

Modern Art, Cultural Pluralism and Agriculture Students: The New York City Experience



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Abstract

African stiltwalkers, subway singers, sailors shopping in Little Italy, rescue workers, shopkeepers with relatives in Mali, and window washers, students re-crossing the George Washington Bridge conclude, "What we will miss most is the friendly people." People, places, and events dramatically etch the value of multiculturalism on rural students making their pilgrimage to New York City.

In a multidisciplinary, introductory course on New York City's visual arts, literature, drama, dance, music and architecture within their cultural contexts, students investigate art and then journey to taste first hand the city's joys. This cosmopolitan giant teems with the products of the mingling of centuries of immigrant cultures. Speaking to our class, Peter Rutkoff explains, "Art is a window, mirror and instruction book." Art pleases but also helps us to get inside a culture, asking us to change our points of view or our actions.

In this paper, I describe how artists in the twentieth century understood the term "modern," define "art" and "cultural pluralism," outline representative educational activities in the local and New York "classrooms," and demonstrate how rural students respond to encountering many ethnicities through their art.

Introduction

Standing on a Brooklyn street corner surrounded by faces in hues ranging from sienna to ebony, students pass around a dish of curried goat and spicy red beans and rice and gnaw on a machete-whittled stalk of sugarcane. A stilt walker dodges their professor, who is eyeing a batiked African dress, and students from The Ohio State University-Agricultural Technical Institute (Ohio State-ATI) wonder on what planet they have landed. The emotions on their faces flash between dismay and delight.

At Ohio State-ATI, students choose one humanities course to complete an Associate of Applied Science in agriculture. "Humanities as a Window on Cultural Pluralism: The Arts in New York City" fulfills this requirement for about twenty students a

quarter. The students in the class familiarize themselves with New York City's art and what the art reveals about New York's populace then travel to the City. A guest speaker, Peter Rutkoff, distinguished professor of American Studies at Kenyon College, explains three potential roles art fulfills. Reflecting the context in which art is created, art shows us another's viewpoint, "window," allows self-examination, "mirror," and guides our lives, "instruction book." Clifford Geertz (1966) concurs, "Cultural acts, the construction, apprehension, and utilization of symbolic forms, are social events like any other; they are as public as marriage and as observable as agriculture."

In this paper I explain the activities in the local and New York "classrooms" and their theoretical bases. Then, I describe how students mostly from rural backgrounds respond to meeting various American ethnic populations through experiencing the art the immigrants and transplants created.

Intellectual Perspectives I: What is Modern Art?

During the first class session, we work to develop a comfortable definition for art. Phrases like "creative process," "imagination," or "aesthetically pleasing" dominate the discussion. "Is this red pushpin in the bulletin board framed with chalk art?" I ask. "Are you trying to express something?" they return volley. Without a doubt, art is a way that humans express themselves; but art also may be one of the forces that shapes our humanity. Susanne Langer (1962) notices, "Every culture develops some kind of art as surely as it develops language. Some primitive cultures have no real mythology or religion, but they all have some artdance, song, design (sometimes only on tools or on the human body)... Art is the epitome of human life, the truest record of insight and feeling... the spearhead of human development."

Humans are compelled to create not just useful tools but beautiful tools; and, in the process, they create themselves, with flexible minds and expanded possibilities. In ritual life, the arts, such as dance and body painting, serve as a counterforce to evil and generate energy (Keil 1979). Students have little experience thinking about art's influence in a society.

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To begin, I ask students to examine Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives* (1971). A Danish immigrant, Riis published a photographic exposé of the dire circumstances of immigrants in Lower East Side and Hell's Kitchen tenements in 1898. These photographs changed public opinion and later laws. "Are these art or documentary photographs, i.e. historical or sociological fact?" Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs in *Altars* (1995) circulates. "Art or pornography?" students ponder.

A few weeks later as students pour over Venn and Weinberg's *Frames of Reference: Looking at American Art, 1900-1950* (1999), Peter Rutkoff explains that modern art celebrates and critiques urban life. In architecture, the skyscraper epitomizes "the modern." He points out that visual artists use an illusion, "perspective," to trick us into believing we are seeing in three-dimensions. Art helps us to transcend the "humdrum" and to suspend reality. On National Public Radio's *Morning Edition*, 30 May 2003, the director of Cinemania, Steve Kovak observes, "When you put a frame (like a stage or page) around something, you intensify it." Susan Langer (1953) suggests, "The function of the artistic illusion is not 'make-believe'...but the very opposite, disengagement from belief, the contemplation of sensory qualities without their usual meaning." Thus, art reorders our individual awareness and our social reality. "I think it was cool that [Rutkoff] got the class involved in the art. He wasn't just trying to imprint his opinion on us," a student enthuses. Students looking at Burgoyne Diller's "First Theme" (1938) erupt with, "I could do that" or "That's not art. It's ugly!" Or they are intrigued by the haunting loveliness of Hopper's "Early Sunday Morning" (1930) or the accurate representation of nature of O'Keeffe's "Summer Days" (1936). The next session, we eat pizza and paint with acrylics. I buy pints of acrylic house paint in basic colors on ceiling tiles, art canvas, and heavy foil. They enjoy examining each other's attempts.

