emotional impact of the activity, his own vulnerability (in crying in front of his peers) and the way in which art reaches students and creates empathy in a way that non arts-based approaches cannot. Because creating empathy for others and understanding different perspectives is a goal of intercultural education (Zembylas 2012), these comments show the direct connection between arts-based approaches and intercultural aims.

### ***Challenging inequality and oppression***

One of the most important aims of intercultural education is to improve intergroup relations (Lopes Da Silva and Villas-Boas 2006). According to Gorski (2008), this cannot happen if we do not disrupt social structures that allow oppression to occur. In the case of our study, social reconstruction consisted of using the ACB interventions in which teacher learners had the chance to interact authentically in the co-creation of art to push back against stereotypes. This occurred because the teacher learners were able to ask questions about their collaborators' experiences, but also because they listened to their responses, and interacted with them in authentic ways. Below Darren comments on how the experience changed narratives he grew up knowing about Muslims and Islam:

It was such a cool experience and really changes some of the narratives that you see in the news about foreign countries and what is really going on there! (Darren, Nov. 7, Reflection on Pakistani Visit, 2019)

Darren's comment illustrates the fact that many of the teacher learners in the slam poetry activity had no prior experience interacting with Muslims, and certainly not with Pakistanis. As such, their prior knowledge of this cultural/ national group was limited to what they had heard in the media, which studies have found largely associates Islam and/or Muslims with violence, religious radicalism, and Islamic extremist militants (Ahmed and Matthes 2017; Samaie and Malmir 2017).

During the ACB experience, the teacher learners were intermingled with Pakistani women and men (all teachers), many of which wore traditional Muslim attire such as dupatta or shalwar kameez, and some women had their hair completely covered. In addition, there were prayer rugs set up in corners of the room for several of the collaborators to use when necessary. Furthermore, the Pakistani collaborators spoke in some of their languages (i.e. Urdu, Pashto) in the slam poems, and they introduced the teacher learners to their music and dance, which most of them had never been exposed to. Nevertheless, because the participants had to create together, the teacher learners were able to see their visitors as complete human beings, not merely Muslims or Pakistanis. Darren's excerpt above shows how the ACB activity freed him to attend to his own prejudices, as Dervin (2011) notes is important in developing interculturality, but also to counter xenophobic notions (O'Farrell 2015) of Islam and Muslims they had previously been exposed to. This activity was reciprocal, and just as the teacher learners dispelled stereotypes about Pakistanis, the Pakistani teachers also had the opportunity to disrupt their own stereotypes of American students. In Halsey's comment below, she shows how in the process of reflecting on the intervention, she experienced the beginnings of 'a praxis, or call to action, in order to better the world' (Carpenter & Muñoz, 2012). She says:

As a Pakistani teacher, they're trying to shift the culture in allowing the inclusion of all languages as the acceptable language of instruction. In the United States, they challenged

the idea of how learning English is often paired with real opportunity for minorities. (Halsey, 7 November 2019, Reflection on Pakistani Visit)

This comment refers to a discussion Halsey had with the Pakistanis in her group in which they talked about the reasons why a teacher should use pedagogical translanguaging. Because the collaborators teach in a very multilingual environment in which they are also multilinguals, they were able to share examples of the different languages present in Pakistani classrooms but also their perspectives on how English has been used as a tool of hegemony and dominance in Pakistan, and as a tool of oppression in the United States when students are not allowed to use other languages in learning. However, although the discussion was meaningful, and helped Halsey understand how translanguaging and social justice are connected, she did not really understand the way in which the dis-inclusion of students' home languages in learning was oppressive until they created and planned their slam poem together using translanguaging, and reflected on it together after their performance.

## **Conclusion**

Our study provides viable evidence that experiences that decenter dominant identities and provide opportunities for authentic engagement across difference can be powerful. In particular, our ACB approach aligned with intercultural education goals to afford a common language in which to learn content together, to create empathy, and to challenge teacher learners to work towards social transformation. Interestingly, three different types of ACB interventions (i.e., creating dance stories, intercultural exchanges, and slam poetry) provided a spectrum and scale of impact which varied. Specifically, we found that the activities that involved intercultural exchanges AND co-creation of works of art made the teacher learners more uncomfortable and created more vulnerability. At the same time, they resulted in more powerful and lasting impacts, although in all cases we recognize that the activities were only one day, and hence the impacts are somewhat limited. Feedback from teacher learners also informed us that it was

important to give students the *time* they needed to be involved in the creative process, as well as inform them prior to the experience of what they will be asked to do so they are mentally prepared.

What's more, we learned that we need to attend carefully to the way in which minoritized populations are humanized, as well as to ensure that we create experiences that position them as authentic co-learners. Purposefully designing meaningful and relevant experiences where *all* can learn and contribute in agentive and authentic ways decreases the risks of unintentional objectification, essentialization, or exploitation whereby we make minoritized populations vulnerable solely for the educational benefit of the dominant learners. Participants engaging in co-creation of art was one powerful example, but it also meant that we needed to incorporate time for the collaborators to learn about their partners instead of it being one-way.

