Citizenship Education and the
Winnipeg International Storytelling Festival

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Prepared by: Sandra Krahn

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This paper examines how well the program of the student forum at the Winnipeg International Storytelling Festival addresses the three abilities for democratic citizenship by Nussbam (2006). The importance of this study will be followed by an overview of the theory of class distinction by Pierre Bourdieu (1977), which will be the theoretical framework used for analysis. A description of the activities in the student forum is used to examine where the program provides space for reflection on the three abilities by Nussbam (2006). Suggestions will also be made on how to better address the three abilities. The paper will conclude with a reflection effectiveness of the theory of class distinction and the three abilities in evaluation of the student forum.

The theme of the festival in 2010 was leadership which was combined with the overarching goal of each festival which is peace and community renewal. The student forum was attended by one thousand students from the Winnipeg area and therefore has the opportunity to influence many teachers and students in the Province. An evaluation of the forum will help us improve models of youth engagement in social issues in the future. The forum planning was influenced by three books: Preparing for peace: conflict transformation across cultures by Lederach (1995), A World turned upside down: social ecological approaches to children in war zones by Boothby, Strang, & Wessells (2006), and Peace power for adolescents: strategies for a culture of nonviolence by Mattaini (2001). I believe it is important to question, discuss, and reflect on educational programs that influence youth. The use of a different framework to
evaluate the program will provide an opportunity to examine any ‘blind spots’ that were not addressed in our planning process.

I have chosen Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of class distinction because in Canadian society education, policies, and delivery have historically been controlled by a homogeneous group that does not represent the socio-economic diversity in our society. Bourdieu’s theory of class distinction examines the presence of social stratifications in societies. Bourdieu’s work originated from his experience in Algeria witnessing the “gruesome realities of colonial rule and war in Algeria” (Wacquant, 2006). Concerns and issues pertaining to social class and minority groups are often addressed as “problems”, especially after the colonization process, these problems have deep social roots not recognized or experienced by the dominant group. All socio-economic groups have values that underpin their culture and specific methods of transmitting these values; Bourdieu (1977) describes these as cultural capital. Students enter schools with specific cultural capital but not all skills, values, and behaviours are valued or accepted within our educational institutions. Bourdieu described the habitus which are attitudes in social structures that are components of the transmission of class from one generation to the next (MacLeod, 1995). This theoretical framework if valuable in our education system because many students are labelled ‘at risk’ because the values and norms they learned in their families are not recognized within the educational system. Students that enter the educational system with cultural capital that is valued and accepted within the system learn to label their peers as ‘problems’, enabling the cycle to continue. Bourdieu (2006) describes the impact of our education as “the action of the educations system, whose effect is unequal among children from different social class” (pg.266). This theory also has limitations in or educational systems today.
The limitation of this theory is the difficulty of applying it in a significant way in our school systems. Battiste (2000) stated that “school curricula teach Eurocentric thought” (pg 87). This is a strong statement indicating how entrenched one world view is in our current educational system. Education is also managed by such large bureaucracies that change is very slow. Many educators have difficulties recognizing the challenges experienced by minority students because most grew up with cultural capital that was reinforced by the school system. All too often a cultural day or allowance for individuals to take a holiday off of school is seen as adequate adaptations for minority groups. The reason I have addressed the issue of educators and the school system for a program that focuses on students is because these students will be left to question and make sense of the presentations and discussions in the context of their schools. The next section provides an overview of the student forum.

This discussion describes the fifth annual Winnipeg International Storytelling Festival; the festival has always included a large school program with storytelling and workshops. This was the first year two one day student forums were offered. The forums included storytelling and discussion groups facilitated by a multidisciplinary team of University students with peace and justice studies back ground. In two days one thousand Manitoba students from grade seven to twelve attended this forum. The program both days included a presentation by Craig Kielburger from Free the Children and facilitated workshops. On Thursday the program included presentations from a variety of different cultural storytellers. Friday students heard a presentation by Hannah Taylor a young local activist. The workshops addressed the theme of power exploring power over versus power with and encouraged youth to consider forms of power they have. Facilitators also asked students to reflect and discuss what issues were important to them and what actions they could take. The outline of the discussion was specifically modeled after
concepts in the book “*Peace Power for Adolescents: Strategies for a Culture of Nonviolence*” by Mark Mattaini (2001). Four components to the peace power strategy are: Recognition of Success, Act with Respect, Sharing Power to Build Community, and Make Peace (pg. 42). The student forum and festival are presented by the Mauro Centre for Peace and Justice. The next section of the paper will address the student forum program in reference to the three abilities of Nussbam including both the presentations and the facilitated discussions.

