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Expressions of Identity: Engaging Theory and Public Advocacy through Media Installation and Performance

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Abstract

Media installations and performance are potent ways to creatively grapple with critical theories about cultural identity. This case study explores students' use of these arts methods to engage mass/lay audiences about the intersections between theory and their lived experiences of cultural identity. Sixteen students enrolled in an upper-division communication studies course worked with discipline-based theories related to their socio-cultural/intersectional identities. Their projects were featured in an end-of-semester exhibition called "Expressions of Identity." Using Dewhurst's criteria for justice-based pedagogy, this article explores how media-arts projects 1) engage lived experiences, 2) work with complex theories of identity, and 3) use mediated communication and related strategies to involve lay audiences in the service of public advocacy and justice-based pedagogies.

We hope that the messages we convey engage the audience…Their participation gives the topics we deal with the gravity they deserve....

Quote from student project statement.

As teachers we can learn a great deal from our students, especially when our students armed with the tools of creative expression, engage with critical consciousness to foster community engagement. In a teaching activity/student event called *Expressions of Identity*, sixteen undergraduate students, using media installations and performance, shared their understanding of theories of culture and identity with an audience comprising of university and public communities. The students were enrolled in an upper-division communication studies university course. *Expressions of Identity* was designed as the class's term project. The students worked individually and in groups to portray multiple facets of identity, while opening themselves to theoretical dialogues intended to foster even deeper notions about identity. The students worked intentionally, engaging Ibram X. Kendi's (2019) call for "persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination" (p. 23). Their goal was public advocacy; to engage their audiences with critical theories of identity, to promote critical dialogues dispelling stereotypes and hegemonies about identity. The event itself was successful, garnering large crowds and ensuing accolades. The event's main contribution, however, was its impact on the student performers and on us, the teachers. There was much we learned from our students, and from the community/audience.

In this case study we discuss this teaching activity on cultural identity and explain its value as both, a means for public advocacy and an instrument of justice-based pedagogy. We use Dewhurst's (2014) criteria for justice-based art pedagogy as a lens through which we evaluate the efficacy of the project. Borrowing from Ayers, Quinn and Stovall's description of three pillars of social justice (activity, activism, and social literacy), Dewhurst argued that justice-based arts education carry these distinct attributes: "1) It is rooted in people's experiences, 2) it is a process of reflection and action together, and 3) it seeks to dismantle systems of inequality to create a more humane society" (p. 8). What follows is an overview of the *Expressions of Identity* project, along with an analysis of the project based on Dewhurst's criteria for justice-based arts pedagogy.

Expressions of Identity: Project Overview

As we noted, the *Expressions of Identity* event was the term project for the upper-division communication class we taught. The focus of the class was on communication and cultural identity. Sixteen students enrolled in the course as the course offered them credit towards their majors. The first half of the course (approximately 8 weeks) was based on learning and

exploring various theories of identity, while the second half of the course (approximately 7 weeks) was dedicated to the design and implementation of the *Expressions of Identity* event. All sixteen students participated in the event, even though they were offered an alternative assignment in case they were uncomfortable with vulnerabilities that could ensue from a project such as this. The students were already familiar with a variety of culture and communication theories, having met the course prerequisite in completing introductory communication (theory) courses.

Cheryl, whose area of study is intercultural communication, was the faculty on record for the course. Due to their background in media arts and production, Heidi was invited in as a co-teacher and media installation consultant. The class was held within a regular 16-week semester (with 1-week break). The first four weeks of the class included an extensive review of communication theories and concepts related to cultural identity (e.g., Crenshaw, 1991; du Gay et al., 2005), including underlying principles of public advocacy (e.g., Warren & Fassett, 2007). The next four weeks of class were dedicated to learning about using media installation and/with performance. Students were introduced to the work of media and performance artists such as Guillermo Gomez-Pena, Ann Hamilton, Toni Latour, and Shirin Neshat, and read selections from related texts (e.g., Bishop, 2010; Reiss, 2001; Schechner, 2002). Students read assigned readings, viewed online materials, and attended lectures for this portion of the class. Three local media artists were invited to the class as guest speakers to talk about their projects and process.

