



Art: Art and Hospitality

What if students could learn respect through art?

Jack wanted to introduce his class to some African Christian art but was aware that the unusual style and cultural differences could mean that his students would understand very little. To appreciate this painting they would need to come with an attitude of humility and respect.

"I decided to use the artwork *He Is the Reason We Are Dancing* by Chidi Okoye (www.modernartimages.com/expressionsofdance2.htm) from Nigeria. I explained that we had a visitor from another country coming to speak to us. We shared how we would welcome our visitor and show our respect. I explained that the visitor was from Nigeria, and we pooled what we knew about Nigeria. I showed them some images on the board. Since our visitor was from Nigeria, some things would be different from what we were used to, and some things would be the same. Together we worked out guidelines about how we would respond:

- We will not make up our minds before we have listened carefully.
- If something seems odd to us, we will not quickly assume it's foolish or inferior.
- We will expect differences and similarities and will work hard at understanding.
- It is all right to ask questions about things that are unusual or different.
- We will expect to learn new things from this visitor.

"I showed the painting, being careful with my own body language as I unveiled it. I introduced it as our visitor from Nigeria. This caused a bit of a stir at first, but then they settled down. We thought about how we would adapt our welcome and how we would show respect to a painting. We used our guidelines as we explored the painting."

What's going on here?

Jack **saw** his art class as a way of encouraging humility, respect, and attentiveness and of seeing art as a personal encounter. He saw the introduction of a new painting as a chance to practice hospitality to strangers.

He **engaged** his students in reflecting on their own responses when relating to a foreign visitor before he asked them to respond. He explicitly invited his students to engage with the painting in morally committed ways , and he made it an encounter of learning from, not just learning about.

Jack **reshaped his practice** by drawing on faith sources (a Christian painting) and adjusting both his own body language and how he framed questions and images.

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Respect and humility are aspects of **love**. Humility is essential if we are to learn from others. Humility is not groveling self-abasement; it is the opposite of the pride and arrogance that thinks we having nothing to learn from other cultures. True humility is a generous attitude of mind that values others and what they have made and sees oneself realistically. Jesus modeled humility throughout his life. Hospitality to strangers is an important expression of love when we meet those who are different from us.

What difference does it make?

Jack made art a personal encounter rather than an analytical exercise. Analytical skills are necessary, and students need to learn them, but they are skills that enable a deeper encounter to take place. His choice of framing questions for the encounter with the art work helped the students reflect on the virtues needed for “learning from” at the same time as engaging with artistic questions.


Where could we go from here?

This approach to reframing students’ encounters with culturally different resources could be applied to poems, films, narratives from historical figures, and also to actual visitors.

Teachers could consider what other virtues might be brought into play when interacting with material, and what change in attitude might be needed. Modeling from the teacher is an important component.

Digging deeper

The term for “respect” in biblical Hebrew means “to bow down.” Respect and honor were shown by a physical position. We do not have the elaborate bows and curtsies of some other cultures, but we still can explore with students how we show respect today. One of the ways in which we show respect is by not jumping to judgment but instead taking time to consider what the other person is saying.



Hasty conclusions are the mark of a fool; a wise man doubteth; a fool rageth and is confident; the novice saith, “I am sure that it is so”; the better learned answers, “Peradventure, it may be so; but, I pray thee, inquire.” Jeremy Taylor

The Bible locates human worth in being made by God and mattering to him. Because of this, people do not have to wait to earn our respect: respect is our basic response, and all deserve to be treated with dignity as God’s children (1 Peter 2:13-17). Jesus said that he treats what we do to others as done to himself (Matthew 25:40). The Bible explicitly includes those who are foreign to us, emphasizing that strangers are to be treated with hospitality and care (Hebrews 13:2).

We can respect people’s creativity, thinking, and achievements without ignoring their flaws. Giving respect to what people have made is a way of paying respect to them.

Learning from others involves humility. In Philippians 2:3 Paul does call on Christians to “in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” This is not a call to pretend but rather a call for generosity of spirit. Generosity of spirit is what this lesson required of teacher and students. The New Testament talks of being teachable (James 1:21), and humility is what makes people teachable. For this reason, when St. Augustine was asked what he thought the three greatest virtues were, he replied, “Humility, humility, and then humility.”

The model of humility is Christ himself, who gave up equality with God to become one of us (Philippians 2:5-11).



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