

International Journal of Education & the Arts

Special Issue: Issues in Teaching Theatre Design

Carly Holzwarth, Guest Editor
Bucknell University, U.S.A.

<http://www.ijea.org/>

ISSN: 1529-8094

Volume 25 Special Issue 2.9

October 7, 2024

Researching Justice in the Darkroom Project

Aly Renee Amidei
University of Wisconsin-Madison, United States of America

Citation: Amidei, A. R. (2024). Researching justice in the Darkroom Project. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 25(si2.9).
<http://doi.org/10.26209/ijea25si2.9>

Abstract

The Darkroom Project is a collaborative research assignment for college level theatre classes in performance design and visual period styles that facilitates active learning and lays the groundwork for developing a culturally competent design practice enabling designers to effectively collaborate in intercultural settings. In this project, students complete in-depth research using a variety of primary resources and synthesize it for application in a hypothetical stage adaptation of Lila Quintero Weaver's autobiographical graphic novel about social justice and the civil rights movement, *Darkroom* (2012). This project highlights student strengths as both researchers and creative designers to build an onstage visual world filled with meaningful content and aesthetically sophisticated choices in support of a story. By engaging in this project, students will gain a better understanding of the socio-political context of clothing, art, and architecture and how it relates to a student's specific discipline as a theatre artist.

Introduction

The Darkroom Project is a collaborative research assignment for performance design and visual period styles classes that facilitates active learning and lays the groundwork for developing a culturally competent design practice. In this project, students complete in-depth research using a variety of primary resources and synthesize it for application in a hypothetical stage adaptation of Lila Quintero Weaver's autobiographical graphic novel, *Darkroom* (2012). This project highlights student strengths as both researchers and creative designers to build a visual world filled with meaningful content and aesthetically sophisticated choices in support of a story. By engaging in this project, students will gain a better understanding of the socio-political context of clothing, art, and architecture and its place in history and how it relates to a student's specific discipline as theatre artists.

Literature Review

As performance design professors seek to decolonize theatre pedagogies and design practices, our teaching should foster both critical and visual literacy. Critical literacy, as defined by Shor (1999), is about questioning the existing norms, rejecting old pathways in favor of justice-minded alternatives, and finding new connections for self-discovery (and recovery) within society as a whole. Critical literacy asks, "How have we been shaped by the words we use and encounter?" (Shor, 1999, p. 2). Visual literacy, as defined by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) (Hattiwig et al., 2011), is a set of competencies in locating, interpreting, assessing, applying, and creating visual content. Visual literacy, therefore, asks, "How have we been shaped by the imagery we use and encounter?" Since, as performance designers, we use objects and imagery to shape the theatrical worlds that our audiences encounter, developing fluency in both critical literacy and visual literacy is necessary to effectively and responsibly build those worlds. Proficiency in visual literacy empowers a designer "to understand and analyze the contextual, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, intellectual, and technical components involved in the production and use of visual materials" (Hattiwig et al., 2011, n.p.). Moreover, a designer with strong visual literacy skills is someone who can assess visual media critically while also actively adding to our collective knowledge and cultural heritage (Hattiwig et al., 2011).

Lila Quintero Weaver's *Darkroom* with its social justice focus on historical events, a narrator from a marginalized community, and powerful visuals created by a Latina woman is a text which is ideally suited for putting visual literacy skills for theater designers into practice. In addition to the beautifully drawn images and rich story of the graphic novel to use as inspiration, Teutsch (2022) notes that using *Darkroom* as a teaching tool exposes students to the history, diverse voices, and experiences different from their own thereby cultivating empathy, compassion, and critical engagement. By choosing source material that centers

diverse voices and stories, we can build students' ability to recognize the political, social and related cultural circumstances reflected in the primary research and apply it in support of the process and execution of a design. Atalay et al. (2019) supports this type of visual literacy building because it provides "multiple points of entry into classic anthropological debates around positionality, reflexivity, and the researcher's gaze" (p. 771).