Students worked in groups, brainstorming topics and ideas for their projects starting the eighth week of the course. They were given a choice in doing their project individually or in small groups. In weeks nine and ten, students were asked to formally pitch their projects to the class, with critical feedback from the teachers (and local artists when present). Students then submitted a short proposal with an annotated bibliography of the secondary sources used to advance their topic/presentation. The next two to three weeks were spent making sure that the students understood the theories they were using as well as maintained clear connections between the theory and their media installation/performance. Students worked in groups, critically and introspectively discussing their topics/ideas and presentation strategy as special attention was paid to the intersections of communication, cultural identity, and power. The feasibility and logistics of the projects were also discussed.

Students were then asked to prepare a short statement describing their projects, linking them to theories of identity. This statement was displayed at the site of their performance/installation as well as printed in the event program. The teachers worked closely with students during office hours in formulating these student statements. During weeks eleven to fourteen, students worked independently on their projects, while in class they

discussed and reflected on process, incorporating the Freirean notion of praxis (Freire, 1970). While a sizeable portion of class time was used to discuss student projects, the classes also addressed other course content, as needed. Students were responsible in getting the materials (e.g., costumes, props) for their presentations. The teachers worked in setting up the event location, including audio-visual and catering needs. A small internal grant of $1000 from the campus arts endowment was received to offset costs.

The *Expressions of Identity* event was heavily publicized to the campus community (Figure 1), using posters, notecards, social media, and other electronic and digital media.
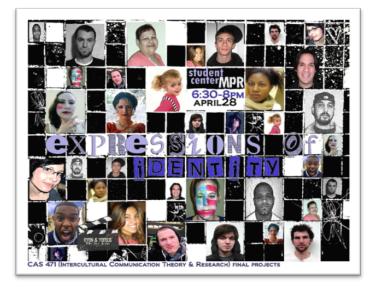

Figure 1. Event Poster.[1]

The event was held in the evening in a large multipurpose room in the Student Center. It lasted approximately three and a half hours. Students were given different sections of the room, and they presented their projects concurrently (Figure 2). They took turns in taking breaks. While they were on break, they walked around the room discussing their and others' presentations with audience members. The event was an enormous success. It was well attended and received many compliments.

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[1] All images belong to the authors and are used with permission.

Figure 2. Event Images.

Sample Student Projects

Here we offer two samples of student work to show some results of this teaching activity. These two pieces were selected as they represent a variety of ways we explored identity topics in the class: from trying to understand how we are "seen" or understood by others, to reflecting on language and socialization, and celebrating space/place as home. Each of these projects show the divergence and convergence of intersectional identities.

Sample 1: Playpen

The young woman in this media/sound installation with performance uses perspectives of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1960) and gendered language (Spender, 1980) to "play" with notions of gender socialization. She is dressed as a child, in a pink nightgown with large fluffy cute-animal slippers. She wears ponytails, with a toy tiara, and sits on a soft pink blanket inside a large playpen. She is surrounded by stereotypical "girl toys" which she plays with, from Barbie dolls to cute stuffed animals and a complete kitchen playset. She is surrounded by pink objects. She does not engage the audience/spectators around her. For her, they do not exist.

The playpen (Figure 3) is situated at the center back of the event room. It cannot be missed. Outside the playpen are other types of toys, from building blocks to action figures and science sets. In the background an audio track plays various statements about appropriate behaviour

for young boys and young girls.

Figure 3. Playpen (Media/Sound Installation and Performance).

The student collected these statements informally, when she asked classmates and family members about their experiences with gendered language. The statements sound innocuous at first, with a young girl voice saying things like, "hello," "do you want to play," and "I love my dolls." Then other voices are added, more young girls, saying things like, "do you like my makeup" or, "I like to smile and look pretty." We also start to hear young boy voices saying things like "let's see who is stronger," or "boys don't cry." Progressively the words and statements become increasingly detrimental. Older voices are added to the mix, and in some places the volume gets louder. Now, we hear words such as "bitch" and, "whore," along statements such as "grow some balls" or "you better man-up" interspersed with the young children's voices. The provocative statements are jarring when juxtaposed against the voices of the children, and the visual of the young woman playing in the playpen. The student does this intentionally to make visible the impact of gendered language and expectations in children's socialization. In her statement she states:

