Connecting Assessment, Aesthetics and Meaning-Making in a General Education University Theatre Course

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Abstract: This paper discusses how the researcher examined learning and teaching over the course of a year, in the course titled: TH 460 Storytelling and Ethnographic Theatre. Discussion revolves around how the course was conceptualized, the procedures and protocols created, engagement and collaborations developed, learnings and outcomes experienced by students and faculty, and resulting works-in-progress and performances. The study finds that students benefited from collecting ethnographic data and creating their own particular performances—especially in response to stories and data from persons unlike themselves. This study suggests that iterative and responsive teaching that spans multiple modes of teaching and experience impacts students' learning— especially in an arts-based oriented teaching and learning environments.

Keywords: Ethnotheatre, Assessment, University-level Teaching, SoTL, Aesthetics, Arts and Learning

I. Scope and Context: Ought teaching and learning be studied in arts-based classrooms?

Assessing arts-based teaching and learning has often been considered restrictive to the creative process and/or inappropriate to developing the "affective domain." In fact, many teacher-artists protest against implementing systematic evaluation of their, or their students,' experiences claiming that assessment damages the intuition and creates barriers to doing, teaching, and learning creatively. After all, don't artists work best in subjective and non-quantifiable environments? Aren't statistical (assumed to be non-arts based) and qualitative (widely perceived as arts oriented) experiences and practices contradictory (Deasey, 2003; Fiske, 1999; Jeffery, 2005)?

This is not a new debate. It is, in fact, almost as old as public schooling itself (Dewey, 1902/1979; Hawkins, 1974) and despite opposition (Jensen, 2001) critical assessment in arts-in-education has led to a broader discussion about how instruction in the arts functions, and how learners relate their creative experiences to, other disciplines and fields (Catterall, 20022; Deasey, 2003; Rupert and Nelson, 2006; Sourfe, et al, 2004). Sourfe, et al (2004) and Rupert and Nelson (2006), for example, include an interest in "*new conversations about research on arts and education* (Rupert and Nelson, p. 27)." These authors note the wide variety of "*opportunities for joining colleagues from arts and education in studying the complex learning and expressive processes of the arts; their implications…and their potential role in our collective pursuit of educational and social goals* (Sourfe, et al, p. 4)."

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Fowler (1996) and Eisner (1993, 1998, 2002) encourage assessing the arts as a foundational perspective through which we may interpret and examine the creative and intuitive learning experience. However, these authors also agree that there is a paucity of data regarding 'best practices' and little research focusing on the impact of instructional methods in arts classrooms. Eisner addresses this lack by pointedly turning the arguments *against* systematic examinations of creative work into a manifesto *for* arts-based research in the area of teaching and education. Such endeavors need to be understood as key to creating "*the kind of schools we need*," argues Eisner, because arts practices are innately flexible, foundational, and seminal to the human experience of meaning making: therefore, arts are key to viable educational systems.

Fowler (1996) goes further and defines the practice of researching and evaluating teaching and learning in the arts as deeply important for creating "strong classrooms" within "strong schools" and argues that arts teachers must begin to think holistically about their disciplines—to present the doing of art in the same comprehensive way that biology or geology teachers might think about 'doing science.' This includes the entire Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) cycle: identifying goals, pursuing outcomes, connecting methods to methodology, evaluating results, and using data to reform practice and inform the field. Through assessment and research, arts educators can begin to mitigate interest in bolstering cognitive growth and achievement joined with the experiential learning arts production generates. When this happens, those of us engaged in the teaching profession become better equipped to foster creative classroom environments while at the same time are able to provide "*proof of the [arts'] educational impact* (Fowler, p 145)."