Some limitations of the study (besides those mentioned above) were the lack of access to communities to draw from in our exchanges, and the short time period we had to do the activities (mentioned above). While we felt that the communities we were able to interact with were essential to engaging in this kind of learning, there was a tension between wanting to make the experiences longer or more frequent and hence more meaningful, balanced with not wanting minoritized populations to have to carry the burden or do all the racial labor (DiAngelo 2018). We also had to attend to the fact that many of our students had full-time or part-time jobs and family responsibilities, and hence we could not make the project too time-intensive without overwhelming them.

As this study indicates, we need to move towards these more authentic, humanizing, intimate experiences in intercultural education where all participants are valued as equal contributors and receivers of new understanding. Furthermore, it implies avoiding traditional voyeuristic and essentializing approaches to intercultural learning that fail to acutely attend to power relationships. In contrast, our findings not only call us to approach this work with equity at the center, but they also inspire us to further embrace the empowering, generative, and transformative potential of ACB education for teacher preparation and development.

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### Contributors

*Theresa Catalano's* research focuses on the connection between language, education and migration, and arts/community-based education. Her book *Talking about Global Migration* identifies metaphors migrants use to describe their experiences. She publishes across a wide range of journals utilizing theoretical tools and perspectives from multimodal critical discourse studies and cognitive linguistics.

*Amanda R. Morales's* research addresses issues of equity & access for minoritized students across the PK-16 education continuum. Her current work focuses on teacher preparation for working with multicultural & multilingual students as well as the experiences of pre-service and in-service teachers of color in predominately white institutions.

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## Appendix A. Interview Questions for Yezidi girls

**Dear Parents,**

**Your child will be asking you some questions about your life in order to learn more about their heritage. They will then share your answers with graduate students from UNL who want to learn about Yezidi culture. They will create dances together based on your answers.**

**Dear Students,**

**You may ask these questions in whatever language you feel most comfortable asking, and you may write your answers or draw the answers in whatever language/s you want. You will share your parents' answers with the UNL students on Thursday, February 9<sup>th</sup>, so PLEASE DON'T FORGET TO BRING THE ANSWERS then.**

1) Why did you come to the United States?

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2) When did you come to the United States?

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3) What was your home country? What was the name of the city or town you came from?

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4) Can you tell me one thing you remember about your journey to the United States?

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5) What has been difficult for you since you came to Lincoln?

---

6) What or who has helped you since coming here?

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7) What do you want for your children in life?

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8) What can you tell us that could help teachers to help your child?

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9) What should teachers know about Yezidi culture in order to be a better teacher for your child?

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10) What would you like to know about American culture that you still don't understand?

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## **Appendix B. Instructions for teacher learners**

TEAC 813J Intercultural Communication  
February 9, 2016

Dear Students,

On Thursday, February 9<sup>th</sup>, at 5:55 p.m., please meet at the front doors of the church. Bring with you a recording device (on your phone or ipad) and/or a laptop to take notes.

- 1) First, we will warm up together and think about how to map our emotions onto our bodies.
- 2) Then, girls ages 6-12 from the Lincoln Yezidi community will be sharing with you interviews in which they asked their parents about their experiences immigrating to the United States. Please view the questions beforehand on Blackboard so you are aware of what the girls will be sharing with you. Keep in mind that some of them cannot write yet, and will draw or tell you the answers. You will do this in groups of 1-2 UNL students per girl.
- 3) Ask the girls questions to clarify their answers or anything you want to know about Yezidi culture and history. Make sure to do some research on this before class.
- 4) I will divide you up into 2 or 3 groups. You will then choose one of the stories to re-create in the form of dance, and work with the girls to be in the dance with them.
- 5) At 7:15 we will share our dances, film them, and cool down.
- 6) You will need to write a reflection of this experience (see "Intercultural Experience Template") which will be due the following week in class.

## Appendix C: Instructions for Intercultural Experience Activities

TEAC 813J Intercultural Experience Reflection Template

This Reflection is due February 13<sup>th</sup> – Please send by email to [tcatalano2@unl.edu](mailto:tcatalano2@unl.edu) before class starts.

Write a 2-3 page narrative about your experience with the Yezidi girls and include the following sections. Make sure to answer the questions under each section and really make connections to what you have learned about intercultural communication in class readings and what you gained from this experience. You are welcome to add anything else you want to say about the experience, just make sure to answer the questions first.

The reflection will be graded on the following things (10 points total):

- Did you answer the questions?
- Did you demonstrate what you have learned in this class and apply it to this experience? (e.g. cite your readings when necessary and be sure to include a reference list)
- Is the paper typed in 12 sized font and well-written (e.g. no spelling, grammar errors)?
- Is there evidence that you truly took time to think about this and critically reflect on what you have known in the past and how this experience might have changed that?
- Did you relate this experience to your teaching?

