

The Artist, the Activist, the Academic: Building a Critical Pedagogy of Embodied Knowledge

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Abstract: This paper is an example of how autoethnography as personal narrative may be used to explore the relationship between applied research methods, activism, and embodied knowledge. This work is a critical reflection of classroom culture that intentionally extends white, Western, male-dominated epistemology to produce embodied knowledge in the feminist tradition. This paper provides a theoretical framework for classroom instruction that may be transformational for students when combined with arts engagement, feminist teaching, and self-directed learning. This critical framework was developed as a result of social work classroom instruction that occurred from 1998 to 2003 at a small, Midwestern liberal arts college. The paper explains how classroom activities both inside and outside of the classroom may be used to provide avenues for understanding and producing qualitative research that traditional methods of classroom instruction do not produce.

Keywords: autoethnography; activism; embodied knowledge; epistemology; feminism; critical pedagogy

As an African American, female, queer identified artist, activist, and academic I spent my entire educational and professional life trying to force the seemingly disparate parts of my identity into a neat package that “others” could understand and accept to no avail. Admittedly this paper is part of my academic emancipation from routine convention and by extension the emancipation of my students from the confines of Eurocentric, male dominated ways of knowing, being, and doing. Such liberation was built on the foundation of the feminist notion of embodied knowledge defended by Grosz (1994), which reconfigures the subjective experience of the body to challenge Western, dualist conceptualization of mind versus body. According to Grosz, dismantling this dualistic conceptualization opens the possibility of mind into body – body into mind consciousness, because what can be known is always known through the lived experience of the body.

Thus, gender matters; sex matters; form and shape matter; race and ethnicity matter. This perspective suggests that we cannot divorce knowledge from the producer(s) of knowledge. Here, the artist, the activist, and the academic need not be at odds. Rather, these identities converge to produce a pedagogy that informs itself and has emancipatory impact. I accept and integrate the disparate parts of myself thereby I am liberated. This approach suggests, in the words of Hoelson and Burton (2012), that “knowledge is assumed to emerge

through social processes that include interaction, language, and narrative” (p. 96).

In this paper, I lay the theoretical framework of embodied knowledge. I then provide a context for the integration of professional ethics and values, social change, artistry, and academic life. Finally, I conclude with providing an extension of embodied knowledge to inform social work qualitative research and classroom instructional methods through the use of performance art as embodied knowledge. This work is based on my social work classroom instruction from 1998 to 2003 at a small, Midwestern liberal arts college.

Drawing on the work of Archer (2000), critical realism maintains that embodied selfhood bears primacy to all other stages of development. If there is no embodiment, there can be no identity development. If there is no individual identity, there can be no social identity, commitment to ideals, or personal agency. According to Archer, first and foremost, humans are embodied beings. It is through this fundamental embodiment that individuals develop the skills necessary to survive and flourish in the world.

Archer's critical realism maintains that embodiment is not contingent on the discursive. On the contrary, Archer claims in fact, embodiment is secondary to the discursive. Long before language development ensues, children manifest intentional causal action

through bodily self-consciousness. Archer asserts that embodied knowledge has three distinguishing characteristics: (a) it is based on sensory-motor exchanges with nature, (b) it is possessed without perception of its cognitive content, and (c) it can only be accessed in direct contact with nature. Embodied knowledge is the knowledge that literally becomes “second nature.” For Archer, “It is a ‘knowing how’ when doing, rather than a ‘knowing that’ in thought.” Archer (2000) exemplifies this embodied knowledge in the free play of children as they throw, swing, slide, build, chase, jump, etc. all the while making personal realizations. These fundamental acts of knowing do not require linguistic mediation. Thus, the primacy of practical action temporally comes before all else, including language itself. According to Archer, words bear no hegemony over “our other doings in the emergence of our sense of self.” From this position, there can be no privileging of the rational, discursive self over the sensory emotive self. Emotions become critical and necessary commentaries on the natural, practical, and social orders - aptly defined as our physical well-being, performative achievement, and self-worth, respectively. Personal identity is achieved by striking a balance between multiple concerns on multiple levels by an active and reflective agent, ultimately establishing a commitment to a defined set of values.

Social work education is guided by the mission and values of the profession, which is, in part, to “enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (National Association of Social Workers, approved 1996, revised 1999). This is a call to action deeply rooted in the values of social justice and service. This perspective lends itself to the notion of social worker as activist. Yet, far too often our classroom activities are void of the very real call to act in a manner that creates transformational change. We discuss the methods of social action but provide a limited number of opportunities to live out this action on concrete terms, seemingly justified by very real limitations of time and resources. This produces a subtle disconnect. Furthermore, our methods are often discursive in nature and miss opportunities for lived embodied knowledge that is fundamental, primal as indicated by Archer.