How well did the program address the three abilities of Nussbam? The first concept by Nussbam (2006) is critical thinking and reflection on one’s own culture and traditions. The theory of class distinction addresses this issue and the area of analysis is the habitus. What are the cultural norms and behaviours we live with every day that are routine and often not questioned? This concept was addressed in two ways by the forum. The cultural norms where first addressed through a presentation of youth activists that talked about why and how they questioned the norms of society. Craig Kielburger questioned the treatment and use of children in other parts of the world and how our society contributes to these problems through consumerism. Hannah also talked about breaking stereotypes of homeless people and how they are generally ignored by mainstream society. These two young people described their journey challenging social norms and what they learned when they chose to dig deeper into the issues. These youth represent individuals that have seen a crisis and taken the opportunity to examine “the experience of reality and the opportunity for reflection it provides” (Arendt 1968). Trough sharing their stories Craig and Hannah challenge students to reflect on social norms that result in inequalities in our local and global communities.

The facilitated discussion was intended to be an opportunity for students to reflect on the morning sessions. When asked about power, issues, and actions in small facilitated groups,
students responded with over five thousand thoughts and ideas. In this discussion the concept of reflection of one’s own culture was part of discussions though a comparison of different types of power, discussing specifically the difference between power over versus power with. Reflection of culture was not directly addressed and limited to the ability of each student to pull criticism and ideas from the morning presentations. Students were challenged to question cultural norms by the speakers in the morning but it was not directly addressed in the discussion sessions. Based on the program we will need to do further analyses on student feedback to determine if this ability was adequately addressed. In the future student journaling by sharing experiences from their cultural backgrounds and responding to stories of others would be another way that this concept could be addressed. Arendt (1968) stresses the importance of reflection, especially in times of crisis, many students feel that they are growing up in a world that is experiencing crisis on many different levels including social, economic, political, and environmental. It is important for students to recognize that they all enter school with not only different economic are resources, but different cultural capital as well. The awareness of differences leads into the second ability described by Nussbam.

The second ability of Nussbam (2006) is the awareness that we live in a heterogeneous society. Hannah Taylor describes the shock of seeing a man eating out of a garbage can on the street. Until that point in her life she did not know that there were people in the world that did not have a safe home, loving family, and food to eat. Craig also told the story when he became aware of the plight of children in Asia when he went to grab the comics and saw a headline in the newspaper describing the assassination of a child. Both of these youth activists shared a critical moment in their lives when they realized the diversity and poverty in the world. Presentations at the forum also included storytellers from Francophone, South African, and Haida cultural
traditions. Although each presentation was short it provided a diversity of voices, experiences, and cultural traditions. Providing student’s opportunities to hear and speak with people from different cultures and backgrounds is one of the main goals of the storytelling festival. Each festival strives towards diversity with storytellers from different genders, abilities, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

The original goal with the facilitated discussion was to mix students up into groups that would share and discuss issues over several days. When the forum grew from one hundred students to one thousand students, mixed groups became extremely difficult. As a result students met facilitators in their school groups which meant that they did not have the opportunity to meet with a group of students from different schools. While many schools attending have diverse populations, the groups were only as diverse as the school group the teacher chose to bring. The discussion did not specifically address the issue of diversity as the discussion revolved around power, issues, and actions. This is an area that we should engage in more significant discussion next year. This could be done by follow up sessions between a small group of students and the storytellers. Many storytellers share cultural stories but also stories that reflect the history of their country, culture, or local group. Roberta Kennedy a Haida storyteller shares the history of her people in relation to creation stories, but also in relation to how her community changed with colonization. These stories speak strongly to individual and group identities that have proud histories, but have also been suppressed and challenged. Providing students a session where they could engage with a storyteller that caught their interest, would provide them an opportunity to ask questions of traditions and culture. There are not many spaces in our educational system where students are provided the opportunity to speak with adults from different cultural groups.
Teachers as a whole represent an extremely homogenous group. In this sense the storytellers were not the only diverse group that worked with the students at the forum.

Facilitators were also selected and paired intentionally to maintain diversity by keeping in mind age, level of education, experience, gender, discipline of study, and ethnicity. Only two out of eighteen pairs did not represent gender diversity. All eighteen pairs of facilitators represented cultural diversity, sixteen included immigrants to Canada, of the two teams that did not include immigrants one included a First Nation’s representative, and the other included a French Canadian. The facilitators ranged in discipline of studies which included education, physiology, peace studies, engineering, human ecology, resource management, and political science. In this sense the facilitators represented an ideal of inclusion and diversity that our school system is as yet unable to provide. The wide range of experiences and backgrounds provided them the ability to address questions relating to the third ability which is sympathy.