Here are the sections of your reflection (use another word document to write your narrative, don't use this paper):

### 1) What I learned from this experience

- What do you think would be helpful information for teachers to know about Yezidi children in their classes that you learned today?
- What did you learn about Yezidi history and culture? How could this help you be a better teacher of Yezidi children?
- Did you apply any intercultural strategies you learned in your book or readings in order to communicate with the students?

Which ones?

- Reflecting on this now, what could you have done that you have learned in class to communicate better with the students?

**2) What is the benefit of this type of activity?**

- What did you gain from doing this?
- Why would I assign this activity?

**3) What is the benefit of this type of activity for the girls?**

- What do you think the girls gained from this experience?
- What do you think they will tell their parents?
- How do you think being part of this group (including our intercultural exchange) will affect them?

**4) What can dance/movement be used to develop interculturality of your students?**

- What exactly did dance contribute to this experience that other modes (just talking or writing) couldn't?
- What about dance facilitates a more "liquid" notion of interculturality that encourages people to look at culture as dynamic and multi-layered?

**5) What kind of activity can you imagine using dance or movement that could help your students (in the classes you teach or will teach) develop intercultural competence?**

- In your specific current or future teaching context how might you imagine something similar happening? Describe this in detail.
- In what situations might this work better?
- What would you need to do first in order for your students to get the most out of the experience?

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**TEAC 413M**

**Reflecting on our cultural exchange and Slam Poetry with Pakistani guests**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

In one to two paragraphs, describe your experiences with our Pakistani

guests in narrative form attending to the following questions:

- How did participating in class activities with them change your perspectives on the content?
- What did you find that was beneficial from doing Slam Poetry with people from very different backgrounds than your own?
- What did slam poetry add that other types of activities might not have?
- Why do you think it was beneficial?
- What about this activity made you the most anxious? (the content, the process, the people, etc.)
- Why do you think this aspect of the experience was difficult for you?
- How could an activity like this be done better?

Include anything else you want to tell me about this experience and type your answers here.....

## Appendix D: 2018 Intercultural Experience Instructions

### TEAC 813J Intercultural Experience Reflection Template

This Reflection is due March 3rd – Please upload to the Canvas dropbox for this assignment.

**Write a 2-3 page narrative about your experience with the UNL CAEP international students during class. Make sure to answer the questions under each section and really make connections to what you have learned about intercultural communication in class readings and what you gained from this experience. You are welcome to add anything else you want to say about the experience, just make sure to answer the questions first.**

The reflection will be graded on the following things (10 points total):

- Did you respond to the questions?
- Did you demonstrate what you have learned in this class and apply it to this experience? (e.g. cite your readings when necessary)
- Is the paper typed in 12-point font, 1.5 or double-spaced, and well-written (e.g. no spelling, grammar errors)?
- Is there evidence that you truly took time to think about this and critically reflect on what you have known in the past and how this experience might have changed that?
- Did you relate this experience to your teaching?

Here are the sections of your reflection (use another word document to write your narrative, don't use this paper):

#### 1) What I learned from this experience

- What do you think would be helpful information for teachers to know about English learner international students entering US schools based on what you learned this evening?
- What did you learn about the social and linguistic culture of the individuals you spoke with? How could this help you be a better teacher of students from these cultures?
- Did you apply any intercultural strategies you learned in your book or readings in order to communicate with the students? Which ones?
- Reflecting on this now, what could you have done that you have learned in class to communicate better with the students?

#### 2) In what ways did YOU benefit from doing this type of activity?



- What did you gain from doing this?
- Why would I assign this activity?

3) What is the benefit of this type of activity for the international students we interacted with?

- What do you think the individuals gained from this experience?
- How do you think being part of this group (including our intercultural exchange) will affect them?

4) What kind of activity can you imagine using games, music, or movement that could help your students (in the classes you teach or will teach) develop intercultural competence?

- In your specific current or future teaching context how might you imagine something similar happening?
- In what situations might this work better?
- What would you need to do first in order for your students to get the most out of the experience?

## **Appendix E: Instructions for Reflection on Pakistani Visit**

### **TEAC 413M**

#### **Reflecting on our cultural exchange and Slam Poetry with Pakistani guests**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

In one to two paragraphs, describe your experiences with our Pakistani guests in narrative form attending to the following questions:

- How did participating in class activities with them change your perspectives on the content?
- What did you find that was beneficial from doing Slam Poetry with people from very different backgrounds than your own?
- What did slam poetry add that other types of activities might not have?
- Why do you think it was beneficial?
- What about this activity made you the most anxious? (the content, the process, the people, etc.)
- Why do you think this aspect of the experience was difficult for you?
- How could an activity like this be done better?

Include anything else you want to tell me about this experience .....