According to Wilcox (2009), disembodied knowledge has weighty consequences for pedagogy, creating barriers for educators in accessing bodily intelligence in classroom instruction. The theories of embodied knowledge from the feminist perspective are often disparaged and poorly understood. In the words of Spry (2001):

I have often felt like I was speaking from outside of my body in my professional and personal lives. In fact, for me, academe has always been about speaking from a disembodied head. And because I often felt like I was calling out to my othered self, I never questioned the implications of a disembodying discourse. The body in academe is rather like the headless horseman galloping wildly and uncontrollably to somewhere, driven by profane and unruly emotion, while the head – holder of the Mind – is enshrined under glass in the halls of academe. (p. 715)

My personal journey as the artist/activist/academic began many years before I actually entered the profession of social work.

I have always been an artist; I was born an artist. It was the first self in a spirit of multiple identities. A natural storyteller, I could spin a good yarn even before I knew the alphabet. I made elaborate stories about my teacher and my classmates before I ever set foot inside a school. I would string words together in a nonsensical manner just because I like the way it sounded. So, as a child, when my artist self met my activist self I had the tools to critically reflect on my reality to transform my world. Though this sounds lofty for a child of 6 or 7 years, in my upbringing, when other children were riding bikes and going to amusement parks my three older sisters and I were marching, rallying, and door knocking. I am the daughter of a man who was the president of our local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for much of my childhood and adult life. I learned early the power of community organizing. My sense of social justice and racial equality was home grown.

When I was called “nigger” for the first time in the late 1970s I had the tools to fight back. Well

informed by the civil rights movement of the 1960s I knew I could have “Freedom Now!” I looked my accusers square in the face and threatened them with a visit to our Black advocate, a towering, brawny African American man of well over six feet who was known to patrol the halls in the gi and black belt of a karate master. I had won. The taunting stopped immediately. I would not be made inferior, invisible, or silent. These are the roots of the activist within me. It is not casual, accidental or lacking in import. I learned my words were powerful. I learned my words had the power to protect me.

I really honed my writing skills in my undergraduate college experience and in the years following graduation. While in college, I wrote a one act play which I casted and directed myself and a full length play that was directed by my college professor and mentor. During this time I wrote numerous poems, short stories, and performance art pieces. I wrote to express myself, fight oppression, inspire, free, and be freed. I knew I must be seen and heard. Art was my activism, my method, my means. In the early days, I wrote about educational disparities based on race and class, the objectification and erotizing of Black women's bodies, and the failure of mainstream society to recognize Black beauty in a manner that went beyond the superficial.

However, making the transition from poetry and prose to find my academic voice felt near impossible to me. Who was the dispassionate, objective other that the academe called me to be? Surely, it was not me. I would write all of my academic papers in poetry first and then translate them to a voice I thought my professors could understand. It was exhausting and artificial. It was the only way I knew how to write at the time. The more degrees and credentials I earned behind my name following the acquisition of my Masters of Social Work degree, the more I lost touch of the artist. Consequently, the activist became masked by a budding academic choking out an existence not sure to last. For me it was disembodiment and I became yet another talking head.

This was particularly surprising to me as a social worker whose profession is steeped in a rich history of activism and social change. I take my charge from the likes of Inabel Burns Lindsay, acclaimed

African American activist, educator, researcher, administrator and first dean of the Howard University School of Social Work who worked tirelessly in pursuit of a truly democratic society (Crewe, Brown, & Gourdine, 2008). However, even in the wake of the ancestors, I felt as if I was hovering over my body watching someone else's life. Suspended. Disconnected. Disembodied. I could not make the artist, the activist, and the academic converge. So, by the time I started teaching as an adjunct professor at a small liberal art college in central Minnesota I was only a shell of my former self, the door knocking, activist, militant seven-year-old who could stand up against her oppressors. The tool and methods of the academy available to me at the time were dispassionate and lacking by extension so was my teaching. Not surprisingly a limited, mechanistic approach to research and theory gives rise to an equally stark view of pedagogy (Stetsenko, 2008). I needed to reunite the disparate parts of myself. The effort to reconcile the activist self with the role as academic is shared by others (Goodley & Moore, 2000; Egan, 2001; Burnet, 2003; Stahl & Shadimah, 2007; Stetsenko, 2008). However, much of this knowledge was unknown to me at the time.

So, a little bored and a little defeated I started performing again. My performance art as always was a reflection of my passion to create social change; performance art is my activism. It is exactly through my consciously embodied self as a performance artist that I was inspired to create consequently increasing my personal agency. Personal agency can be defined as the ability to assert one's power over one's material experiences so that people can effect substantial change in our lives (Egan, 2001). This sense of agency becomes the foundation of the work however that work may be defined. Discussed in Egan (2001), it releases and values a “plurality of subjectivities” (p. 12). It is authentic. It is the first steps in the process of “identifying embedded local knowledges” (p. 12) that allow us to relate to others be they students in the classroom or participants in research. One can bring one's self fully to the experience, free from the guise of a “deconstructed, objective, a posteriori examination” (p. 12) so common to both traditional forms of research and classroom instruction.