Project Description and Learning Outcomes

Active learning, according to Bonwell (1991), is defined as "instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing" (p. 5). Tasks where students discuss a text and tackle problems involve high-level thinking abilities such as analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating ideas. Moreover, small group discussions are believed to be particularly effective as they prompt students to articulate their thoughts and consider diverse viewpoints while problem-solving. (Slavich et al., 2012, p. 571). For this project, students read the graphic novel then consider the possibilities and challenges in adapting it for performance. After working as a class to create a list of important characters, locations, and scenes from the graphic novel, the list was distributed across small groups in the class. Each student group then worked collaboratively to assemble visual research by identifying trustworthy sources and tools including, but not limited to libraries, online resources, archives, museums, and special collections. Additionally, the individuals within the groups 'peer-reviewed' the collected research findings for accuracy and effectiveness. The small groups then compiled the edited visual research into a shared Google Slide deck utilized by the entire class. When all the slides were combined, the class had created extensive visual reference materials for the *Darkroom* hypothetical stage adaptation.



Figure 1. Student Darkroom Research Display. UNC-Charlotte, November 2017.

Extending the Learning

The project can be further extended for more experiential active learning and engagement both within the class and across disciplines. For example, after completing the research, the class could create dramaturgical design displays using research and actual objects. Costumes and small props can be sourced from a theatre department's existing stock and used to create museum-like displays. Set models, soundscapes, lighting plots, and costume renderings could also be created. After using visual literacy skills to find the research, students then would further apply those skills through hands-on practical experience of translating design ideas into tangible materials in support of a text. Students could also be encouraged to find other creative ways to share their research findings. Examples include creating a YouTube or TikTok video, building an interactive research website, or using a web-tool like Thinglink to visually annotate a research image with additional notes, media content, and supporting images.

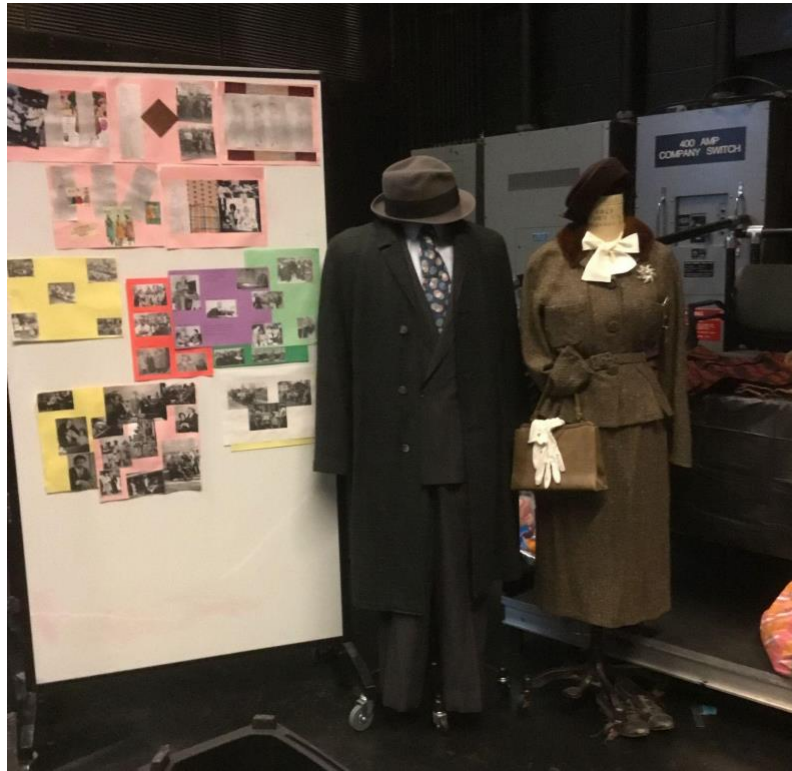


Figure 2. Student Darkroom Research Display. UNC-Charlotte, November 2017.