Of course, students find that "art" means more than painting. For example, dressed in a Greek toga, Isadore Duncan danced barefoot "with an abandon that offered audiences a new vision of female movement...A heavy woman, Duncan exuded a sensuality and female vitality that forced her audiences to rethink their ideas of womanhood" (Scott and

Rutkoff, 1999). As a modern Jewish woman, Duncan challenged male-domination, believed in modern birth control methods, engaged openly in heterosexual and homosexual relationships, and held radical political views. Using Duncan's example, students discuss how art faces down societal norms and reveals to viewers how tradition curtails or inhibits freedom.

Table 1 Survey of the Attitudes Toward Racial and Ethnic Minorities of 152 Ohio State-ATI students and Survey of Attitudes of 15 The Arts in New York City Students Post-Test (both Autumn 2002)
(Key: 1= Accepting, 3=Neutral, 5=Rejecting)

Attitude of:	Rural (nr. 51/4)		Rural (nr. 64/4)		Sub/Urban (nr. 15/1)		Sub/Urban (nr. 22/5)	
	no ethnic mates		with ethnic mates		no ethnic mates		with ethnic mates	
	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Mean	Median	Mean	Median
RELATIVES:								
Parent 1	2.1	2	1.23	2	1.47	1	2.09	2
	2.75	3	1.50	1	1	1	1.80	1
Parent 2	2.3	2	2.17	2	1.53	1	2.18	2
	2.25	2,3	2.00	1,3	1	1	1.60	1
Grandparent 1	2.67	3	2.61	3	1.93	2	3.23	3
	2.75	3	2.25	1,3	1	1	3.20	3
Grandparent 2	2.39	3	2.59	3	2.43	2.5	3.1	3
	2.25	2,3	2.75	3	1	1	3.20	3
Other	2.37	3	2.36	3	1.55	1	1.92	3
	2.00	1,3	2.75	2,3	1	1	3.00	3
FRIENDS:	2.8	3	2.66	3	1.6	1	2.05	2
	2.25	1,3	2.00	1	1	1	2.00	2
MY HIGH SCHOOL ATTITUDE:	2.06	2	2.09	2	1.47	1	1.36	1
	2.25	2,3	1.50	1	1	1	1.80	1
MY CURRENT ATTITUDE:	1.78	1	2.08	2	1.27	1	1.86	1
	1.75	1,2	1.50	1	1	1	1.80	1

Intellectual Perspectives II: What is Cultural Pluralism?

To benchmark student attitudes, in the first session students complete a survey of attitudes towards racial and ethnic minorities and a numbered diversity survey, which I match to the post-test at quarter's end. (See Table 1) Many students hailing from rural communities report having narrow views and few firsthand experiences of diversity: "I grew up in ____, Ohio, where an African-American would be chased out of town in less than a month...I learned to have hatred from my grandfather. Although in my elementary school, there was one African-American family that survived the hatred," remarks a nineteen-year-old.

In a self-report, the control group of 152 Ohio State-ATI students rate themselves and their Ohio State-ATI peers as slightly less accepting of diversity than the "average" American. One class ignores a hearing-impaired student because of her "accent." Even the media they take in, Country Music

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Television, Rush Limbaugh, and local newspapers reinforce their stereotypes. Essayist Richard Rodriguez (2002) notes people's limitations, "My brown is a reminder of conflict...the terrorist and the skinhead dream in solitude of purity and of the straight line because they fear the future that does not isolate them" [emphasis mine]. Grouping with others like themselves is reassuring to students. Stepping out of their comfort zone is not.

Similarly, not every aspect of our study charms. "I find [Mapplethorpe's] work offensive, immature, and it displays humans in such an aspect that is quite disturbing," a student protests. "I personally don't really like talking about racial issues," admits another. Several plead for people to blend, "I think that the minorities in America along with the majorities should just ignore the fact that they're different and accept people as they are"; and nearly all state that they oppose bilingual education. Yet, most students find themselves enthralled, perhaps radicalized, by personally experiencing pluralism in the city. One student wrote, "New York was amazing, just the overall life generated, the limitless possibilities available. Maybe I should give up on trying to be a dairy farmer and try to write books or something and go live in New York... They say America is a melting pot, well, I say New York is the top of the pot."