Freed from the chains of my stunted creative self, I also started little experiments with students in both my Human Behavior in the Social Environment class and my Research Methods class. First, I would ask them to attend my performances on campus that addressed issues of diversity and educational equality in predominantly White institutions of higher learning. The performances were followed by classroom discussions where I asked my students, who were mostly White, middle class, suburbanites, to confront their issues of racial bias and privilege. They were lively discussions where students could compare and contrast their experiences with the realities presented to them in performance. As a consciously embodied performance artist, students could relate to me in ways they could not in my role as professor. I showed vulnerability by presenting my story and the story of those like me. Students could relate to this vulnerability and in this space they felt free to expose their vulnerabilities. Tectonic plates were beginning to move.

Next, I began asking my students to attend other performances on campus and in the community that confronted issues like sustainability, racism, classism, sexism, gender bias and homophobia. We would discuss these performances in class and students were required to write critical reflections about what they were learning about themselves and their worldview in comparison to those who possess a conflicting or competing worldview. These reflections were required to relate back to what they were learning from lecture and their readings on human behavior and research ethics respectively. The critical reflection papers were followed by small group presentations that pooled together the students' collective wisdom about what they were learning about critical social issues. Here is where the magic happened.

Students were no longer content to do standard PowerPoint presentations. They requested to be able to write performance art pieces to demonstrate their learning. I also had pairs of students write a song about the importance of understanding diversity in social work practice. Students also wrote poetry and acted out scenarios of how they'd committed racial transgressions against others or had been transgressed against themselves. They had emancipated themselves from the confines of

traditional ways of knowing, being, and doing academics. Such transformations beseech Freire's critical pedagogy and open pathways for an integrative, transformative style of teaching and research (Stetsenko, 2008).

Furthermore, many of my research methods students, who were required to write research proposals as a requirement of the course, were using their performance inspired knowledge to write proposals that were specifically designed to change their communities in some way. For example, one student troubled by the poor nutrition faced in many low income communities, wrote a proposal to use geographic information systems technology to identify "nutritional deserts" in her community that could be used to advocate for more fresh produce in local convenience stores. Another student, whose small rural community did not have a city recycling plan, wrote a proposal to conduct a recycling feasibility assessment that she ultimately planned to distribute to her community city council. Yet another student wrote a proposal to better understand the needs of the growing, underserved Somali immigrant community in her relatively small Midwestern town. As a result of these early experiments, I have come to better understand how performance art can be used to inspire, motivate, and create a call to action in my social work students. By connecting to my activist self I gave permission to my students to do the same. Burnett (2003) speaks about this transformation:

The life of an academic is enriched, enhanced, and fulfilled by the application of research to actual social change. Applied research that grows out of committed activism enlivens the classroom as an arena of relevance. By being intentional about the dynamics between teaching, research, and service the ivory tower can have its doors open and moved into the hearts of academic-activists who live meaningfully at the intersection of passion and vocation. The activist academic is a way of life – being and doing, action and reflection, teaching and research, theory and practice. (p. 148-149)

The use of performance art as a pedagogy provides a link between embodied knowledge, the call to

action, and applied research methods. Activist methodologies are an intentional departure from the traditional. According to Guajardo & Guajardo (2008) “our task is to do more than construct a different theory of practice. We must also rupture the traditional paradigms and use methods as an instrument of change” (p. 7). To this end, I have since used performance art as a method of social change both in the classroom and in the community for nearly 15 years. Performance art strikes to the core, invokes visceral, emotive responses that provide the fuel for creating action. Students are inspired to transform themselves and their communities not only when they perform but also when they embrace actions, images, and deeds inspired by viewed performance art. My students were naturally moving toward models of community-based participatory research and this type of research “is particularly effective in contributing to the empowerment of oppressed groups and social work researchers are well situated to engage community groups in research because they often have access to these groups” (Stahl & Shdaimah, 2007, p. 1611). Not only can these tools be used as an instructional method, they can also be embraced as research methodology (Stahl & Shdaimah, 2007) and an embodied way of knowing.

Autoethnography

This paper uses autoethnography as personal narrative to examine how performance art can bridge applied research methods, activism as a social work ethic, and embodied knowledge. Autoethnography as a methodology parallels radical ethnography whereby the researcher makes and expressed attempt to include the life stories and experiences of the researcher as part of the research methodology (Dennis, 2005). This effort is not without risk and vulnerability as the writer/researcher exposes his or her self in highly personal ways in an attempt to produce an artifact of the research experience that is both authentic and honest (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009).

Nevertheless, this work is my critical reflection of the classroom culture I created to produce a means of embodying social work research. The effort intentionally extends White, Western, male-dominated epistemology to produce embodied knowledge in the feminist tradition. Specifically, Black feminists have a long history of using

autoethnography to theorize about the use of self in praxis (McClaurin, 2001).