> It is through symbols that we educate and connect or disconnect; therefore, it is also through symbols that we classify and isolate. I follow Spender's (1980) theoretical trajectory by showing how the verbal and nonverbal symbols we use create a hierarchy in gender roles, behaviour, and expectations. Biologically, males and females are born very similar, but they have socially and historically taken on different roles and values. Our symbolic world has afforded males the power to construct and have accepted a myth of male superiority. Such negotiations are part of our mundane activity that often goes unnoticed or ignored (Garfinkel, 1967). In my performance, I 'play' with symbols of masculinity and femininity, stressing that

such symbols create worldviews that oppress women. For example, such symbols create worldviews where:

* it is empowering for women to behave like men, but not for men to behave like women
* good female athletes are not merely good athletes
* feminism is a bad word
* there are more bad words that relate to being a woman than a man
* … (audience: your entry here) …

Sample 2: Cityspace: The Street as Home

In this media installation, a student attempts to explore her cultural and familial identity as "located" in a space/place. She lives in Reading, PA, a post-industrial city imbued by problematic narratives about decay and loss, cloaked in race-based politics. Reading is impacted by the cessation of economic drivers in manufacturing and industry, juxtaposed against a growing poorer Latin/x population, and the exodus of affluent (mainly White) populations. Like many cities in the United States with similar "stories," minority scapegoating is widespread.

The view from the "outside" tells many that life in the city is bleak, that the people who live there are plagued with the ills of inner-city struggles, from poverty to high crime, unemployment, and bad/dilapidated housing. Yet for the citizens of Reading, their city offers so much more. Importantly, a sense of home. In her installation, this student provides a more nuanced view about Reading, by showing us the everyday behaviors with space/place that celebrates notions of family and community. The student identifies as Latina, and she has lived in Reading all her life. In the class, she was introduced to and inspired by de Certeau's (2011) ideas about place and practice, where de Certeau discussed the "walking people" who shaped the city. That being "stuck" in pathways and corridors allowed us to better see the space around us from those vantage points. She decided to pay closer attention to her city, like an ethnographer, to look more closely at her daily activities and behaviours. She armed herself with a camera and began documenting her movement in her neighborhood, an area that is predominantly Puerto-Rican and Dominican. She discusses these activities as follows:

> You may know about people who experience the city life, but until you experience it from the ground level and the act of being there, you won't be able to truly comprehend and admire the landscapes and your surroundings. It is these landscapes we call home.

> I now walk these streets with the eye of a researcher, camera in hand, ready to document instances of everyday living and imprints of everyday activity that make

possible this space as home. My pictures show front porches, where families gather to talk and share stories; graffiti on buildings, marking spaces of transgression, belonging and identity; the community's makeshift bus stop outside a shop, where community members gather before leaving the neighborhood for other activities; an umbrella used by elementary students and homeless people … street life as everyday instances of home.

In her installation (Figure 4), which was situated in one of the corners of the multipurpose room, the student sets up a dinner table, complete with plates, silverware, placemats, and flowers in the middle. The dinner table is traditionally viewed as the place where family gathers, where we would "do" being family (Goffman, 1959).

Figure 4. Cityspace – The Street as Home (Installation).

The flowers, however, are plastic and colored red, white, and blue. The placemats are quilted with an Americana motif, resembling the American flag. This is done to exaggerate notions of "belonging," pointing to the fraught and complicated migration history and politics for Latin populations in the United Sates. Placed in the empty spaces on the dinner table are photographs, propped up by distinct types of holders, showing places such as front porches, bus stops, and sidewalks. These are the photographs taken by the student. These are places where her community gathers, spaces where they "do" being-family, and being-community. These images are displayed prominently against the backdrop of her "Americana" dinner table. She states:

> I visually juxtapose these neighborhood spaces with the traditional dinner table. The dinner table is often used as a symbol for home and familial connection. The dinner

table in my community is the city street.

These sample projects were two of nine media installations and performances at the *Expressions of Identity* event. In all the projects, theories of identity presented through mediated arts-based methods, provided students a framework to share with others their complicated dealings with identity and identity politics.

