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Piecing/Peacing It Together: An Experiment in Teaching and Learning in Israel

Christine Boyko-Head

A well of truth, of images, of words,
Low where Orion lies
I watch the solstice pit become a stair,
The constellations rise.
Jay Macpherson, "The Well"

A few months ago I was invited to write about the experience of teaching for Lesley University's Extension Program in Israel. The documentation of my time in Israel was something I had critically reflected upon and needed to do since my first visit there in July 2002. Since that initial trip, I have gone to Lesley University's Israeli site in Netanya three times. The course I teach for the Master of Education program in Integrated Teaching through the Arts is "Arts and Culture in the Community." Before I delve into my sharing of a story that has many chapters, it is important that you understand where I was and where I am coming from regarding my teaching encounters in Israel. It still won't give you the entire picture; but you will at least see a glimpse of a week that completely changed my life and pedagogy.

When I teach this course in the United States it is political in content and experimental in form. It emphasizes critical reflection through the arts in order to expose and challenge sites of power and privilege. Students explore how various art modalities can be used as powerful communication strategies for social issues and concerns giving voice to the neglected, the marginalized, the disempowered. Beginning with the feminist maxim "the personal is political", my approach to the course guides students from their present "Me" mentality to the empowering state of a "We" collective with the objective of their collective thinking being community development projects that can bring about positive social change. As I said, that is what I do when I teach in the United States. To transfer this approach to Israel would be tantamount to imposing an outsider's pompous and colonializing attitude of things she knows little about. In fact, when I was first asked to teach in Israel I was a newly hired adjunct faculty—hardly the type of person prepared to teach a potentially volatile course in an often volatile country. I was still getting my legs, so to speak, with Lesley and my own pedagogical challenges and beliefs. However, during that summer a rash of suicide attacks in Israel kept veteran American instructors within the safe confines of the United States. Someone had to teach the course so why not ask the new person—who also happened to be Canadian—to meet the challenge. I had little doubt as to what my answer would be.

Chronicling my experience of teaching in Israel is almost as challenging as the teaching assignment itself. To teach in Israel is a humbling encounter; yet this publication wants the voice of experience coming through my words to the reader. Experience according to the Chambers 20th Century Dictionary is “wisdom derived from the trials and changes of life” (p. 443).

I stumble.

I have had extensive teaching practice in various North American sites; but does that bring wisdom? Did any of those encounters change my life in ways that I can measure? Again, I stumble.

Besides, context is everything, and I knew nothing about the context of being in Israel, let alone teaching what they needed to know.

Well, that’s not exactly true; I knew a mediated Israeli context. And that was precisely why I went. I needed to see for myself what this part of the world was like. I could not believe that all there was were the horrific images of rubble, charred buses and chaos shown on the nightly news during the summer of 2002. Still, you may wonder, why would that compel a third-generation Ukrainian Catholic and mother of three young children to travel half way around the world during a time when suicide attacks were happening almost daily? There were two reasons: first, although I am a professor, I am also a writer and the journalistic inquisitiveness and quest for uncovering understandings has always guided my actions.

The second reason, ironically, doubles back to the challenge of writing this story. When the program director called me with the offer I did not think of the opportunity as an experience. Rather, I thought of it as an experiment in what I believed with my entire being: that the arts have the potential to change society for the better. Creating and participating in the arts can have a healing quality capable of moving people to new insights and perspectives. These new ways of knowing and being can ultimately lead to public change. I had proclaimed these statements to undergraduates, graduates, and my theatre audiences many times in the past. All my data and examples came from texts I had read, stories I had heard from others, or from minor successes with my Canadian students regarding social issues.

Now, however, I would have the opportunity to live my own text and test this notion in a place that was not safe, comfortable or willing to placate the idealism or naiveté of a Canadian playwright and professor. Finally, I could put my money where my mouth was, or shut up from here on after. So, travelling to Israel to teach was risky in more ways than the obvious. It could reinforce my belief in the power of the arts, or totally

annihilate those beliefs that had come to define who I was as a teacher, an artist and a person.

Up to this point, I had always brought my Lesley students tiny tokens from Canada. No matter what the age, students always appreciate a surprise from their teacher. Canada pins or pencils covered with red maple leafs was my way of telling them how much I had enjoyed spending those intensive weekends with them. It also acted as a reminder that we were from different places, with different backgrounds, yet were capable of communicating and sharing so much. When I began my packing for Israel—I had only received the call one month before the teaching date—these tokens seemed trivial. I couldn't go all the way to Israel and just give these students Canadian lapel pins! Instead, I would present them with a gift about my homeland. I would present them with the images of Canada in quilt form. I thought this use of iconic images appropriate because I was also searching for the other, non-mediated image(s) of Israel.