Champions of autoethnography produce rigorous a scholarship that is intentionally personal, political, cultural, and social as a means of challenging canonical epistemology in the post-modern era (Dennis, 2005). In response to positivist science which maintains that the truth can only be known through that which is observable and measurable, the post-modern era ushered in a new age that upholds the notion that truth is relative, contextual, and not free from the bias of its creators (Kuhn, 1979). Therefore, autoethnography carves out a space for recognizing the world view of the researcher in all of its social and cultural richness in a manner that makes bias transparent, examinable, manageable, and relative to the context in which it was created. “Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systemically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, para. 1).

Autoethnography, written or performed, creates a gateway for embodied research. Conception to completion, in autoethnography, I am deeply and intimately immersed in the lived experience of the body. Reis (2011) suggests that a break from the dominant, positivist paradigm offers a means for the researcher to bring the creative, reflexive use of self into the research process. As my embodied, creative self, I sit down with my research journals, memos, field notes, laptop computer, and even my sketch pad to create the tactile experience of re-searching through my ideas, my observations, my musings, and my evidence to create something that others will digest and transform in their own process of knowing. The word becomes flesh.

I shift between writing and typing, pounding my fingers to the click-clack of key strokes or sliding my hand across a white lined page. Writing and typing, typing and writing I revert back to hand written words when I am feeling stuck. A more basic technology, pen and ink pull me back to the world of ideas. A word, a sentence, a paragraph, the completed text, the words are alive. They have shape, form and meaning. Words are things. This is the process of embodying ethnography. The researcher explores the self in the environment to

reveal the truth of the moment as part of a social and cultural journey to understanding. According to Ellis (2004):

It [autoethnography] is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness... Back and forth autoethnographers gaze. First they look through an ethnographic wide angle lens focusing on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition. (p. 58)

Furthermore, artist/activist/academics like Spry (2001) suggest that autoethnography when performed is an act of academic heresy, she states “Though emotion and poetics constitutes scholarly treason, it is heresy put to good use. And it is heresy I continue to attempt to commit in the ‘BEING HERE’ of my own scholarly reflection” (p. 709). These treasonous acts in performed autoethnography open a pathway to a new understanding and use for bodily intelligence. When we capture the social and cultural experience through performed autoethnography we rest in the heart of embodied experience.

We understand within the depths of mind and through visceral, emotive relationships that the meaning we create is a rigorous effort to convey the lived experience. The sights, the sounds and the touch of you and me becoming we is something larger than ourselves that connects and weaves the web called culture. Therefore, autoethnography is not a degradation of theory but rather an embodiment of theory. Theory and practice are part of a continuous feedback loop where one aspect informs the next. Thus, when we create narrative and performance through autoethnography we shake the dust off our grand theories and lofty assumptions to animate our understanding of what is the lived experience. Burnet (2003) reasons, “We should not be ashamed of having a perspective since all research is done from some perspective.

Methodological problems arise when the researcher is unaware of, or does not acknowledge, her perspective” (p. 143).

Yet, autoethnography as personal narrative is not without criticism. Ellis, Adams, & Bochner (2011) explain that the methodology, researchers, and products of autoethnography have been referred to as self-absorption, failing to meet the demands of scholarship through hypothesizing, analyzing, and theorizing that is critical to social science research. Critics also purport that it fails to meet the demands of literary excellence necessary for autobiography, thus, placing autoethnography in a kind of methodological no-man's land. However, Ellis, Adams, & Bochner (2011, para. 39) maintain that:

These criticisms erroneously position art and science at odds with each other, a condition that autoethnography seeks to correct. Autoethnography, as a method, attempts to disrupt the binary of science and art. Autoethnographers believe research can be rigorous, theoretical, and analytical and emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena.

In this space the artist, the activist, and the academic may converge to produce a product that is literary, expressive, and passionate. The result is a fruit born in the fertile ground of evidence, ideas, and theory giving rise to the activist nature in which social work was founded. The products of the qualitative researchers' labor often produce a sense of self-advocacy, self-empowerment and resilience for both researcher and participant (Goodley & Moore, 2000).

Autoethnography has the power to inspire, to captivate, and to produce a call to action because it is affective, intimate and performative. Autoethnography when performed taps the primal self; that which is before words. The goal is to produce emancipatory transformation. When one is freed from the confines of positivism a world of possibility opens (Spry, 2001).

Furthermore, “Autoethnographers view research and writing as socially just acts; rather than a preoccupation with accuracy, the goal is to produce

analytical, accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, “Critiques and Responses,” para. 40).

I am using the concept of autoethnography as personal narrative as outlined by Nash (2004) who skillfully heralds the scholarly use of personal narrative while firmly grounding the approach in social science, ethics, and philosophy. In Nash's words:

Good teaching, good helping, and good leadership are, in one sense, all about storytelling and story-evoking. It is in the mutual exchange of stories that professionals and scholars are able to meet clients and students where they actually live their lives. It is in the mutual sharing of our personal stories, particularly in the willingness of professionals to listen to the stories of others, that we make the deepest connections with those we are serving. (p. 2)

My use of narrative is reconstructed from my first five years as a social work educator. The reconstruction represents a deeply felt sense of what my students and I were trying to create to better understand ourselves, our biases, human development, complex social issues, advocacy, research, and social justice. I have come to understand that our efforts were about “living social work” and “embodying social work” in our everyday lives as agents of social change in a manner that was both authentic and creative.

