Original research question: What are effective practices in inspiring collaboration in a very diverse classroom comprised of UWB students and UBB students from Monroe?

Framework

12 UWB students and 12 Monroe offenders (University Beyond Bars students) collaborated weekly within the Monroe Washington State Reformatory in BISIA 483, Arts of Social Transformation.

Course details

Arts of Social Transformation is a 5 credit course fulfilling VLPA (Visual, Literary, Performing Arts) and IPR (Interdisciplinary Practice and Reflection) requirements.

This course was designed to familiarize students with a basic practical and theoretical understanding of public art with a focus on the impact this art form can have on individuals, local communities and society at large. This course took an active, project based approach to understanding public art emphasizing the function of the work over aesthetics: introducing students to art as a tool to inspire thought, spark conversation and as a catalyst for change.

Course work

In this course, weekly low stakes, group art projects propelled by contemporary socially engaged arts practices honed creative confidence and explored art as a tool to spark conversation and as a catalyst for social change.

Two individual projects were assigned which were further developed in class through a variety of group exercises and discussions.

- "The Mending Wall" project examined personal and social barriers and boundaries, why, how and where they exist and how to inspire social dialogue surrounding these issues through sculpture. Incarceration, homelessness, discrimination and inequality spurred deep conversations and powerful projects resulting in high level student engagement.
- The final project "Catalyst for Change" investigated individually selected social issues through visual and socially engaged art with the goal of generating social change on some level. Projects explored inequality, displacement, the death penalty, addiction, prejudice, gender and race among other issues.

Assessment

Project assessment was based on class contributions, extent of social research, personal reflection and depth of conceptual exploration. The experiential impact of this course was assessed through individual reflection papers in which students discussed social misconceptions and reported gaining a more empathetic understanding of community, privilege, power and prejudice. I now believe that both student groups would gain a great deal by sharing these reflections with one another.

My current research question is one that I would like to engage symposium participants in: What are effective strategies for sharing these experiential reflections in the classroom to expand students’ understanding of the impact of this unique collaboration and, what are strategies for assessing the impact of the collaboration?