We next evaluate this class activity/event using Dewhurst's (2014) attributes for justice-based arts education. As discussed earlier, Dewhurst provides the criteria that such work should: 1) be rooted in people's experiences, 2) involve concomitant processes of reflection and action, and 3) seek to disrupt or undo systems of inequality towards the betterment of society.

Identity and Praxis: Rooted in People's Experience

A significant part of how we understand and live our lives is based on our socio-cultural identities. These identities shape how we see ourselves and influence how we navigate our relationships with others (see Hortobágyi, 2009; Jackson II, 2002; Martin and Nakayama, 2018). Given its crucial role in our lives, it is therefore unsurprising that critical conversations about culture and identity have become an important part of the higher education experience, especially within the college liberal arts model. Intrinsic to the liberal arts experience is the cultivation of critical thinking, ethical reflection, and "transformative" learning, prompting judicious and compassionate engagement with complex human issues. It is here where many (students and faculty) first encounter or expand upon their knowledge of culture, identity, justice, and equity. Importantly, these conversations are not necessarily limited to any one field or disciplinary domain.

While there are extensive ways in which scholars have conceptually and methodologically treated cultural identity (e.g., Gjerde, 2004; Hall, 1990), we begin by using the term broadly in this context; that is, as interconnected and divergent categories of meaning and behavior, based on a variety of associations. Examples of these associations include race/ethnicity, geography, nationality, ethnolinguistic, psycho-social, demographic, and ability (physical and mental). In this (upper-division communication) course, however, our grappling with cultural identity was both, critically invested and disciplinarily based. We used du Gay, Evans, and Redman's (2005) reader on critical cultural identity studies as a primary text, along with other supplemental readings. We explored various theories of identity from scholars such as Louis Althusser, Judith Butler, Franz Fanon, Patricia Hill Collins, Michel Foucault, and Stewart Hall. As a communication studies course, there was particular emphasis on the role of symbolic activity (verbal and nonverbal behaviors) in negotiating cultural identity. The du Gay et. al text was valuable here, in discussing identities from a subject-of-language approach, where students learned that identities are reiteratively constituted in discourse "to

produce that which it names and regulates," and shaped "in and through difference," making them inherently context bound. Students also learned of identities as (unconsciously) "interpellated" or "sutured" to already-present socio-cultural meanings (p. 2). Armed with these core theoretical ideas about identity, students were invited to then use specific theories and models to bring focus and perspective to how they engage with any, or a combination of, facets of their cultural identity. In addition, Crenshaw's (1991) perspective on intersectionality was used intentionally to explore how overlapping and intersecting (oppressed) identities are compounded within systems of power and domination.

Students tend to enjoy conversations about cultural identity, often drawing on their own lived experience to situate and explore various components and intersections of their identity. This interest, however, does not translate quite that easily to engagements about identity as *theory*, especially critical-cultural theory, which is often written in ways that undergraduates find difficult to access. Yet understanding and working with theory is an intrinsic part of the college learning experience; theory offers students lens to understand and critically engage with various facets of their lives. Recognizing such apprehension and difficulties in learning theory, this teaching activity used mediated strategies to help students ease into the learning of complex and multi-faceted critical-cultural theories about identity. The teaching activity focused on harnessing students' interests in studying identity based on their own lived experiences, a topic that they were excited to explore and share. They were asked to come up with creative ways (using media installation and performance) to (re)present their identities as understood through a particular theoretical lens. The back-and-forth movement between designing their projects and working with or reflecting on theory offered the students critical learning moments.

As teachers working with these students, we were able to observe such learning and growth. Working with theories that connected to their lived experiences, the students engaged both lower- (remembering, understanding, applying) and higher-level (analyzing, evaluating, creating) forms of learning and critical application (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) as they developed their projects.