Autoethnography as personal narrative was used in this study to illustrate how performance art can be used to inform teaching and research in social work. I've used my memory and journals written from the period 1998 to 2003 to tell the narrative of my experience and the experience of my students. I have constructed the narrative following Nash's (2004) principles of ethical truth telling; I've conveyed this narrative with accuracy and without deceit or dishonesty. Nash maintains (2004, p. 22), “To write a personal narrative is to look deeply within ourselves for the meaning that just might, when done well, resonate with other lives; maybe even inspire them in some significant ways.”

I've tried to capture the stages of how my students and I created a classroom culture that went beyond White, Western, male dominated ways of knowing, being, and doing to offer an alternative, consciously embodied model. The stages can be understood as: 1) creating safe space, 2) exploring the environment through the eyes of a performance artist, 3) learning through difference, 4) analyzing what was learned, 5) inspiring and being inspired, 6) embodying knowledge. Each stage/phase of the process is described further below.

Creating Safe Space

“Hmm...Ms. Washington, our other professors let us call them by their first names. Can we call you Felicia?” My students could not have known they were blowing the lid off over 200 years of slavery and oppression in the African American community. They could not have known that my grandmother, Mrs. Audrey Leach, was raised on the sleepy banks of the Mississippi River in a small town in the Jim Crow south. She was allowed to play freely with little white children until the age of twelve. All of the children were on a first name basis. But, at the age of twelve something drastically changed. She was no longer able to call her little white playmates by their first names. They became Miss Sue, Miss Mary, Miss Annie, Miss Jane, but Audrey would remain Audrey and sometimes just “girl.” Rather than feeling inferior, she stopped playing with “those girls” as she came to better understand her place in society.

Countless African American men and women have been historically reduced to being called boys and girls, nigger, darkie, jungle bunny, or coon, continually being called out of their names and disrespected. I tell the students my story and the story of my community not in a defensive sense but rather as a means of honoring my ancestors, the masses who were made to feel inferior by being called something less than who they were. “No, you may not call me Felicia. You may call me Ms. Washington.” This is who I am and nothing less. Later, this name would become Dr. Sy. But, this act of showing respect was not a barrier. It was an invitation. I would say, “Tell me how you got your name.” “What is the story of your birth? Let's get to know each other better.” “Have you ever been called outside of your name? How did it feel?” “Do you think if you were practicing social work in

an immigrant community, it would be important to learn the correct pronunciation of your clients' names?"

What's in a name you ask? Answer: Safety and comfort. These early complex conversations set the stage for me to expose myself, my values, and my vulnerabilities to my students thereby allowing my students to do the same. I wanted my students to express themselves. This is something they could not do unless they felt safe and respected in doing so. This first stage was also about reflecting on individual experiences and learning from the experiences of others. This concept would become a major theme in my classes and the beginning of understanding the world through performance art. None of this work could have been done without some established ground rules. Students were reminded that this was a classroom and not a therapy session and to therefore share accordingly. Students were asked to listen respectfully. They also had the right not to share at all. In any event, knowing yourself and knowing yourself in relation to others is considered the first step to becoming consciously embodied. This work is not possible unless students feel safe in the classroom.

Exploring the Environment through the Eyes of a Performance Artist

For me, writing and performing is a basic need like eating, drinking, physical activity or sleeping. If I do not have some form of creative expression in my life, I wither like a fallen leaf. I cannot say the words and the art come easily, but they are a necessary part of feeling grounded and centered in my identity. As previously mentioned, my performance art is a gateway to my activism. I start with a passion against some social injustice. I immerse myself in the phenomenon through the written word, still images, videos, other performances, listening to live conversations, and just by observing what is happening in the world around me. I pay attention. I tune in. I allow myself to be moved by the experience of others. This studying provides the fuel for my creative work. During this period of my career, I was tuning into the stories of students of color in predominately White institutions of higher learning. I compared and contrasted their experiences with my own. Eventually, I cast my net wider to include the stories of non-traditional students, first generation college

students, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to better understand the challenges of those who entered college on uncommon grounds and the barriers to success they would experience as a result.

My art was a bit like making stone soup. I started with the base of my experience and then added the experiences of others to create a spectacle that had the power to move others in very profound ways. I performed my art on campus, sometimes as a one woman show and at other times in collaboration with another artist friend of mine. I required my students to attend these performances, discuss them in class, and write critical reflection papers on what they'd learned by watching the performance and class discussion. It wasn't without push back from some students, however.

"I can't act, Ms. Washington. I know nothing about acting or performance art." Karen shuffled on her feet looking defeated. "I feel awkward when I have to get up in front of people. I don't really get this whole performance art thing. I'm not creative. Can't I just write a paper?"

