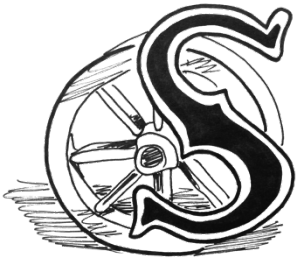


Border Monument Engagements as Curriculum Work

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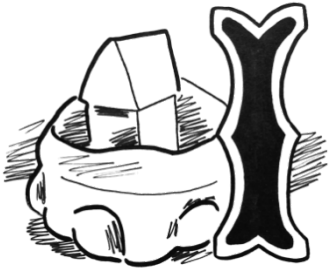


ocially engaged art education, curriculum theory, and a contentious topic: I am mashing up these things in my dissertation. The context for this mash up is education work I did in Arizona in late 2019 and early 2020, right before the pandemic. The groups I worked with were an elementary after school art program, several undergraduate classes in an art education program, and visitors to a border monument site. The border monument in question is installed across from the city council chambers in Tucson, Arizona. I worked with different age groups because I wanted to “get the whole wheel rolling,” as documentarian Tom Hansell once said (Knight, Forney, & Schwartzman, 2006, p. 50). I was an outsized influence in getting engagements going, but I tried hard to be more a rung in the wheel than the hub. And the border? Well, I am from the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, but I would not say I am from the border. I grew up in Corpus Christi, Texas, the border of the border. My folks are from the Rio Grande Valley. Like border monuments, I know my Whiteness and gender are contentious sites. Initiating this discussion further

puts things in contention. But I am committed to anti-oppressive work, and I know I need to listen and stay accountable.



he mashup of socially engaged art education, curriculum theory, and border monuments comes from an idea that socially engaged art can be a critical kind of “curriculum work” (Gaztimbide-Fernández & Sears, 2004). What I am calling border monuments are monuments that imply U.S.-Mexico border issues and border histories. When they involve colonial issues and histories, they are like Confederate monuments—a real problem. Border monuments have policy mandates around them, have an instructive role in communities, and they are public; they are a public education. The widely used term is public pedagogy, but I think *public curriculum* is viable for this. Curriculum work is like Paulo Freire’s (2005) “cultural work.” And it is work, a curricular laboring. Curriculum work is a kind of curriculum development and curriculum theorizing that is engaged, collaborative, praxis-oriented, and progressive (Gaztimbide-Fernández & Sears, 2004). Socially engaged art, which has been around for a while, still has the character of being a “new genre” of art (Lacy, 1995). The main medium—dialogue, relationality, social organizing—is intangible (Helguera, 2011). In my experience, it can seem radical to a lot of participants used to less conceptual forms of art. When socially engaged art is of an activist bent, issues of citizenship become wrapped up in it; questions of legitimacy, participation, and voice come into play. Research methodologies are increasingly part of the practice, too, and in a way, this project is a socially engaged arts-based research (Rowe, 2019). So, the idea for me is socially engaged art education is a way for curricula like border monuments to be democratically and aesthetically altered, edited on the spot, and disrupted—curricula for curriculum work. That was the proposition with my dissertation, at least.



n practice, issues definitely came up. There are big barriers to this kind of engagement. With the elementary students I worked with, there is a question of whether topics like border monuments and socially engaged art are even appropriate. The charge is it is too negative, too conceptual. From a psychosocial perspective, the elementary students I worked with were not quite ready for critical awareness raising. It is not like I directly taught “border monuments” or “socially engaged art” as some kind of content knowledge. We focused instead on preliminary learning. We worked on border literacy. We read picture books about the border. We looked at photos of border monuments and school mascots, because mascots are something familiar and have a similarity to monuments. And we talked about the art elements of space and sculptural form. We also played with socially engaged art practices. We walked around the elementary school asking questions about what should be on a collaborative mural. Elementary students also made individual creative responses. I asked them to make “border sculptures” in clay. It went in wild directions: there were memorials to pets, a house surrounded by a border fence, desert landscapes reminiscent of where border walls are, along with responses that resisted the prompt and followed students’ own interests, like when students made Sonic the Hedgehog and Minion figures.



also tried to get a cross-engagement to happen where one of the undergraduate groups would do activities with the elementary students at an outdoor border sculpture site. The sculpture at this site is a contemporary outdoor sculpture related to the border and not a colonial border monument like the one by the city council chambers. The cross-engagement was supposed to be a field trip for the two groups.

