Quilting our County:

Fusing Research and Art Making in the Classroom

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Abstract

Working with needles and thread, smartphones and laptops, fabric, scissors, rulers, Google Earth™ and Street View™ mapping services, students in an art class for pre-service educators researched the geography surrounding our university and created a quilt. In the process they gained first-hand experience in an arts-integrated approach to teaching and learning. Inspired

by Bennett's (2008) account of elementary students exploring quilting and social studies, and informed by arts integration approaches outlined by Marshall (2005, 2006, 2010), the project was guided by a number of questions: What do we know about our surrounding county? What can we learn using online technologies? How can we show what we learned by making a quilt, and what can we learn about quilting along the way?

Project Set Up

A nine-by-nine grid layered over a high-resolution map of the county allowed for eighty-one map squares. This would be enough for each student to have at least one square that would include content within the border of the county. Each student was given at least one square with content, and many students also received blank squares.

Students consulted the eighty-one square map, and another printed reference map throughout the process—during the research to figure out where their individual squares fell within the county, and throughout the quilting part of the project, to locate adjoining squares, and determine where individual blocks fit in the overall quilt.

Historical Background

Connections to the history of quilting were established through viewing and discussion of excerpts from the video series *Why Quilts Matter: History, Art & Politics* (2011). Students learned first-hand about traditional and contemporary takes on quilt blocks and construction during a field trip to the French Knot Quilt Shop in downtown Nacogdoches. A video interview with contemporary artist Faith Ringold about her story quilts shifted the conversation to a questioning of what a quilt is, what its purposes might be, and the range of approaches contemporary quilt-making artists employ.

Research

Multiple options were explored by students for researching and discovering the geography in their individual map squares. Google Earth™ mapping service was a useful tool for determining the human-made and naturally occurring features found in each of the squares from a birds-eye-perspective. In many cases the street view function allowed the students to see the landscape from a more familiar, car-level vantage point. In other cases, discussion with fellow students was helpful for identifying significant features in a particular area which was followed up with Google Earth™ and internet searches for more detailed visual information.

Creative Problem Solving

A significant artistic problem presented in the blank areas when assembly of the finished quilt blocks began. Some students had appliquéd one or more layers of white fabric to create their blank squares making them more visually appealing. These squares fell together in one area of the quilt creating an off-balance feel

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or should the rules be followed to the letter? The students decided to back to to the research portion of the project and go back into the maps to see what could be found south of the county in this blank area. Again, laptops were opened to Google Maps™ and it was found that Lufkin was well within the borders of the quilt. Scissors and seam ripper were quickly employed to detach the appliquéd squares and move them to the location of Lufkin. The squares were carefully rearranged to approximate the outline of the city. These changes were motivated not only to satisfy the directives of the research, not only to produce an aesthetically pleasing quilt, but in order to adequately satisfy both.

Transferring details of the Nacogdoches County line onto fabric

Reference maps and quilt blocks during assembly phase

Drawing details of the Historic Wiley Hotel onto fabric

Conclusions

Throughout the course of the project, students negotiated the space between practice-led research and research-led practice (Smith & Dean, 2009). At times they leant toward research as the guiding force—carefully examining the contents of the map squares—and at other times the communal experience of knowledge-building through connecting pieces of fabric guided the learning experience. Problem areas of the quilt, it turned out, were some of the most productive. They became spaces where research and art making blended in an iterative, improvisational way, where an openness to

serendipity (Marshall and Diamoto, 2011) acted as an active component for learning and expressing knowledge. A section of the artwork that started out blank turned into fertile ground where problem solving involved “engaging a rich array of skills and learning strategies so that the understandings of each content area is enriched and illuminated by the presence of the other content area” (Burnaford, et. al, 2013, p. 7).

Art 390 students assembling the Nacogdoches County quilt top

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