I replied, "Well, college is a place where you can safely push yourself in ways you never imagined. Right now, I am just asking that you come see me perform and learn one way to approach performance art as a form of activism. We'll talk about what we learned and then build from there. Ultimately, you are not being graded on the final product, but how much effort you put in and how well you understand the process."

I interpret the exchange above as fear of the unknown and lack of competence. In order to fully understand what was happening in performance, students needed to understand the basic elements of theater including actor, audience, space, text, and spectacle. Students needed to understand how these elements came together to create something that is greater than the sum of the parts.

I am an actor who comes in a particular physical package: large bodied, African American, female, dark skin, and queer. All of these factors relay some perceived, symbolic statement even before I open my mouth to utter a word. Here, the stereotype, the box audience members put me in actually works to

my advantage as I deconstruct each component of their preconceived notions through my performance.

Next, audience is a necessary component in embodying the work. Actor and audience work together in a symbiotic relationship to bring written words to life. The actor feeds off the audience and vice versa to give meaning, in the moment, to the work. Attention to space also gives meaning to the work. Performance spaces provide context and also provide a layer of meaning. Performances can be indoors, outdoors, in theaters, museums, coffee shops, banquet halls, civic buildings, and classrooms. The possibilities are limitless. I want to also suggest that there is another kind of shared space that actor and audience occupy that transcends physical space. This space applies to the emotional realm. It is ideological and replete with meaning. It is something that cannot be seen, touched by the hand, smelled, tasted or heard. It can only be felt with the heart. Also, spectacle draws our attention because of the visual display created. Spectacle is created by props, costumes, sets and staging. Finally, text, in the form of narrative in this study, provides a script that tells a story, offers meaning, and a starting point for critical analysis. Fluency in these basic concepts provided a language for reflection and analysis.

Learning through Difference

As a female, person of color, and a bi-sexual, many life experiences have called me to feel outside of the norm or oppressed by mainstream society in some way. I have always been compelled by stories of difference, in part to better understand myself, normalize my experience and carve out my identity. I've come to know myself better. Through comparison and contrast, I locate myself in relationship to others and society. I've asked my students to engage in critical exploration of their cultural experiences and to recognize areas where they had privilege and where they'd been complicit with injustice. I asked students to uncover what social issues were most important to them. We learned that our experiences were not the same, but that we had more in common than we had different. Our core values were the same; we valued family, friends, education, livelihood, love and intimacy.

Our differences became topics of deep conversation. Our differences were related to our families of

origin, family history, bias, and personal identity. In our discussions room was made for vulnerability, doubt, and even anger and outrage. I would say to my students, "Tell me who you are. I will tell you who I am and in our similarities and differences we'll come to understand ourselves better. We'll come to understand the world better." We had to expand our definition of diversity outside the boundaries of the racial divide. Students shared:

"My mother has mental illness. I grew up taking care of her."

"No one knew my father was an alcoholic."

"I was home schooled."

"We lived on a farm – traveling to the city was such a culture shock."

"I'm a single mom."

We all had a story to tell. Many of the students who were quiet in class would open up in their papers. They revealed their level of understanding in ways I could have never guessed based on their level of participation in class. I cannot confess that I knew what I was doing. I was largely led by my sensibilities about what was important and has how to express oneself artistically. I followed my nose and the direction of our good conversations. I graded my success by the level of student engagement, mid-semester feedback from students, and final course evaluations. Things seemed to be working well. So, I persisted.

The concept of learning through difference extended beyond the walls of the classroom; over the years, we saw performances with themes about women's bodies, HIV/AIDS, homosexuality, poverty, Native Americans, African Americans, apartheid, drug addiction, and educational inequality to name a few. Many of these experiences extended outside of our realities, but many of them led to critical self-discovery and further exploration. We were learning through difference.

Analyzing What Was Learned

Performance art unfolded as a bridge between activist sensibilities and a method of rigorous research. In order to accomplish this task, critical

analysis of text and narrative was fundamental. Students described their analysis in 5 to 8 page reflection papers that required students to interpret behavior and apply theories of human development to what they learned as a result of watching various performances and in class discussion. This was one of the more challenging assignments for students, but they generally rose to the occasion. Students were also required to reflect on the elements of theater: actor, audience, space, spectacle and text and make some assessment on how these structures were used in each performance. These analyses introduced rigor into our studies.

Inspiring and Being Inspired

I wanted my students to come away from class and performances feeling connected to what they were learning. I wanted them to understand nuances of experience that could not be learned in a text book. Classroom connections could and should turn into real life experiences that were grounded in embodied knowledge. One student said, “My family originally comes from Appalachia. I want to study how music can be a protective factor against despair in rural Kentucky.” I’ve come to understand this student’s research question as an exploration of herself, factors that influenced her family’s move away from Kentucky, and the music that was important to her, producing her sense of embodied knowledge.

