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Artefacts, Stories & Photographs

*Do they work as a tool for
Cultural Understanding & Humanitarian Learning?*

Learning happens best when it is connected with topics people care about: essential subjects like love, friendship and death, ageing, family relationships, children and grandchildren, the transience of natural beauty and of human happiness, the essential human longing recognised as our inheritance form.



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Jane Taylor
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This thesis is dedicated to those who purposefully explore cultural difference and who share their stories and beliefs to make meaningful connections with other human beings thereby learning more about themselves and others in the process. Especially I acknowledge the commitment of the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO) in their collective pursuit of international understanding through fostering education in which people “learn to live together and build a sense of identity and cultural awareness” (IBO, 2002).

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*The most extraordinary mysteries of this life are to be found only in another,
and in our surrender to the strange rhythms of this humanity.”*

(Davies, 2003)

Cover art used with the kind permission of artist, Melissa Martyn.

Fluttering in the Heart – Hawk Moth. “The flute of the Infinite is played without ceasing and its sound is love.”
KABIR. 2005. Mixed media collage; machine and hand stitched painted and printed paper. Brown paper, paint calico, leaf, cowrie shells, and print of moth from another painting by the artist.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a qualitative, ethnographic study, which examines the assumption that at the heart of worthwhile teaching and learning is our shared humanity. Artefacts, stories and photographs are explored as vehicles through which learners critically examine and share their cultural learning and perceptions of what is significant and valuable.

In this way artefacts, stories and photographs provide a conduit for learning between and among people of diverse cultures. I believe such learning celebrates our shared humanity, which is deliberately defined in positive terms as “the *best* that encompasses the collective quality and characteristics of all people including kindness, compassion, empathy, humility, caring and thoughtfulness”

Learning that celebrates our humanity may be considered a positive force and humanitarian in nature. In the context of this thesis I speak of and describe humanitarian learning as “*the development of understanding of self and others through the sharing of personal, cultural and social experiences that exemplify the attitudes and values needed for responsible citizenship and dignified relationships.*”

Rich sources of ideas, expertise and perceptions about relevant experience have been drawn from various authors and educators. Key documentation from the International Baccalaureate Organisation, (IBO), including “A Continuum of International Education” (2002) and the work of the former Director General of the IBO, Professor George Walker also provided useful resource material.

The data was generated through questionnaires and photographs focussing on cultural artefacts with personal meaning, documenting the voices, reflections, interactions, and perceptions of the participants about the significance of cultural diversity in their lives and education. The data is presented in a series of charts and graphic organisers linked with the IBO expected teaching practices. These are analysed in the context of intercultural understanding and humanitarian learning, a notion developed and examined in this thesis with a view to how it may be supported.

In analysing the data, the following key points emerged:

- Personal multicultural experiences, a sense of global awareness and a thorough appreciation of people from differing backgrounds are considered highly significant in humanitarian learning
- Stories, artefacts and photographs create an accessible, versatile and effective *human connecting instrument* enabling humanitarian learning
- Stories, artefacts and photographs can illuminate cultural conflict, tension and misunderstanding.

Suggestions and recommendations for ways that humanitarian learning can be fostered in a climate defined by tolerance, respect and responsibility include:

- The need to make more explicit the obligations of learners to develop perspectives, intuition and empathy so they know themselves and others and are able to view cultural difference as enriching
- The notion of learning as humanitarian is worthy of greater emphasis and implementation in educational organisations
- The recognition that areas of tension between people have great potential for meaningful growth of understanding across cultures.

This thesis provides a springboard for more serious consideration and action towards initiating learning that purposefully fosters people knowing each other in a spirit of global responsibility.

“We are made for complementarity. I have gifts you do not: and you have gifts that I do not.

So we need each other to become fully human.”

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

GLOSSARY

Fundamental to this research are some basic terms and expressions defined below. Some are based on those used by the International Baccalaureate Organization; others have been interpreted, synthesised and developed by me throughout the process of this thesis.

Artefact: An item or an object of personal significance, perhaps but not necessarily historic significance, which can support understanding of what it is to be human

Catalyst: Providing a motivating burst, a reason to act, a force, which stimulates a purposeful move forward

Culture: The ways individuals and groups transmit their identity and human potential through understanding *who they are* individually and collectively

Cultural artefact: An item or object of personal or professional significance. Something that carries weight for a person, tells a story, has a past with connections to the present and perhaps possibilities for the future

Cultural cooperation: Developing harmonious relationships and friendships among diverse people and bringing about a better understanding of each other's way of life

Cultural transparency: Seeing beyond the languages, beliefs, values and attitudes of others to the essence of a person. To view critically one's own beliefs and values and see what is possible through cross-cultural collaboration

Dialogue: An exchange of ideas, channel of communication, striving to increase understanding

Difference: The notion of 'otherness.' The use of difference in this thesis promotes difference as a source of richness, interest, delight, joy, concern, caring and fascination with the human condition. It refers to an inclusive way of being. It is antithetical to the notion of familiarity and similarity being ideal

Diversity: Variety, a multiplicity, non-uniform. Differences among people, which enrich their lives individually and collectively

Global Citizenship: A sense of belonging to the world, not a country; being fascinated by what's happening in other countries and cultures; learning through travel. The acquisition of knowledge, skills and talents through intercultural encounters. Ownership of diverse reference points to help resolve local challenges (www.mikelipkin.com/personalbest/five.htm).

Humanity: The *best* that encompasses the collective quality and characteristics of all people including kindness, compassion, empathy, humility, caring and thoughtfulness

Humanitarian learning: The development of understanding of self and others through the sharing of personal, cultural and social experiences that exemplify the attitudes and values needed for responsible citizenship and dignified relationships

International Baccalaureate Organization: A non-profit making educational organization based in Geneva, Switzerland, focusing on educating for international understanding worldwide

Internationalism: The ability of people to be “critical and compassionate thinkers, life long learners and informed participants in local and world affairs, conscious of the shared humanity that binds all people together while respecting the variety of cultures and attitudes that makes for the richness of life” (IBO mission statement IBO Council of Foundation, 1996).

Intercultural understanding: Being able to reconstruct what is culturally unfamiliar, consider others’ perspectives and see things through their eyes. One’s own cultural context helps make this possible. Being able to overcome the dominance of our expectations, attitudes and interests and recognise those of other cultures as valid

Narrative / Story telling: A way of purposefully connecting with others by bringing alive and reliving experience or sequences of events, ideas and journeys, real or imagined through the spoken or written word mime or gesture. Conveying thoughts, ideas, adventures via a storyteller to an audience

Narrative imagination: The ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires of that person

Memories: What we know and understand from having experienced or understood before. Memories are the sum of stories we can recall and apply to new situations

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