One woman, struck by the fact that women sewed sixteen hours a day, "exhausted, corpses, hot, tired," exclaims that with "all that women have done for this country, we should always learn about women, their impact on America and helping it get started. They never got the recognition." Although the surveys show only a slight adjustment in student's thinking throughout the quarter (Table 3), it may be several years before the effects are felt. This course is unlikely to overturn completely long-held prejudices. Yet, students report a growth: "We got to not only learn about different culture, but experience them" and "I enjoyed 'Waiting for Lefty' if you do not stand up and fight for yourself, no one else will." They recount many surprises: "Ground Zero was much larger than I expected; the Statue of Liberty was much smaller."

Samba and tamale, signifyin(g) and fufu, hora and matzoh ball, the gumbo of American culture is lush and tantalizing. Current American policy endorses inclusiveness. Nearly all our educational institutions now have a diversity requirement with specific goals and competencies and work from the premise that it is possible to improve interpersonal skills and attitudes through education in cultural awareness (Aby, 1997). The desired outcome is cultural pluralism. Former President Bill Clinton advocates,

We must never believe that diversity is a weakness it is our greatest strength. Americans speak

every language, know every country. People on every continent can look to us and see the reflection of their own greatness, as long as we give all our citizens, whatever their background, an opportunity to achieve their greatness. We are not there yet. We still see evidence of abiding bigotry and intolerance, in ugly words and awful violence, in burned churches and bombed buildings. We must fight against this in our country and in our hearts (In: Levinson and Ember, 1997).

Proud of their own culture, secure and self-aware, citizens would also be tolerant of the cultures of their neighbors. As the British playwright Oscar Wilde (1997) posits, "One does not see anything until one sees its beauty." Vecoli (1995) contends that our mainstream culture is already more diverse than we admit:

Some have argued that there is an American core culture, essentially British in origin, in which immigrants and their offspring are absorbed. However, if one compares the 'mainstream culture' of Americans today (music, food, literature, mass media) with that of one or two centuries ago, it is obvious that it...is the product of syncretism, the melding of different, sometimes contradictory and discordant elements. Multiculturalism is not a museum of immigrant cultures, but rather this complex of the living, vibrant ethnicities of contemporary America.

Appreciation of the splendor of another culture both material (e.g., dress and technology) and non-material (e.g., language and values) proceeds from realizing how others struggle to maintain their identity as well as how they combine into uniquely American forms. The anonymity of the city allows some freedoms too risky for small town America (Willits et al., 1982). In the city, students learn "to tolerate the ambiguity that results from not knowing what the rules are or what is expected of you in unfamiliar situations" (Vaughn, 2002). Then, they learn to expect the unexpected, blue spiked-haired teens, blue-lidded cross dressers, and blue-veined elderly with their grocery pushcarts.

Teaching the Course I: Exploring Pluralism: Classroom Activities and Assignments

The classroom assignments in "New York City and the Arts" course seek to open discussion about New York City. (See Table 2) One assignment has four parts. First, students choose a photograph from Riis' (1971) book. Each reports on the accompanying chapter about the immigrants of 1900. They are always amazed at the number of bars as compared to churches—111 Protestant churches, chapels and places of worship below Fourteenth Street, 4,065 saloons—and shocked at the presence of "street Arabs," homeless boys. Second, they interview a

recent immigrant. Third, they write a paper contrasting the experiences of the immigrants a century apart. I express pleasure in their resourcefulness in finding “a guy from Germany married to my aunt” or “the Hindu family that bought the farm next to ours.” Linda Houston, an Ohio State-ATI professor, tells how her family met monthly at the Henry Street Settlement House on Manhattan's Grand Avenue to visit and pool their money to bring other members from Eastern Europe.

