Chapter 4
Productive Ambiguity:
Promoting Cross–Cultural Understanding through Art

Rebecca L. Shipe
Rhode Island College, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents how a concept termed "productive ambiguity," or the ability to transform encounters with difference into opportunities for personal growth, relates to nurturing cross-cultural understanding through experiences with art. While reporting on relevant components of her recent dissertation research, the author describes how a small group of fifth graders examined the concept of productive ambiguity while engaging in relational aesthetic experiences and responding to themes through both pictures and words. Research findings reveal specific facilitation strategies that promoted self-reflection and human connection through creating, viewing and dialoguing about visual art. While comparing study findings with additional literature presented in this chapter, the reader is encouraged to critically consider the positive outcomes gained from these interactions, potential facilitation challenges, and other implications for the field of art and visual culture education.

INTRODUCTION

The research presented in this chapter demonstrates how a concept termed "productive ambiguity" supports the value of classroom based, cross-cultural exchanges that incorporate experiences with art. Productive ambiguity refers to the ability to transform tensions that disrupt one's current understandings into opportunities for personal growth. Ambiguity becomes productive when encounters with difference stimulate curiosity, imagination, and consideration of new possibilities and perspectives (Shipe, 2015). Generally speaking, people experience different degrees of productive ambiguity all the time. This research, however, focuses on how productive ambiguity can promote appreciation for other cultures through experiences with art.

This chapter is divided into two parts. Part one describes several theories that have influenced the author's conception of productive ambiguity and highlights its timely relevance to current art education research and practice. Next, pertinent aspects of the author's recent dissertation research will highlight how a small group of fifth graders examined the concept of productive ambiguity during their interactions with art and visual culture. More specifically, participants engaged in relational aesthetic experiences that involved responding to specific themes through both pictures and words. Study findings suggest specific visual content and instructional strategies for translating productive ambiguity into the reality of an art classroom. In addition, part one highlights how this concept promotes the importance of fostering personal connections among young people living in diverse parts of the world.

Part two of this chapter describes how insights gleaned from the author's dissertation research in addition to other relevant literature might help art teachers to facilitate cross-cultural connections that promote productive ambiguity. These examples examine how educators use experiences with art to generate self-awareness, empathy, and openness to new perspectives while encountering otherness. These research findings reveal critical points for future inquiries. For example, how is productive ambiguity revealed through observable behavior and what personal characteristics, such as age and life circumstances, impact a person's ability to experience it? Ideally, this study encourages the reader to generate a new understanding of productive ambiguity and consider how it supports cross-cultural understandings through art.

Finally, this chapter highlights how teachers living in the United States might take advantage of the Peace Corps World Wise Schools (WWS) program to establish valuable connections with students living in other countries. This program provides opportunities for students of diverse backgrounds to learn about other cultures while becoming more self-reflexive global citizens. The author highlights how facilitating experiences with visual art that promote productive ambiguity can enhance the connections made through the Peace Corps World Wise Schools program.

PART ONE: EXPLORING PRODUCTIVE AMBIGUITY

Theoretical Influences

While engaging with the ideas presented in this chapter, the reader will have an opportunity to develop a personal understanding of a concept the author has termed "productive ambiguity" (Shipe, 2015). Part one presents several theories that influenced the conception of this term. "Ambiguity" resembles the tension created when individuals encounter difference. "Difference," as defined by Tanner et al (2008), exists outside of her/his taken-for-granted state of consciousness. In this sense, people encounter difference when something disrupts their existing way of knowing, which might cause them to become more aware of their own consciousness. For example, Goodman (1984) described how the construction of world versions is always a re-construction of prior versions and results when experience conflicts with expectation. To Goodman, this moment of conflict causes individuals to rethink her/his own subjective perspective and consider new points of view. The positive activity resulting from this conflict represents the author's perception of productive ambiguity. Ambiguity can also be perceived as the space between the known and the unknown. Ambiguity becomes productive if an individual refrains from immediately accepting or rejecting this difference and rather considers new possibilities and perspectives. Productive ambiguity occurs when curiosity and imagination override the impulse to cast judgment based upon preconceived notions. Ideally, productive ambiguity enables the recognition of consciousness and the subjectivity of thought (Shipe, 2015).

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