Creating Meaning

By Amber Miller

If you were to look at a quilt from long ago you would see a montage of colors and patterns all interwoven into one. At first glance it would appear to be just another bedspread or blanket for the sole purpose of providing warm insulation for the body underneath it. Yet, step by step if you were to come a little bit closer, if you were to rub your fingers across that same pattern you would see the single stitching made from just a needle and some thread.   The stitching that was worked through diligent hands, carrying with them stories from faraway lands, from cultures far and wide. By understanding authorship and perspective through this lens we come to find that our preconceived notions disable us from learning about the world, and that power is created by those individuals who have a voice.

Werner uses the theme of photographs to explain the concept that "pictures invoke three people: the subject represented in the picture, the author, and the viewer" (Werner, 2006, p. 208). You can take a single photograph of a family of four and analyze it from various perspectives. The author may have intended for it to just be a family portrait, yet the way we analyze it and the time period in which we are looking at it the photograph may represent something else. "A travel account, for example, describes much more than a place; it also implicates the traveler's interests, curiosities, priorities, sensibilities, fears, longings and stereotypes, which in turn tells us about the writer's cultural and political milieu, and his or her assumptions regarding the expectations of audiences" (Werner, 2000, p. 197). The implication for looking at a single picture and taking the information we get as the truth is disablement. We disable ourselves, our cultures, our identity, and our communities by not properly making our own meaning and assumptions. Yet most of the content and curriculum in which we explore in our classrooms and outside of our classrooms are from a single perspective, a judgment dictated to us, and transferred to us without question.

Ultimately, this is the problem with authorship and perspective. We the people have a way of limiting our understanding in the essence of finding the right intended meaning. When we look at a textbook and take the information as solely factual we acknowledge the perspective of the book but not the other side. We neglect to answer our own questions and conclusions because we take the words written as unquestionable. Werner says, "Young people learn from experience that books are sources of uncontested information, repositories of answers to be mined, under the guidance of the end of the chapter questions, or worksheets" (Werner, 2000, p. 193). But that doesn't help us read the world. Students should openly critique and make reformations to any text where they see fit, because by doing so they have to research the content. If you open any book the content inside has partial preconceived notions, partial facts. Hans Rosling said that "Swedish students know less about the world than chimpanzees, because of their preconceived notions" (Rosling). Before reading "The Roads Not Taken" I had no idea about the federal policies which created economical gaps, like HUD, and homeland security, but because I was given the opportunity to research it I learned valuable information (Drier, 2001). Ironically, just like myself we assume that we know the world, because of our failure to seek it, and we can only read the world when we depend less on our preconceived notions and more on our own research. When we use our preconceived notions we give the power to someone else, yet when we seek information we create power, because we create a voice.

In Sach's article titled *A Global Family Portrait* he compares third world countries, like Bangladesh and Malawi to the United States and Europe. He describes the harsh conditions under which women went through in order to climb the social ladders and provide a better life for themselves and their families. In regards to women in Bangladesh he indicates, "One by one, they recounted the arduous hours, the lack of labor rights, and the harassment. What was the most striking and unexpected about the stories was the repeated affirmation that this work was the greatest opportunity that these women could have ever imagined, and that the employment had changed their lives for the

better" (Sachs, 005, 22). Now we would look at this country from our perspective and talk about how wrong it was to treat women like that, yet by broadening our perspective in finding out a firsthand account we would find that it was actually one of the better opportunities they had partaken in. Even with the statistics from Hans Rosling about the Philippines being at the same rate of poverty in 2007 then we were at in 1913, though these statistics help us to visualize the world from a varying distance we must go beyond the statistics and find the why behind the disparities (Rosling).

All in all it is important for us to read the world so that we don't create racial stereotypes, so that we don't pass along only half of the truth, and so that subsequently we can lift up our world instead of tear it down. Just like the quilt, our understanding of the social world is hidden from us because of our own preconceived notions and ideas and of our failure to question, critique, and create our own meaning. We come to understand the quilt as just a blanket for warmth, as just a comforter for a bed because we don't' realize the story that it carried. Yet all quilts are different, and depending upon the time period it was created, depending upon the place in which it was created, and the person who is using the blanket, the meaning changes and so does the power.

Works Cited

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