Another discussion centers around the contrasting views of two African-American leaders as to how “blacks” could be “modern.” In the wake of the Emancipation, Booker T. Washington, the founder of Alabama's Tuskegee Institute, declared the “natural” destiny of blacks as service. African-Americans should train to be domestics and craftspeople. However, in New York City, W.E.B. DuBois, the first African-American Harvard Ph.D. and a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Persons (NAACP), maintained that education in the arts and sciences was the key. He encouraged the “Talented Tenth,” the brightest and best, to devote themselves to the arts as the shortest route to achievement, recognition, and acceptance for all African-Americans. The elite, including professionals, turned to painting, sculpture, architecture, and music (DuBois, in: Levy, 1994). One lawyer who followed DuBois' advice was Paul Robeson. With a law degree from Columbia University, Robeson turned to the stage to make his contribution. The class watches clips from the 1936 film version of the musical, “Showboat,” with its minstrel show stereotypes. Hattie McDaniel nags Robeson to stop being so lazy. Whittling, he sings “Ole Man River.” Still, one plot conflict centers around a bi-racial couple “One drop of Negro blood makes you a Negro in these parts,” says the sheriff and charges of miscegenation. The students consider what instructions the musical gave to viewers in 1930's America about ethnic relations.

Robeson's life leads into a session on art and politics. Robeson was censored by the House Un-American Affairs Committee since he would not denounce the Communist Party (Stuckey, 1994). I offer a brief history of unionism, including the public outcry inspired by Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire (Zinn, 1980). Subsequently, we concentrate on Odets' “Waiting for Lefty” (1939), a one-act play, “part agit-prop, part minstrel show, and part working class melodrama based on New York's bitter 1934 taxicab strike” (Scott and Rutkoff, 1999). I dole out the parts and describe the union hall setting. Strikers peppered through the audience wait for their leader. Recalling the opening night, Odets says, “The audience stopped the show, they got up and began to cheer and weep... You saw for the first time theater as a cultural force” (Miller, 1957). The students love playacting

and cite labor-management conflicts from their experiences.

America's greatest musical contributions to the world, jazz and the blues, originated in African-American life (Meltzer, 1999). With roots in New Orleans and slave life across the South, this music came north by riverboat and train with African-Americans seeking a better life in the city. Students listen to musical examples and try to write twelve-bar blues lyrics. We travel to Cleveland to a blues club to hear Robert Lockwood, Jr., blues great Robert Johnson's stepson, and visit the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame to see the blues' influence on rock'n'roll. Astonished to learn that African-Americans were barred from attending Louis Armstrong's homecoming concert in New Orleans, students read how well paid, famous musicians slept in railroad stations when no local hotels or boarding houses would put them up (Harrison 1988). They discuss how African-Americans respond to centuries of prejudice.

A vital part of the course is journal writing. Personal reflection follows readings and activities. Scholars write about the value of journaling for developing critical thinking skills (Hallberg, 1987). Ohio State-ATI students journal in their orientation course and later in engineering and social sciences courses. In *The Arts in New York City*, students have the full attention of the instructor when they inquire upon reading J. W. Johnson's *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1958), “I never read a book of poetry before. Where do I begin?” or contemplate, “I wonder if women's paintings in general are different from men's.”

The week before we go to New York, students report on one aspect of New York (e.g., the Guggenheim, Coney Island). I read Emma Lazarus' “The New Colossus” and Langston Hughes' “I, Too, Sing America” (Gates and McKay, 1997), two voices speaking for the immigrant. Students reflect on them. We talk about expectations for the trip, (e.g., Show up on time and participate fully in every scheduled event; Mix, mingle, in other words, make an effort to include everybody; Step outside your comfort zone and pull someone into your group for a meal or walk), and how to get around on the subway.

Teaching the Course II: Experiencing Pluralism: The New York City Experience

We're off! The van ride goes quickly, we soon see the lights and smell the City. After an evening of live music at Broadway restaurants one block from Hosteling International, we sleep soundly on solid bunkbeds. A favorite activity is sitting on the patio talking with Germans and Italians also hosteling.

Recently, our first Saturday stop is the World Trade Center area. We pause at street memorials with their folk art quality. One group walks the six

Table 2 New York City Sample Topics and People

<p><u>What is Art? Photography and New York Immigrant Life in 1900</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jacob Riis, Joseph Byron, Robert Mapplethorpe <p><u>Crazy Blues, Race Records and Films</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bessie Smith, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Mamie Smith, Victoria Spivey <p><u>Jazz</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Art Tatum, L. Armstrong, ‘Duke’ Ellington, ‘Dizzie’ Gillespie, Miles Davis, Billie Holiday <p><u>The American Story</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Amy Tan, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Jorge López, Gwendolyn Wright, Ralph Ellison <p><u>Art and Politics</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Oliver Harrington, Henrietta Rodman, Dorothy Day, Margaret Sanger, Edna St. Vincent-Millay <p><u>Modern Art</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Georgia O’Keeffe, Jacob Lawrence, Alice Neel, Lee Krassner, Isamu Noguchi, Augusta Savage <p><u>Dance</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Martha Graham, Alvin Ailey, Judith Jamison
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Table 3 What About Diversity? Pre-test and Post-test Results (Autumn 2002)