Slowly students wanted and asked for more. They were not content with the status quo and asked for opportunities to express themselves creatively. For example, students in my research class read *Savage Inequalities* by Jonathan Kozol (1991), which documented educational disparities in our nation’s largest inner cities. The reading assignment was in preparation for a group project where student were required to write a mini-proposal on how they would go about answering the research question, “What are the mechanisms that allow some inner city youth to excel despite being in disadvantaged school systems?” They were so moved by the stories and scenes in the book that for extra credit they created a script of the text and performed for the author on his trip to visit our campus.

Students were also required to write research proposals based on their understanding of some social problem. To inform their learning, they could

use a variety of media including any performance they were required to see for class. Some students listened to protest music of the 1960s and 1970s, others analyzed Nazi war time photos of concentration camps and others read biography about social and religious leaders to name a few. These types of sources were better at inducing an emotive response and better at generating empathy. Students were also required to use resources from their text books and peer reviewed journals. Students were not required to do their research proposal, but they had to conceptualize their projects from start to finish. Many of these projects included components of advocacy and community participation and some of the proposals expressed a direct desire to fulfill a mission of social justice. They could include elements of performance and narrative in their proposals but it was not a requirement.

Embodying Knowledge

“I think I’ll be better able to help people with AIDS because I understand the AIDS epidemic in ways that I never would have if I didn’t see this play.” This student was describing how he felt after seeing a production of *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner. As a social work educator, this statement epitomizes the most important outcome for the use of alternative pedagogy; improved social work practice. When meaning becomes deeply engrained it has the potential to influence behavior, emotions, and thoughts. Insights gained are the building blocks of skill development. Thus, skillful practice become second thought, common place. It is a natural extension of being connected to oneself and others in salient knowledge. One comes to know that the body understands how to respond in praxis. Therefore, one my primary objectives as an educator were to create opportunities both inside and outside of the classroom for students to acquire their embodied knowledge.

Coda

Performance art as a consciously embodied practice can be used as a form of critical pedagogy, a method for conducting research and a platform for social activism, which is consistent with social work ethics. Through critical reflections and discussions on performance art, personal experiences and the experiences of their peers, students were able to analyze and apply theory. Performance art inspired

them to create their works of art, which ultimately may have the power to inform and inspire others. Performance art meets actor and audience in the place beyond the discursive through the use of spectacle and space to convey meaning often in symbolic form. These audience/actor involvements are visceral and emotive. This may have the power to move others in a call to action, because knowing in the body is the first way of knowing. These embodied practices take us back to something basic, primal as Archer (2000) discussed. The experience invokes bodily intelligence. Wilcox (2009) suggests:

To avoid the entrapment of the mind/body hierarchy, we need to explicitly name and parse embodied pedagogies whereby the body is at the front and center of knowledge production. Performance, an area where bodily knowledge cannot be dismissed, must be taken seriously in this pursuit...Cultural performances such as dance, music, and theater constitute an important social field where embodied knowledges are not only created but also validated. (p. 106)

Performance art uses text as a fundamental structure. Words convey meaning, which leads to understanding. The text may be poetry or prose derived from the lived experience or imagination inspired by real life events. Narrative critically examined is strategy for learning. As a method for research, performance art may take its text directly from the data, from the researcher's personal narrative, archival information, or oral history. Costa (2005) suggests "Working through narrative process also allows students to explore issues of power and representations of racial, ethnic, and sexual differences that they encounter in their everyday lives" (p. 2). The end product can be disseminated as performance and the performances may have emancipatory capacity for both actor and audience. Again, according to Wilcox (2009):

Performance capable of cultivating creativity, critique, and citizenship, has much potential for feminist pedagogies. Popular educators and theater practitioners have applied embodied performance

similar to Theater for the Oppressed in literacy education as well as social movement mobilization since the 1970s. Unfortunately, most educators in the academic mainstream remain either oblivious of, or resistant to such radical practices. (p. 106)

Yet, performance art as a critical pedagogy and research method is not in opposition to traditional methods of teaching and research. In fact, this particular point of view is grounded in theory, philosophy, analysis, observation, and fieldwork. "It is the experience of planning, engaging in, and analyzing a narrative project that pushes students to think critically about the production of knowledge" (Costa, 2005, p. 4). Traditional methods are not abandoned, but rather the repertoire of research and teaching tools are expanded. Such efforts may unite the artist and the academic in conscious embodiment.

