



Art Bridging Cultures: Fostering Learning and Cultural Sustainability through Narratives and Collaborative Creativity

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Abstract

This paper presents an educational design aimed at developing cultural sustainability by involving students grades 5-9 in a curatorial role, managing and creating collages and stories based on a digital exhibition of Islamic and Golden Age artworks from two renowned museums and discusses the notions of cultural sustainability concerning this learning design. The project's core objective was to deepen learners' comprehension and appreciation of these pivotal and radically different cultural epochs, through their collaborative productions based on the artworks. The project produced an interactive website with a framing narrative that presented the historical art pieces the students could delve into, curate, and interpret through collages. We employed a mixed methods approach and used observations in two school classes, interviews, and a survey. Two classes used the platform as part of the iterative development cycle, and their feedback contributed to the further development of the platform. The learning design was driven by twin ambitions: to improve educational outcomes in a multidisciplinary approach and to advance cultural sustainability through understanding and appreciation of other cultures. The design facilitated a narrative learning experience that stimulated critical thinking, creativity, and collaborative learning, guiding students to appreciate not only the artistic merit but also the historical, social, and cultural significance of the artworks. Our approach resulted in an inclusive learning design encompassing reflexive tasks and creative endeavors. Findings suggest enhancements in students' cultural awareness and engagement in learning, underscoring the transformative potential of digital-based and hybrid cultural education.

Keywords: *narrative learning, creative learning, museums, cultural sustainability.*

Introduction

The *Across Culture* project was designed as a narrative learning environment to engage students in grades 5–9 with works of art from two different cultural traditions, which were represented in the two collections: older Danish art from the Golden Age from Den Hirschsprungske Samling (HS) and older Islamic art from Davids Samling (DS). This project aimed to develop an interactive digital platform that would enable students to explore, curate, and design collages and stories from these works of art, to foster their understanding and better appreciate the differences, similarities, relevance, and richness of the cultural heritage being represented in the two collections. The project's main goal was to help learners get a closer insight into these two important and radically different cultures through narrative [1], [2] and through their collaborative productions based on the artworks. It aimed to provide cultural awareness and active involvement [3] for the students by having them take on a curatorial role and create collages and stories [4] based on a digital exhibit, which comprised Islamic and Golden Age artworks from the two collections.

At the inception of the project and the initial study, the concept of cultural sustainability had yet to be explicitly considered. However, revisiting the initial study, it was evident that the learning design and outcomes very much aligned with the principles of cultural sustainability in education. Hence, the project is being re-examined through the lens of the concepts of cultural sustainability, especially those proposed by Laine [5] and Soini and Birkeland [6]. These theoretical frameworks have been applied to interpret the *Across Culture* project retrospectively. They aim to gain further insights into the potential of narrative learning environments and digital curation, understanding it through a cultural sustainability lens. The value of interdisciplinary collaboration between cultural institutions and its potential to foster student engagement with diverse cultural heritage and cross-cultural understanding has become apparent in this study.



Background

Previous studies have shown that including cultural sustainability in education is essential. Dessein et al. [7] presented the outcomes of COST action IS1007, which investigated the concept of cultural sustainability and its role in sustainable development. The authors emphasized the need to integrate culture into, for, and as a part of sustainable development pointing to the need for educational activities that facilitate cultural awareness and understanding.

The use of digital technologies has demonstrated great potential for creating engagement and motivation for students. Gjedde [4], [8] has explored the challenges and potentials of fostering students' creativity through animated storytelling and arts integration in learning; in the 21st-century classroom. This research demonstrated how digital tools enhanced students' engagement and enabled creative expression.

It is essential to recognize and appreciate the multidisciplinary approach in cultural education. Londesborough [9] demonstrates this in the latest report on "Learning about culture", the importance of integrating cultural education across various disciplines. The report implies that implementing a multidisciplinary approach can lead to a better understanding of culture and its role in society. Based on this foundation, the present study seeks to add to the growing corpus of research on cultural sustainability in education by understanding how digital narrative curation-based learning design may be engaging learners. This will actively engage students as curators and provide a pathway for engagement with Islamic and Golden Age works of art, building a deeper appreciation for diverse cultural heritage and developing reflexivity, critical thought, creativity, and collaborative skills.