Public Advocacy: A Process of Reflection and Action Together

It was important that students situated their theoretical exploration of identity within a justice-based framework of public advocacy. In class, we emphasized the "weight" of discussing these critical issues with larger general audiences, that there was a sense of responsibility or accountability when presenting ideas that might be difficult or delicate for others. We emphasized the importance of critical consciousness, as part of the process for students and teachers. We considered the role of dialogic engagement, incorporating what Paulo Freire (1970) called critical praxis, or our "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform

it" (p. 52). We attempted to do this by continually reflecting on our performative/communicative behaviors as a constitutive force, situating (symbolic) systems that empower and oppress, being self-reflexive, and recognizing dialogue as a route to social change. We kept reflecting on and asking questions about our perceptions about identity, the various systems (social, political, educational, mediated, etc.) that have shaped or influenced those identities, and our own behaviors related to those identities. We also reflected on strategies that would engender dialogue; amongst ourselves, as students and as media-creators/performers; between ourselves and our various audiences or interactive partners; and, between audience members. This type of critical awareness is a necessary step in working towards strategies of transformation, be they anti-racist, feminist, anti-ableist, or any other form of justice-based education. Exploring symbolic behaviors in this way is a core component of many communication or rhetoric-based classes.

Media Installation and Performance as Public Advocacy

Media installation and/with performance have long been used as a tool for advocacy. Striff (2003) explains that the use of media arts and performance to explore the self/selves/community have been academically popular since the 1970s. In higher education, these approaches have however, been associated with theatre and performance-based programs of study. Media-installation and performance allow students to use media technologies, place/space, and theatricality to aesthetically engage audiences; to show, and to evoke emotion, instead of simply "to tell." As such, these methods tend to be accessible to a wide variety of people. The access to lay audiences was a primary motivator for this teaching assignment, given the assignment's public advocacy ethos.

This teaching activity, highlighting media production/installation and/with performance, veered away from traditional teaching approaches that rely on the transfer of information through lecture, textbooks, and exams, what Freire (1970) would call the banking model. While the students (and teachers) initially lamented the amount of work involved in this project, we were thrilled and proud of the result. This project helped us engage with and learn about theory, mediated communication, public advocacy, and cultural identity in memorable and enjoyable ways.

Conclusion: Disrupting Systems of Inequality, Towards the Betterment of Society

This justice-based teaching activity used various (critical) theoretical lenses to highlight students' lived experiences about their intersected (and often oppressed) cultural identities. Drivers for this activity were critical consciousness and public advocacy. This activity, as a term project, culminated the core objective for the course: to use the students' exploration of their identities to interrogate the systems of inequality that implicate those identities. As we

discussed in this paper, the use of arts-based techniques of media installation and performance were an especially effective way to critically engage audiences from within and outside the classroom. Additionally, these strategies provided us with a better appreciation of the organic and dynamic spirit of justice-based arts education, as laid out by Dewhurst (2014):

- By linking theoretical concepts to *lived experiences*. Students used theory and self-reflexivity to creatively explore how their identities were subject to the interplay of culture, media/performance, and discourse.

- By focusing on processes of *reflection and action.* Students and teachers were in constant dialogue with each other, and with a variety of audiences (such as the course/guest instructors, and the campus community) as they worked through their strategies, including their use of mediated forms, in developing their installation/performance. It allowed for a student-centered approach to teaching, encouraging self-expression, self-reflexivity, and engagements of multiple and diverse viewpoints.

- By focusing on public advocacy. Students used deliberate actions to engage various audiences. In so doing, we created spaces for critical dialogues regarding systems of oppression that implicate our cultural identities. The dialogues are meant to foster critical consciousness, a necessary step in working towards the *betterment of society*.

As teachers, we found this activity to be a success, even though we initially thought the overall project to be rather daunting. Our evaluations were based on observing student and audience engagements during the event itself, as well as on a post-event reflection paper and debriefing session. Students were asked to write a short 2-page final reflection paper that explored their learning process, focusing on 1) what they learned, 2) the strengths and weaknesses of their project, and 3) what they would do differently if they repeated the assignment. We discussed the event and the reflection papers during a final class session. Almost all the students noted that this was "the best" or "one of the best" learning experiences in college. They were humbled and awed by the work done by their classmates and were proud of their accomplishments. Many noted that the assignment made theory fun and accessible. Many discussed how much more they appreciated theory and what it offered, particularly to understand cultural identity. Two students noted that this assignment inspired them to pursue graduate work, since theory is "no longer something to be afraid of." Importantly, we observed from the reflection papers and discussions, that students were able to talk and think about cultural identity with stronger critical nuance and theoretical depth.

