

CHEE HOO LUM

## Positioning Soundscapes as Means of Intercultural Dialogue in Arts Education

One of the key goals in The Seoul Agenda (UNESCO, 2010), which was a significant outcome of UNESCO's Second World Conference on Arts Education in Seoul, Korea, calls for the application of “arts education principles and practices to contribute to resolving the social and cultural challenges facing today's world” (p. 8). More specifically, arts education can serve to promote “social responsibility, social cohesion, cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue” (p. 9) and this can be done through a recognition and prioritization of relevant “learner-specific context ... including minorities and migrants” (p. 9), fostering the “knowledge and understanding of diverse cultural and artistic expressions” (p. 10) and the introduction of “intercultural dialogue skills, pedagogy, equipment and teaching materials in support of training programmes in arts education” (p. 10). What constitutes intercultural learning and dialogue, and how does arts education play a role in encouraging their activation?

When one recognizes that individuals have complex and plural identities working within dynamic cultures, the promotion and safeguarding of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue (Huber, 2012, p. 18) will raise awareness towards the “rights and responsibilities in a democratic society, of activating existing networks and encouraging and facilitating the participation of young people in civil society” (Birzea, 2000, as cited in Portera, 2008, p. 483). Intercultural education thus aims to develop and sustain ways of living together in multicultural societies within an environment of mutual trust and empathy to understand, respect and dialogue between different cultural groups (UNESCO, 2007, p. 18) not merely in co-existence but “fruitful and equal cooperation and learning between cultures” (Räsänen, 2010, p. 12).

Students involved in intercultural learning should be able to negotiate “intercultural encounters in the classroom (self-representation, dealing with misunderstandings and misinterpretations, dealing with conflicts, learning to cooperate, etc.)”, to develop “an awareness and appreciation of their own cultural background(s), as well as respect and tolerance of the ‘otherness of the others’ ... based on equality and on the right to be different”, and to activate and apply “factual and strategic knowledge in situations

where intercultural questions are to be negotiated and tasks need to be solved cooperatively” (Huber, 2012, pp. 34–35). Intercultural education thus offers students the opportunity to interact with the everyday realities of cultural differences where the aim is not “assimilation or fusion, but encounter, communication, dialogue, contact, in which roles and limits are clear, but the end is open” (Portera, 2008, p. 488).

What determines the success of intercultural dialogue is the basic ability to listen, cognitive flexibility, empathy, humility, and hospitality [...] The arts and creativity, in particular, testify to the depths and plasticity of intercultural relations and the forms of mutual enrichment they embody. (UNESCO World Report, 2009, p. 10)

Arts education has the means within a safe space to open the eyes and minds of people to explore and dialogue in “culturally enriching experiences and ethically conscious learning processes” (Räsänen, 2010, p. 22). Arts engagement trends are also moving towards greater intercultural dialogue that stresses direct in-situ experiences with opportunities for context-specific intercultural learning (Wren, 2015; Pöllman, 2016).

As examples, within music and music education, McKinlay (2017) posits the conceptualization of the intercultural music classroom as a space for educators and students to think about “rights, responsibility, recognition, respect, reciprocity, re/search, re/presentation, reflexivity, and rites” (p. 177). Marsh (2017) spoke to active intercultural engagement within musical play spaces as children activate their innate creativity while negotiating cognitive and musical complexities. Key to intercultural arts engagement is the process of improvisation (Wren, 2015) which Lum (2021) corroborated in his study of collaborative creative processes of musicians in creating interdisciplinary and intercultural works through intensive listening and dialoguing in improvisatory jam sessions. Working within the intercultural space also allows contemporary musicians (Lum, 2018) the “opportunity to articulate and identify their unique voices within the soundscapes they inhabit or are situated in” (p. 122).

## Soundscapes as entry point to the intercultural

We turn towards soundscapes as a possible entry and engagement point into intercultural learning and dialogue within the arts classroom. Canadian soundscape composer R. Murray Schafer (1977/1994) has long argued for soundscape education as a rich interdisciplinary possibility towards the development of cultural sensibilities where deep listening is fundamental, and students make their own creative works as they attune to the sounds of the environment and make critical judgements leading to improvements, allowing the arts to meet and develop harmoniously (Boucher & Moisey, 2019).