There was a problem, however. I was not a quilter; I didn't even own a sewing machine, let alone scraps of fabric for a quilt!

So, off to a friend's basement I went in search of purchasing colour coordinated metres of fabric. I thought the images of Canada could be glued or painted onto earth-toned squares that would then be sewn onto a larger background. After soliciting the help of a few sewing friends, our children began questioning what we were doing and why this place called Israel required such an elaborate gift. These questions brought the children into the project and helped them learn about this far away land and its struggles. In the end, twenty squares containing the various images of Canada were created by both adults and children.

As I stated earlier, this story has many chapters. I will fast forward to the presentation of the Canadian quilt to my forty students. These women and one man wooed and ahhed the display. They turned it back to front, front to back, touched it with their hands and faces, laughed at the images of a skinny parliament building and long necked goose, inquired at the meaning behind the Inukshuk, and sighed at the beauty of a Tiger Lily.

Forty Israeli teachers wanted to reciprocate the gesture. They wanted to send a gift back to the children and parents who had made this brown, rust and green textured message. So, my lesson plan for the next morning began to unfold organically from their hearts and I followed their enthusiasm into unknown territory. I would assist them in making an Israeli quilt?!

The previous day we had experimented with Augusto Boal's physical games in order to liberate the body and free the mind. While that is an intriguing story in and of itself,

during the quilt activity I told the students about a specific story Boal recounts in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, where he gives a group of South American villagers cameras to photograph where they live. We then discussed the importance of a sense of place, geography and social-political context—in its many manifestations—to cultural identity. We explored how people often define themselves in relation to where they live.

I provided Canadian examples that greatly impacted my sense of cultural self: the Group of Seven, Native and Inuit art, the Tragically Hip, pop culture in the form of beer commercials and the literature of Munroe, Purdy, Reaney and Findley.

In turn, these stories connected to the quilt activity in that the students were going to use fabric to communicate their sense of place and sense of identity. Playing with fabrics, they would bypass the dominant means of communication—in this case television and the nightly news—and engage in the expressiveness and tactile warmth of the arts in order to tell a story true to them. The arts would empower them to correct the misconceptions of the outside world, or at least the people in my small Canadian town, about life in Israel.

Using the Canadian quilt as their model, each student would design his or her own 6” x 6” image of a sense of place and a sense of home. As students examined the already finished quilt, they commented that they thought Canada was a happy place, but that the quilt’s earth-toned colour coordination did not convey this message. (And, to think I put so much effort into finding a soothing palette!) The Israeli quilt, on the other hand, would capture their vibrancy and zest for life. So, the students enthusiastically gathered supplies, and brought reams of fabric scraps from home and set to work with the sounds of Canadian and Israeli music filling the room. Sequins, glitter, jewelry, plant-life, lace, satin, silk, home-dyed cottons, paint, chalk buttons, feathers and pins—all these things went into the making of a sense of place and home. The idea of uniformity, conformity and consistency was totally abandoned as I received 40 “squares” of all shapes and sizes.

The activity did not end there. Remember, I am a writer; so the next day I asked the students to look and think about home. As inspiration I used the following excerpt from a story written by one of Canada’s best author and playwright Timothy Findley: Home is the center of our lives. Only a fool . . . a determined, not a true pessimist . . . would tell you otherwise. One is not just people. Home is what people dream, a bed, a window, food, a blanket. Something, anything, kindly to remember. For horses, the smell of hay and other horses. For cows, the mother-smell of milk. For us, for humankind, a photograph of someone loved, the taste of marmalade, curry, wild rice, the scent of snow. In a trunk or in a suitcase, in a mind or in a memory, something carried everywhere. The permanence of nowhere, nowhere somewhere, because you

have it in your hand. I am here – and with me, who I am. We are home – in the rain and on fire, in ruins and in standing walls. No one leaves home. We carry it. It has a leather handle and it burns your hands and bumps against your bum. For me, it has an Irish voice. It says: “go later to your room. Now come with me. And stay. (p. 68)

Not all the students spoke or understood English. Half the class did these workshops with me and then continued the course with an Israeli instructor in Hebrew. The rest wanted the foreigner—as I was called—to practice their English. But many times, even my group required an interpreter in order to catch the details. After reading the Findley excerpt to the students in English, my student-interpreter took over and translated the passage into Hebrew. I can not thank her enough for her assistance. Regarding the quilt assignment itself, I thought the instructions were simple enough; however, I would eventually be reminded that subtle codes hide within all language systems. I asked them to create a false or mock haiku about their quilt square. They were to use descriptive, sensory language and take the visual into the linguistic realm by writing about their home. The haikus were false because I learned very quickly from the squares that there was little point in asking them to follow a haiku’s syllabic rhythm. I am so glad that together we warped, twisted and broke the rules.