In addition, students noted the importance of arts-based pedagogy as public advocacy. They

claimed to have important conversations about identity with family members (who attended the show) and audience members. The students noted that this type of work is needed for social change. Three students stated that the project helped them reflexively deal with problematic ideologies or hegemonies that infused their own perspectives on identity.

Members of the community attending the program also expressed their appreciation and admiration of the students' work. A professor in the sciences noted she would like to adapt this activity, but on a smaller scale, in her own classroom. Other members of the community congratulated the students for tackling "important issues" about identity; these are "things we do not like to talk about," one audience member said, further explaining that this platform (media installation and performance) can be very effective, as it allows for audiences to receive information in a variety of ways, and in their own time.

We too learned a lot from this project. Our students helped us better understand various socio-cultural issues that impacted their identities. We were aware of the privileges of academia that offered us ways of learning about, while also shielding us, from many realities that our students live. This assignment offered us opportunities to reflect as well on our roles as teachers and advocates for our students. We recognized our own struggles between adhering to self-imposed rigid academic expectations and opening ourselves to other leaning possibilities. We were excited to witness our students use arts-based techniques to creatively and strategically to engage lay audiences. We learned to better trust our students to lead us in their own journeys of academic exploration. We were gratified in seeing our students work with theory and the arts in the ways that they did.

Overall, this teaching activity was remarkably successful; however, we identified a few caveats. First, that it is important to have access to funding for materials and publicity. While an activity such as this may rely on a small budget (using only found objects and electronic advertising), costs can accrue in unexpected places, such as technology fees or the need for unique props. Second, that some students may not be ready to deal with difficult topics about identity. As such, it is important that the instructor(s) work closely with students and be particularly attentive to individual needs. Third, that this type of activity may not be suitable for all students. While it was not our experience in this instance, there have been other occasions where students were uncomfortable delving into their identity using these methods. This type of activity requires that students be vulnerable and introspective. Not all students can do this. The use of critical and introspective methodologies, however, can help art educators create conditions for "safe spaces" for students (see, for example, Travis, 2022; Travis & Hood, 2016).

Finally, that time management is a key factor in the success of this activity. Students

overwhelmingly noted that they wished they started earlier or had executed better time management. While these concerns are important, the benefits of this type of teaching activity outweigh them, for many of the reasons discussed in this paper. Importantly, when done well, this activity allows for substantive and transformative arts-based pedagogy for the students and instructors.

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Cheryl L. Nicholas, Ph.D., is an ethnographer who enjoys doing research in her homeland, Malaysia. Her research is based on how symbolic activity constitutes and is constituted by cultural worldviews. Her research has been published in journals such as Sexuality and Culture, Communication Quarterly, Storytelling, Self & Society, Journal of International and Intercultural Communication and as book chapters in books such as, Queer Identities/Political Realities, and Games, Leadership and Learning in Virtual Environments. Her recent multi-modal project on Malaysian WWII oral histories was recently exhibited at the Perak Museum in Malaysia. Cheryl received the 2011 Penn State Berks Outstanding Full-Time Teacher Award and the 2014-15 CLGBTQE Award for Outstanding Service. In 2017 she was honored in the 'Teachers on Teaching' series by the National Communication Association, and in 2019 she was named an Alumni Teaching Fellow at Penn State. In 2024, she received the ARID Teaching and Service Award at Penn State Berks.

Heidi teaches courses in the areas of digital literacy, digital design, and critical/cultural media studies. Her courses are part of interdisciplinary digital programs, serving degrees in Digital Communications and Digital Studio Art. Heidi's research is in media and communication, intersecting areas of digital and popular cultures, gender and sexuality, and memory studies. Her research has been published in disciplinary and interdisciplinary journals and books. Heidi was awarded the Dr. Henry P. and M. Paige Laughlin Research Award for Faculty Scholarship at Albright College. Heidi is currently working on two larger projects, one looking at media entertainment and fan cultures, and a second project that examines how the collective memory of Harvey Milk is communicated and shaped over time. She has collaborated with Cheryl L. Nicholas on many research and creative projects, most recently as

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