An Interdisciplinary Collaborative Project

This project can also be done in conjunction with other classes within the theatre department and beyond. For example, playwriting students could create monologues or scenes based on the text which are then performed by acting students. These performances could be supported with actual designed elements or enhanced with the aforementioned dramaturgical design displays. This type of collaborative departmental project was successfully piloted at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte (UNCC) in 2017. Under the creative supervision of Dr. Beth Murray, the project “Framing Civil Rights: Graphic Novels in Artistic Spaces” was supported by a UNCC Chancellor’s Diversity Challenge grant. The participating faculty and students completed projects that framed and reframed topics of civil rights across different creative disciplines. The project culminated in a public presentation of work on November 16th, 2017 in the UNCC Black Box Theatre. Additionally, *Darkroom*’s Lila Quintero Weaver was an artist-in-residence for a week and conducted guest lectures in Art, Theatre, and Education classes including: Children’s Book Illustration, Theatre Education, Multiculturalism and Children’s Literature, Scenic Design, and Costume History. By centering the *Darkroom* text and social justice as a collaborative departmental project, a great sense of community was cultivated for the participants who were then able to see how each of

their discipline-specific contributions to the project combined as a powerful storytelling device.

Summary

As we rethink how to be more culturally competent in our pedagogy and design practices, developing critical and visual literacy will allow designers to more effectively challenge the status quo and infuse their design practice with a justice-oriented mindset. The *Darkroom* project builds these essential skills around critical and visual literacy by having design students conduct extensive research using primary sources in collaborative small groups and contextualizing that research as a tool to tell a story centered on social justice themes. Additionally, the active learning principles utilized in the discussion, reflection, and group problem solving that students engage in effectively parallels the collaborative processes critical to a successful design career in theatre. By adding projects like these in our design pedagogy, we can help cultivate a generation of designer activists ready to engage with a diversity of cultural content for performance design.

References

- Atalay, S., Bonanno, L., Galman, S.C., Jacqz, S., Rybka, R., Shannon, J., Speck, C., Swogger, J., & Wolencek, E. (2019), Ethno/graphic storytelling: Communicating research and exploring pedagogical approaches through graphic narratives, drawings, and zines. *American Anthropologist*, 121, 769-772. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/10.1111/aman.13293>
- Bonwell, C. C. & Eison, J. A. (1991). *Active learning: Creating excitement in the classroom (Report No. 1)*. Association for the study of Higher Education-ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED336049.pdf>
- Hattiwig, D., Burgess, J., Bussery, K., & Medaille, A. (2011, October 27). *ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*, American Library Association. <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/visualliteracy>
- Shor, I. (1999). What is critical literacy?" *Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice*, 1 (4.). <https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/jppp/vol1/iss4/2>
- Slavich, G. M. & Zimbardo, P. G. (2012). Transformational teaching: Theoretical underpinnings, basic principles, and core methods. *Educational Psychology Review*, 24(4), 569-608.
- Teutsch, M. (2022, March 31). Learning history in Lila Quintero Weaver's "Darkroom." *Interminable Rambling*. <https://interminablerambling.com/2022/03/31/weaver-darkroom/>

Weaver L. Q. (2012). *Darkroom: A memoir in black and white*. University of Alabama Press.

About the Author

Aly Renee Amidei is an Assistant Professor of Costume Design at University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her professional design practice focuses on new works and re-envisioned classics. Her research interests center on design for immersive theatre, Japanese art and fan culture, and the growing complexity of costume design for video games.

International Journal of Education & the Arts

<http://IJEa.org>

ISSN: 1529-8094

Editor

Tawnya Smith
Boston University

Co-Editors

Kelly Bylica
Boston University
Rose Martin
Nord University
Laurel Forshaw
Lakehead University

Jeanmarie Higgins
University of Texas at Arlington
Merel Visse
Drew University
Karen McGarry
College for Creative Studies

Managing Editor

Yenju Lin
The Pennsylvania State University

Associate Editors

Betty Bauman-Field
Boston University
Amy Catron
Mississippi State University
Christina Hanawalt
University of Georgia
Diana Hawley
Boston University
David Johnson
Lund University
Heather Kaplan
University of Texas El Paso
Elizabeth Kattner
Oakland University
Mary Ann Lanier
Groton School
Allen Legutki
Benedictine University

Alesha Mehta
University of Auckland
Leah Murthy
Boston University
Hayon Park
George Mason University
Allyn Phelps
University of Massachusetts Dartmouth
Erin Price
Elizabethtown College
Natalie Schiller
University of Auckland
Tim Smith
Uniarts Helsinki
Yiwen Wei
Virginia Commonwealth University
Zahra Bayati, Helen Eriksen & Gry O. Ulrichsen
Solmaz Collective

Advisory Board

Full List: <http://www.ijea.org/editors.html>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).