An interesting dilemma happened during the second part of the activity. I certainly did not see it, or intend it, and it arose, as a result of translation and subtle coding. I instructed the students, in part one of the activity, to create their vision of home and sense of place.

The directions for the second part asked them to consider their home and sense of place. I think the quotation added to the personal nature of the assignment. I intended the message or task to be identical with only the art medium changing. One student who had earned her college degree in the United States and still spent summers in New Hampshire interpreted the task as a discordant leap from her ideal vision to her real version of home and place. In essence, she was following a backward design of the Boalian theatre activities we had performed two days prior where we moved from the real to the ideal with the emphasis being on the transitional, middle process.

Like most graduate students in creative arts, she was deeply concerned that she had “done it wrong.” Her quilt square depicted a Holly Hobby type world, and she wanted to re-do her square. By the way, hers was the only one that was 6x6. My response to her was that she had not made a mistake; there was no such thing. She would simply have to find a way to link her disparate visions. And isn’t such linking the artist’s greatest challenge and strength? The student’s solution still hits me today.

The entire quilt tells each student’s individual story. But to share each narrative is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I would like to share a few more squares.

The student acting as my interpreter created an abstract view of her Kibbutz. Her false haiku transformed the interesting colours and shapes into a haunting reality.

Her haiku mimics this visual tranquility: “Citrus blossoms in the spring.” Both works signify her desire to escape reality and enter an idyllic wilderness away from the dropping bombs. This student came all too close to a suicide bombing the previous year. During our theatre workshop she found a way to think about the issues and her experience without crying and without paralyzing fear. More significantly to her, she had discovered art’s safe environment as a way to help her elementary school students do the same.

The final two squares pictured in this paper were created by a father and his daughter: both were taking the “Arts and Culture in the Community” course. The father based his work on his memories of peace. His daughter only knew that she could not take her own child to the museum, to the art gallery, to the public square without fear and trepidation. Her work signifies the reality of her young life.

Additional signification arises from a myriad of juxtapositions. They have familial ties. Each square acts as bookends to the quilted row reflecting the way war and peace defines society. Finally, their particular row is in the very heart of the quilt with four other rows above and below.

Since it was our last day together, there was neither the time nor the equipment to assemble this massive quilt. Instead, we shared our work and discussed how the creative process became a metaphor of community development. Beginning from a place of personal empowerment with the individual squares, these squares negotiated their place and positioning within the larger whole. Such negotiations create a supportive community with each square resting upon the strength of the next. Since the individual squares form one collective piece, the finished quilt takes on a life of its own as it connects to the world in a communicative act with the potential of bringing a particular understanding and insight to others.

My experiment with the arts became an experiment in teaching and learning. Ironically, I am not sure who learned more—the students or me. On a personal level, they showed me how to cherish family, friends and to place everything in perspective of a larger context. On a professional level, I experienced a simultaneous encounter between the act of teaching and the act of learning, and I believe this is what a valuable educational experience should be in the first place.

A person cannot embrace learning without an experience of teaching. Likewise, one cannot effectively teach without an openness to learning. Both are offerings that

require an act of faith from each participant: the teacher and the student. Each offer themselves to the moment where teaching and learning unite.

As Leonard Cohen sings, “Forget your perfect offering/There is a crack in everything”—in the cracks, in the jagged voids, in the creative process, that is where teaching and learning meet; where the personal and the political intertwine to make meaning. This is the insight the experiment of teaching and learning in Israel brought me and continues to bring me—in new and fascinating manifestations—each time I go there. The finished quilt has a sewn front, and is tied together. It measures 130cm x214cm (51inches x 84inches) and it is beautiful—like my students. Best of all, an idea that was simply a personal gift spawned into an arts-based, cultural exchange with personal and political impact. The quilt has toured to Lesley University’s main campus and various elementary and high schools in Canada (see Figure 10). The Canadian quilt resides somewhere in Israel.

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