Schafer’s thoughts were also shared and expanded by others like Etmektsoglous (2019) and Westerkamp (1988). Through an articulation of the creative processes and works of some Singapore contemporary visual artists, Lum (in-press) offered pedagogical

suggestions on how to encourage the creation of soundscapes in the arts classroom, so that students can listen deeply and engage with interculturality in a meaningful way. Suggestions include engaging students to create soundscapes that connect to their everyday lives, asking students to listen deeply and be cognizant of the sounds around them. The arts educator may task students to identify three or four distinct sounds they hear within their homes and record them. They can then share these sounds with their classmates and have an open dialogue about similarities and differences before embarking on a soundscape creation exercise where students are encouraged to recreate and combine these sounds using either their voice, body percussion, or technological means. Similar soundscape exercises can be activated for sounds within the school or the community environment, where more collaborative group work can be encouraged as students learn to create and perform these soundscape compositions together, listening and dialoguing with each other, negotiating differences to come up with a plausible common consensus. These everyday soundscape activities can allow educators to have a glimpse of the sonic surrounds (Lum, 2007) of their students at home and within their immediate environment. The soundscape exercises also provide safe spaces for students to explore their interculturality, “to develop mutual empathy between classmates, understanding each other’s social and cultural contexts at home, in school or within their communities” (Lum, in-press).

Activities on the soundscapes of everyday can be extended into observations of nature as well, where students particularly in urban settings rarely pay attention to the sounds of nature and its relationships with the urban landscape they inhabit. The arts educator can support these efforts by encouraging nature-linked creative soundscape exercises in their classrooms to help attune or re-acquaint students to the sounds of nature in their environment.

How is attuning to sounds of nature part of the intercultural experience? Smith (2021) and other scholars (Schafer, 1977/1994) have made suggestions for music education to shift towards ‘sound education’, moving away from a Western anthropocentric definition of music to consider music that can be generated by other-than-human sources in biophony and geophony, for example. Attending to natural soundscapes will allow students to develop deep sensitivities to sound and acquire an ecological perspective of arts learning, preventing them from

identifying exclusively with human cultural conceptions of music and cause them to form an identity that is separated from the earth [...] a reclaiming of an Indigenous form of sound-knowing that was essential to our ancestors’ survival and might be key to our adaptation to a rapidly changing climate [...] to be better attuned and responsive to the needs of both humans and other-than-humans in our ecosystem (Smith, 2021, p. 5).

Some nature-linked creative soundscapes exercises can include taking sound walks in nature parks or reserves where students are encouraged to individually record sounds

of nature that attract them during their field trips. Students can also be tasked to walk around in their immediate environment or around their neighborhoods to locate sounds of nature within their urban dwellings. A more in-depth exploration could include tasking students to think about nature sights and sounds that are no longer visible/audible in their immediate environment and asking students to further the task by speaking with their parents or grandparents about their experiences with nature in their immediate environments and what has changed over the years. The cumulative sounds and sights gathered in these suggested activities can then be transformed into compositional activities like the creation of nature soundscapes utilizing recording or compositional software. Students might also be encouraged to advocate for certain environmental issues that they may have encountered through artistic means.

## Moving ahead

A willingness to enter an intercultural space suggests an openness to negotiation of difference. Latching onto UNESCO's prompt on promoting intercultural dialogue through the arts and sharing good practices, this short paper is arguing for the affordances and accessibility provided by soundscapes to create an improvisatory and collaborative environment to shed light on conditions necessary for encouraging "a more profound interculturality" (Lizeray, 2018, p. 25). In order to do so, we may perhaps take reference from the works of existing sound artists, practitioners and researchers who are deeply engaged in contemporary aesthetic exploration using sound as impetus. The field of sound studies and its connection to arts/music education (Thibeault, 2017) can also be expanded towards intercultural explorations.

Intercultural communication and dialogue can benefit from soundscape education where everyone comes into a safe, equal space that allows for differences to emerge and co-exist, through listening and responding. Arts educators should consider engaging and dialoguing with sound artists and soundscape practitioners to include such practices into the arts classroom. And there is definitely room for extensive research work to be done that will aim to examine the tangible benefits and challenges surrounding soundscape education for the purposes of intercultural learning and dialogue.

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## Note

A more detailed elaboration of this paper can be found in:

Lum, C. H., & Tse, N. A. (In-Review). Deep listening and playing in the intercultural space: On soundscapes, improvisation and collaborative creative processes in early childhood and elementary music education. In J. L. Arostegui, C. Christophersen, J. Nichols, & K. Masunobu (Eds.), *SAGE Handbook of School Music Education* (pp. -). SAGE.

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