Methodology

The study employed a mixed methods approach, including observations of two school classes, which tested the platform as part of the iterative development cycle, and interviews and a survey conducted with students; the feedback from the students was contributing to the further development of the platform. The learning design and the interactive website were developed iteratively, incorporating feedback from the students in participating classes (grades 5-9). The students were given a curatorial role of managing and creating collages and stories based on the collections of Islamic and Golden Age digital exhibition artworks chosen by DHS and DS.

Observations were conducted in two classes to ascertain student engagement and interaction with the platform. Interviews were conducted with students and teachers to gather qualitative data on their experiences with the learning design. A survey was also administered to collect data on the students' background, previous knowledge of the collections and art-forms as well as experience learning with the platform.

Results

The observations in the classrooms showed engaged and motivated students who collaboratively solved the tasks on the learning platform and chose to print out copies of the works of art for joint collage-making in the physical space. For the curation tasks, the students were fully engaged, with both the Islamic and Golden Age works generating collages and narratives. The introductory narrative animation with characters from different cultures appealed to the students and provided a narrative context for the tasks in the learning platform. Analysis of the interviews found that students and teachers appreciated the production-based cross-disciplinary approach in the learning design which afforded reflection on the differences as well as similarities between the cultures focusing on themes like faith, clothes, gender, love, celebrations and styles of painting. Students had a deepened understanding of the Islamic and Golden Age cultures and appreciation of them, as well as increasing their interest in exploring cultural heritage from different countries. The teachers noted the platform's potential for enhanced reflexive, creative, and collaborative learning by the students using the provided teachers' materials and the relevant themes it introduced. The survey results supported the qualitative data, it showed that most of the students were unfamiliar with the collections and had never visited them and rated that their knowledge of the different cultures and types of art had increased through working with the platform. The feature of the virtual museum was appreciated as it allowed students to view the works even if they could not visit the museums in person.



The learning design's effectiveness in promoting cultural sustainability was evident through the increased accessibility of cultural education to schools and students who may not have had the opportunity to visit the physical museums. The digital platform thus allowed for a more inclusive approach to cultural education, enabling students from diverse backgrounds to engage with and learn from the Islamic and Golden Age artworks.

Discussion

The *Across Culture* project's learning design, which combined a narrative learning environment and digital curation, aligns with concepts in cultural sustainability education as outlined by Laine [7]. Carrying out exploration, curation, and creation of collages and stories - based on Islamic and Golden Age artworks - students could engage in identity processes and micro-level encounters with diverse cultural heritage as stressed by Laine [8] as key dimensions in culturally sustainable education. The initial implementation of the project was considered successful, despite technical challenges. Evidence from the findings in the areas of student engagement, cultural awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity, indicated the potential of narrative learning environments to foster cultural sustainability education. This corresponds to Gjedde's [8], perspectives on how digital tools and storytelling may support the students' engagement and enhance creative expression.

Furthermore, the collaboration between DHS and DS in developing the *Across Culture* project represents a significant step toward fostering interdisciplinary partnerships in cultural sustainability education. By bringing together two distinct cultural collections, the project not only exposed students to a wider range of cultural heritage, providing tools for reflection but also promoted cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. A collaborative approach that echoes the importance of considering culture on local, national, and global levels in education, as emphasized by Laine [8].

Similarly, re-examining the *Across Culture* project in the light of theories of cultural sustainability also demonstrates the value of applying these frameworks to educational initiatives retrospectively. By doing so, educators and researchers can uncover new insights and identify areas for improvement in promoting culturally sustainable education. This approach can also help to bridge the gap between theory and practice, making sure that educational initiatives are grounded in sound theoretical foundations while remaining adaptable to the changing needs of learners and society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, viewed through the lens of cultural sustainability theories the *Across Culture* project's initial successful implementation and positive reception from teachers and students, can indicate the potential of narrative learning environments and digital curation to promote culturally sustainable education. The collaboration between different cultural institutions can serve as a model for how to foster students' engagement with diverse cultural heritage while promoting cross-cultural understanding. By applying a cultural sustainability framework to existing educational initiatives retroactively, educators and researchers can identify, refine, and improve approaches to culturally sustainable education, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and equitable future.

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