The third ability of Nussbam’s (2006) is sympathy, or the ability to see the world through someone else’s eyes. Storytelling is an art that can help individuals to imagine the life experiences of other. Nussbam (2006) stated that “thought needs to be given to what the student’s particular blind spots are likely to be” (pg 7). What better place to identify student’s blind spots than to have youth share moments when they recognized their own blind spots? In this sense I believe that the sessions provided students the opportunity to see the world from a different perspective. Even with 400 students in the room, the room was quiet as Craig, Hannah, and other storytellers shared their experiences and stories. It was also evident, by the number of students that came to the front to talk with the storytellers, that they had been engaged in their stories. When asked in small group discussions to identify what issues the speakers had addressed in one and a half hours students identified over one hundred issues. The speakers in an
hour and a half had the ability to cover a very broad range of social, economic, and cultural experiences through storytelling. While it is impossible to know if the students did take this journey with their imaginations the opportunity was definitely provided in the presentations.

In the facilitated discussion sympathy was not explicitly addressed. As well as identifying issues based on the presentations students were also given an opportunity to identify issues that were important to them. The issues that came up could be considered indicators of which group of people students empathised or sympathised with. This list included many of the issues addressed in the sessions and included others as well. In discussions the issues that came up were rich and diverse indicating that students had reflected on different stories and contexts. In the evaluation of the event many students indicated an interest in learning more about Haiti, which puzzled me at first, as I didn’t remember Haiti mentioned in the presentations. I did realize that Craig had told a story about Haiti, which described two boys that ran back into a devastated building to help a friend that had a broken leg. While the interest in Haiti does not provide proof that the students empathised with these boys, it does indicate that this short story had some impact. There are many ways that we could provide more opportunities to improve students’ abilities in this area.

Mixing the groups from different schools and allowing them the opportunity to share and discuss experiences with each other would facilitate discussion between a more diverse group of students. If we are considering Bourdieu and class differences some schools are divided by class based on their catchment area. In this sense the students would get a larger economic diversity in their groups. Some groups attending like St. John’s Ravenscourt are private schools which represent a lower range of economic diversity than most public schools. Time in sessions could also be added to provide students more opportunity to share experiences related to their
cultural traditions. Even a simple activity like sharing a story of people’s names brings up a deep richness of cultural knowledge and diversity. Creating smaller session sizes so that the audience could interact with the storytellers would also provide students an opportunity to question speakers about ideas and traditions they are not familiar with.

A reflection on the three abilities by Nussbam (2006) provided me a different viewpoint to examine our programming. It also challenged me to reflect on the teacher’s role in shaping student idea’s and perceptions. While the forum is primarily planned for students it would also be helpful to provide professional development material for teachers in the area of peace and justice studies. The framework of the three abilities could also be used to develop discussion outlines and training for facilitators at next year’s festival. Examining the three abilities also reinforced for me the power of storytelling especially in its ability to exercise imagination and empathy. Not all stories end with happily ever after, but the role of the storyteller is to safely take you into a new world so that you can see all sides of the situation and bring you back (Simms, 2007). Although the forum did not explicitly discuss these three abilities, the artistic mode of storytelling provides opportunity to explore each of the three abilities. It is also interesting to note that ability one and three, reflection of cultural norms and sympathy, were combined in many ways through the stories of our young activists. In describing the moment that interested them in activism they expressed their sympathy to those less fortunate, while at the same time questioning societies acceptance of poverty as a result of individual laziness. The reflection has also made me aware that providing an opportunity for students to develop all three abilities in a four hour period is very ambitious. Providing teacher’s material to discuss with classes before they come and after they leave is one way we can expand the discussion. Facilitators could also go into schools to continue discussions and challenge students to reach beyond their traditional
comfort zones. Having an outside facilitator in partnership with classroom teachers provides stability and the ability to question and explore new ideas.

This paper provided a description of Bourdieu’s theory of class distinction as the theoretical framework for the paper. The student forum and the International Storytelling Festival was described and evaluated based on the three abilities of democratic citizenship by Nussbam. The theory of class distinction with the concept of cultural capital and habitus provided a good lens to discuss the three abilities by Nussbam (2006). Overall the festival programming did provide students the opportunity to exercise the three abilities although not directly. Expanding the influence of the forum by providing material for discussion before and after the forum would improve the capacity of the forum to cover all of these concepts. In order to cover these abilities more intentionally combining the theoretical framework of class distinction with the three abilities would be a valuable framework to base the programming for the next student forum. Overall this reflection has provided good insights into the strengths of our programming as well as providing new directions for the future.


Simms, L. (2007) Lecture, "*Storytelling for Peace.*" Storytelling for Peace and Renewing Community Summer Institute, Mauro Centre for Peace and Justice, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, August 14.