Unfortunately, I could not solve the policy and logistical problems with the elementary school, and the elementary students were not able to attend. It was a reminder for me how important policy is to curriculum. In organizing the field trip, safety concerns and transportation were big sticking points. Busses and parking could not be arranged. And while the elementary school was only a

mile from the sculpture site, a busy road would need to be crossed, and first and second graders could not be trusted to walk that far—that was the district’s sentiment. Transportation is accessibility, and accessibility is a factor of policy and design. Permitting, too, played an important role. Questions of rationale, rules, and accountability came up when I was getting event permission. In several instances during the study, actions by key personnel in the permission process resulted in major characteristics of what content emerged, that is, when the people responsible for granting permission did not entirely squash the event from taking place. The failed cross-engagement between the undergraduate and elementary groups meant that, at the last minute, the undergraduate students had to redesign their activities for random site visitors instead of children. In the end, engagement was not great at this event, but I still thought it was okay. It was not okay for everyone, though. One of the undergraduate students commented it would have been better if the audience had been more “prepared” to engage. We had a hard time getting visitors involved and broaching the charged political subject. This comment about being prepared has always struck me as exemplary of a crisis of engagement. Barriers to engagement are many, and not just in terms of policy. The nature of intervention seems at odds with traditional forms of curricular planning.



see border monuments as a prompt, an example of a public kind of problem. (I imagine you might be thinking about similar problems and prompts relevant to where you are at, too.) This prompting or educational *big idea*, when explored through socially engaged art practices, resulted in emergent curriculum, where public responses and independent actions altered and added to the content being studied. This was something I was looking out

for specifically. However, the emergent curriculum tended to be far flung. Another example of this involved the second undergraduate class. This was a different group than the one that missed the opportunity to work with the elementary group. This group produced an exhibit at a city library, the subject of which focused less on the issues suggested by the border monument we had visited earlier and more on issues related to the site of the monument itself. We learned that the park with the monument had been an Occupy site, and at the

library where students put together the exhibit related to the border monument site, we met a lot of library patrons who were unhoused. The monument continued to mediate the artistic production and educational reflections, but it was a step removed; there was new directionality, new supplementarity. The engagement ricocheted off from issues related to the border or the monument. This happened with all the groups I worked with in varying degrees.



The initiation of prompts like this is a key issue I want to leave us with. My initiation of border monuments as something to engage is contentious. My positionality gunks up the works, first of all. I have learned that if I am doing the prompting and facilitating, I have to make extra time for trust building. The monuments

themselves initiate something contentious, too, of course. It is a loaded topic; and, as the undergraduate student I spoke of earlier continues, people “do not want to engage with heavy subjects without some sort of ‘warning’ or chance to prepare.” Yet, *there* is the border monument, in broad daylight, so present, so initial, that it can almost seem absent and un-engageable. Also, when engagement is well-initiated, when it is adequately planned, the monuments continued to have their own mediating function, although distantly, in future engagements. For instance, the dialogue among one of the undergraduate groups followed themes of the monument, in this case exchange and commerce. The discussion was at times critical of these themes, but the monument was still able to insinuate something, still able to lead. Because it was first. We assume that socially engaged art is a critical pedagogy, but I see it as something a little different. In this situation, a key tenet of critical pedagogy is not being followed: the content is not starting with the participants (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2020). I was the one that put the participants up to all this, and the monument, too, kept mediated something. I think there is still a place for this kind of curriculum. It is not curriculum-as-planned or curriculum-as-lived, as Ted Aoki (2005) breaks it down, but a curriculum-as-engaged. Elmore and Sykes (1992) would call it a curriculum-as-dialogue. Further, Adam Greteman (2019) talks about students “coming into presence and resistance” (p. 43), and I witnessed both of those. I saw an undergraduate student make a plan to civically engage public sculpture back home. I listened to another undergraduate student push against my own

style of intervention, building up their conviction for more prepared engagements. This vested interest is something we should consider along with traditional curricular learning goals. We can shift these goals from knowledge and skills to experience and empowerment. As Anna Ryoo (2021) discusses in this same Marilyn Zurmuehlen Working Papers panel, art education is a political priming that activates presence and plurality. The thing is, the start-up is always a jump-start, even when it is a warm-up. So, it seems to me the snag will always be in the invitation to engage.

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