

Chapter 12

The Boone–Kabul Project: How Art Taught Us to Know and See Each Other

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ABSTRACT

In this project, the in-depth discussion of artistic works by Afghan and American students working together to reduce cultural stereotyping and poor media image-making created a shared understanding and a deep connection as humans that transcended national, political, religious, and cultural boundaries. Students discussed various works of art dealing with topics such as leadership, women and education, heroism, and homeland/patriotism. Students then answered questions related to the works of art and share their responses with each other in a continuous dialogue. Students were able to determine how perceptions are shaped about other cultures, analyze how these perceptions change, and examine how art is multivalent and is particularly able to carry many nuanced messages that allow for in-depth discussion.

INTRODUCTION

Art is transformational and it can build bridges across cultures. Students in Afghanistan know Americans from two main sources—America’s military presence and exported media. Students in America know very little about the average Afghan student or citizen, as they only hear of Afghanistan in terms of military efforts and sensational news stories. Through a chance encounter at a conference in North Carolina, Lillian Nave of Appalachian State University (ASU) and Abdul Habib Khalid of Kabul Education University (KEU) created a project to connect their students through digital technology and the arts. In this particular project, the in-depth discussion of artistic works by Afghan and American students working together to reduce cultural stereotyping and poor media image-making created a shared understanding and a deep connection as humans that transcended national, political, religious and cultural boundaries.

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Professors Khalid and Nave wanted to bring about a positive change in the perceptions of Americans and Afghans by and through their students who had no opportunity, or a very limited one, to obtain first-hand information about people living in the other country. They hoped that if students were introduced to each other via technology, they would learn about each other's lifestyles, wants, desires, thoughts and dreams. They wanted the project to ask students in vastly different cultures about their values as responsible human beings, and share those with each other. Perhaps, then, the misconceptions that have been perpetuated by mass media would decrease and a mutual understanding of each other would increase.

BACKGROUND

Khalid and Nave met at a university teaching conference in January of 2013. After a brief conversation and sharing some information about their students and universities, they decided to initiate a project that would allow their students to communicate with each other. After the conference, they exchanged emails and started planning the project. When Khalid returned to Afghanistan and resumed his teaching at KEU, he shared the idea with some faculty members in his department and talked to students about the project. Students were enthusiastic and wanted to join the project. KEU's students had limited exposure to international students and their perceptions on various issues in terms of culture, arts, history and education.

For her part, Ms. Nave developed a consent form for participation and had it translated into Dari and Pashto (the official languages of Afghanistan) so that both American and Afghan students could participate in the project. She also developed a survey asking students how they received their information and formed opinions about people in other countries, asking questions such as "Do you receive your information via personal conversations, reading newspapers, watching television news, or through other mass media outlets?" Preceding the first contacts between students, the two professors communicated through emails and Skype on student selection, topics to be discussed, and how to pair Afghan and American students. Basically, the instructors began with merely an idea and access to the Internet. They started to plan the program, thought about discussion topics and questions, advocated for the program, encouraged students to participate and kept records of their development.

THE BOONE-KABUL PROJECT

Access to technology through globalized endeavors has made mutual understanding amongst students from different countries more possible than ever before. Students can learn from each other through one-on-one dialogues as recent technology has made it feasible to continue immediate conversations across borders and oceans. Harnessing this very powerful technology for good was the chief aim of the Boone-Kabul project.

Goals and Objectives

From the outset of the project these two instructors had some very ambitious learning goals and objectives for their students. A learning goal here is defined as a broader understanding that is attained by the end of the project. A learning objective, by contrast, is a skill that students will have obtained by

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