The disparate parts of the artist/activist/academic have a pathway for reunification through the use of performance art because all parts of the self are required in order to engage in an authentic fully pressed experience of identity. These determinations may produce a platform for action because the consciously embodied work calls for transformation. For professors and students alike, this work is grounded in analysis of narrative. Costa (2005) maintains:

They [students] can analyze narratives in terms of form, coherence, or contradiction; how speakers narratively produce self and identity; the politics and/or power relations of the encounter; and how the process of narrative methodology exposes the production of knowledge and undermines universal notions of "truth" or "history." (p. 6)

In the present study, students inspired by the process were called to advocate, mediate, negotiate and broker on behalf of would be clients. These are the manifestations of bodily intelligence. The progression of creating performance art as a pedagogy and research method may make an excellent coupling with community based

participatory action research. This model of research can be defined as collaborative research endeavor between academic researchers (professors and students) and community members that validates multiple sources of knowledge with the goal of creating social action and social change (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003). Anderson's (2002) approach states that:

The philosophy underlying the model incorporates three diverse service and research needs. First, it recognizes the important role that participatory and community-based social service research plays in community development and problem solving, and assumes that the technical quality of such research is critical to its evolution. Second, the model responds to the increasing research demands that community agencies face as social services are rapidly devolved to communities. Finally, it is premised on a need to engage students in meaningful applied research projects, in order to enhance learning and better prepare students to become community research practitioners. (p. 73)

The tradition has a significant history in social work (Jacobson & Rugeley, 2007) and the approach aligns itself with social work values and ethics. Participatory action research asserts that with the right tools people closely affected by the social issue are best able to understand their problems and address their struggles (Koirala-Azad & Fuentes, 2009-2010).

In appropriate situations students may work with community partners to chronicle and convey their stories to arouse and transform their communities. Capturing narratives is the cornerstone of this work. Students may move beyond simply seeing problems that encompass complex social realities to genuinely seeing the humanity of those they serve whose lives are intricately shaped by their environments. Fraser (2004) expressed that, "With the capacity to recognize people's strengths and engage people in active, meaning-making dialogues, narrative approaches – notably those informed by critical ideas – may help social workers move beyond a

strict problem focus to more generally explore social phenomena" (p. 181).

Additionally, through performance, faculty research efforts may be infused with the richness and vigor that often accompanies the opening of the creative process. Spry (2001) says of her work in performed autoethnography, "I find that authorial voice in the autoethnographic texts far more engaging due to its emotional texturing of theory and its reliance upon poetic structures to suggest a live participative embodied researcher" (p. 709). In the present research, I have been given a new sense of purpose as I've poured over old journals and recalled long held memories from my early days of teaching. I've moved from adjunct to tenure track and I am currently in the process of defining my research agenda and what kind of member of the academy I will become. One could say I've come back to my roots.

In this exploration of alternative pedagogy, I invite others to join me in the conversation on how to engage students in embodied learning. These conversations have implications for what will be taught, how and from whose perspective. It is a matter of engagement, emancipation, and creative expression. In the social work activist stance, academic social workers are encouraged to come out of their silos and connect to real world experiences for the betterment of the profession and instruction to students (Saleh, 2012).

This research is subject to the vulnerabilities of autoethnography as personal narrative due to the fact that it relies, in part, on memory and memory can be faulty. Also, I've relied on journals that were written almost ten years ago and the way I made meaning of events at the time is not necessarily how I make meaning of events in retrospection. This raises issues of reliability and validity. Furthermore, my small class sizes of ten to twenty provided limited scope making generalizability highly unlikely. However, "For autoethnographers, validity means that a work seeks verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible, a feeling that what has been represented could be true" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, "Reliability, Generalizability, and Validity", para. 34). This is what I have done. I've applied the principles of ethical research and

recreated the truth of my experience. Coherence and credibility are established as the writer continuously checks that the written analysis is in keeping with the stories told and the objectives of the research (Fraser, 2004). Finally, I am a trained actor with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in theater. This uniquely positions me to use performance art as a tool in the classroom. Replication of these exercises may prove challenging for others without such training.

Future research on the use of performance art as pedagogy and methodology might attend to how Bloom's Taxonomy (1956), a classification of learning objectives, might be used to better understand the stages of creating embodied knowledge through performance. The taxonomy is divided into three domains: cognitive, affective and psychomotor. Such an analysis may yield particularly informative results for educators. Also, greater investigation into the uses of community collaboration and its impact on stakeholders is warranted in addition to the perceived barriers and limitations of such an approach. Finally, given the primacy of the body as a tool for learning, increased understanding of the mechanism of embodied intelligence seems relevant. Merleau-Ponty (1962) viewed the body as directly correlated to the capacity for developing skills. As our skills improve, so does our capacity to act. The body is the vehicle for direct, applied action:

The body is our general medium for having a world. Sometimes it is restricted to the actions necessary for the conservation of life, and accordingly it posits around us a biological world; at other times, elaborating upon these primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through them a core of new significance: this is true of motor habits [sic] such as dancing. Sometimes, finally, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body's natural means; it must then build itself an instrument, and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world (p. 146).

Performance art can be successfully used in social work pedagogy and research methods. Performance art creates an embodied response in a manner not

evoked in some traditional forms of teaching and research. These effects are inspiring and emancipatory and may lead to greater involvement in social justice and social change, which is consistent with social work values and ethics. The embodied responses may be a result of increased bodily intelligence. Bodily intelligence improves skillful practice and competence is the ultimate goal of social work education.

Author's Note

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