Question	PRE-TEST				POST-TEST		
	+	Neutral	--	Don't Understand	+	Neutral	--
1. Ohio State-ATI is thinking about offering a course in ethnic diversity. Should it be required? Why or why not?	10	0	5	0	10	0	5
2. You bought food in Café Carmen. The only students eating at this time are three African-American students. What do you do?	9	6	0	0	8	6	1
3. You overhear a friend talking about “jewling” someone down or “gypping” someone. What do you do?	1	6	4	4	7	5	3
4. Ohio State University has decided not to observe Martin Luther King Day this year. What do you think or feel or do about that?	10	2	3	0	7	4	4
5. Some gay and lesbian students express that they would like to be given protected status as a minority group. What do you think?	5	3	7	0	8	2	5
6. “Racial profiling” is a term that you can hear every night on the news these days. How do you think or feel about that?	8	3	2	2	8	4	3

blocks to get tickets to stand on the platform overlooking the site.

At the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, groups of fourteen enter a preserved building to hear the stories of those who lived there until 1936. “Piecing it Together” details the life of an Italian family of dressmakers. Upstairs the Jewish father has tuberculosis, so they cram in boarders to have money to buy food. Museum interns have researched the families, and docents show us photographs of descendants.

After a footrace through Chinatown and jumping on the subway to dash to a play, “Noises Off,” we decide next time to skip the afternoon play and eat instead. At eight, half of us sees “Beauty and the Beast” while the other half sees “Aida.” This is the musical story of a [black] slave, a princess of Nubia

captured in a war raid, and a [white] general, first in line to the throne of Egypt. The themes include war, love and respect in unexpected places, loss, betrayal, and capital punishment.

On another trip, we head uptown to the Studio Museum of Harlem to see Romare Bearden's work. Next, live at the Apollo Theatre, we sit in inexpensive orchestra seats enjoying “Harlem Song.” This multimedia revue incorporates film, interviews, dance, and song to honor Ma Rainey, Malcom X, Billie Holiday, Langston Hughes, and the vibrant artistic life of Harlem from 1900 to the present.

At night, Times Square is the place to be. From the first New Year's celebration in 1905 with music and fireworks (Scott and Rutkoff, 1999), Times Square is an all-night party with blinding lights, perpetual motion, preachers, and breakdancers. Crowds stand agape or shuffle like a herd of penned cows.

A major highlight of a Memorial Day trip proves to be DanceAfrica at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. We grab a mouthwatering bite in the African bazaar outside. Nearly all of us are white, nearly all of the other attendees in this sold-out performance are not. Xenophobic but justifiably sensitive to their out-of-placeness, students express discomfort. When the director of dance invites us to hug seven other people, the students relax. The drumming

and the dancing are beyond belief. The Ballet Folclorico Cutumba, a company specializing in Haitian-Cuban dance, amazes us with their maypole dance, winding the American and Cuban flags in red, white and blue, and then reversing the process in just a blink of an eye with acrobatic tumbling. We are screaming and ululating with the rest.

Conclusions

The development of intercultural competencies through coursework that emphasizes cultural pluralism moves agriculture students toward an ability to cope with and appreciate differences. No one would question the fact that agribusiness is an international concern. Across the Midwest, communities and businesses, such as dairy farms, green-

houses, and landscape companies, are welcoming a wave of recruits from India, El Salvador, Mexico, the Middle East, and Europe. Our students are working closely with people of various backgrounds. Their ability to appreciate difference makes them not just well-rounded individuals but more valuable employees. Classes that celebrate diversity can stimulate mental growth. What makes this course special is that students immerse themselves in the multicultural experience if only for a long weekend. This makes good pedagogical sense.

Sixteen of nineteen students who began in the course in Autumn 2002 completed it. The greatest difference in the post-tests was that their answers to the open-ended questions were nearly twice as long. Perhaps, the students were comfortable opening up with the professor to talk about diversity or had learned to tell the professor what they thought she wanted to hear: "I think it's sad there's still a lot of racism. It's mostly underground" and "Diversity in culture, religion, beliefs and values is what makes this world so great." I will continue to monitor their thoughts and attitudes and adjust the course. But a long-range study of these students over a five to ten year period will give further evidence.

The students themselves earnestly express the value of the New York City experience. The promise of the trip serves as a carrot that lures them into the class. But they also recognize that the coursework has prepared them to visit the City, opened their eyes, and helped them to think and reflect on their own prejudices and limitations. And this includes their prejudices about what is Art and what is not.

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