Paradoxically, as the debate heats up voices opposing formal assessment and evaluation within teaching and learning and the arts have also supported action research and related studies—investigations that examine arts-based teaching practices and their impact on learners. For example, new studies into the affect and efficacy of arts-based instruction have grown exponentially over the past ten years (Bresler, 2004; Fox and Geichmnan, 2001; Davis, 2006; Willis and Schubert, 2000). These find that creative thinking, the experience of imaginative exploration, creative "Flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996), arts-disciplinary instruction, and aesthetic discourse, are key components for deep learning. Arts-rich settings are cited as being beneficial to creating a well-rounded and educated citizenry and for supporting life-long learning habits of mind (McCarthy, Brooks, Lowell, and Zakaras, 2001; McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, and Brooks, 2004).

A. Grounding the Study: A Theatre Arts Context.

Despite interest in the educative nature of arts engagement there remains a paucity of literature connecting theatre arts-based classrooms with SoTL especially if one focuses on university-level instruction. This lack of SoTL-based evaluation and literature limits academes' ability to define quality arts instruction.

A review of the literature pertaining to Storytelling, Creative, and Ethnographic performance, for example, shows a small number of SoTL related studies that examine the doing and making of ethnotheatre[2] in an educative environment (Ackroyd, 2006; Conrad, 2004;

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[2] *Ethnotheatre* is defined as the production/performance of an ethnographically based theatre work or composition. *Ethnodrama* is an emerging term and defines the written versions of ethnographically based theatre works or compositions. The data sources for these texts usually have been created using qualitative data points such as

Saldaña, 2005). Yet, without models of grounded assessment practices we do not know if our students are learning or if we are succeeding at teaching them.

In the field of Theatre this is a real problem since we tend to correlate audiences' and critics' praise as evidence of successful learning outcomes. Also, we frequently interpret accolades and popularity as substantiation of deep understanding. Yet, mere popularity does not denote knowledge acquisition. A cursory review of the recent publications that propose to define methods for teaching Acting, for example, show that although the methods and language used in Western actor training are somewhat standard (they are understood systemically and used across the discipline) instruction of the most common methods is—almost exclusively--personality driven and idiosyncratic.

This study was developed within the contentious, debated, and creative environment discussed above. It was planned in direct response to the concerns regarding supporting a wider discourse of best practice within the performing arts and with a desire to demonstrate arts teaching and learning, i.e. meaning-making, specifically in General Education theatre classes.

It was based on the assumption that teaching and learning are creative and constructed processes and that they are particular to each individual practitioner and at the same time interconnected. Further, teaching and learning ought to involve all components of the investigative paradigm (Bybee, 2002), that is, the learner, teacher, and the environment must interact in an ongoing experimental and educative way in order for deep understanding to occur; what Hawkins (1974) calls the interaction between "*I, Thou, and It*." Further, this study's methodology is situated on the 'boundaries' of qualitative and ethnographic investigation where transactional praxis is located.

B. Ethnographic Theatre.

In the field of storytelling there has been a decided epistemological shift in practice. Changes in older models of scholarship and folk practice have inevitably led away from the structuralist ideas that 'told stories' are either universally accepted or are anecdotes that illustrate idiosyncratic or dominant perspectives. There is a shift toward viewing storytelling and theatre as central and primary to thinking and meaning making (Bruner, 1990). "Narrative Inquiry" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000), as it is now characterized, has become a legitimate scholarly discipline and as it grows it has taken on new functions in research study. Narrative Inquiry is beginning to resemble much that is familiar to the working artist in that it requires the practitioner to be a reflective and active inquirer, storyteller, author, and performer (Patton, 2001a).

One of the most controversial edges, or 'borders,' (Gubrium and Holstein, 1999) where theatre making and qualitative inquiry come into relation, can be observed in autobiographical and ethnographical theatre and "creative[3]" neo-storytelling (Saldanã, 2003 and 2005; Schueb,

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interviews, diaries, autobiographies, first-hand accounts, field notes, participant-observations, and personal stories, etc.

[3] The phrase "Creative" theatre was first used by Lecoq (2002) to describe his movement-based theatre-making. It now denotes a performance that is predicated on improvisation and role-playing around thematic or storied constructs. "Creative Storytelling" (Zipes, 1995) is used to describe the work of storyteller performers who use traditional folk literature as the basis for new performances, usually without a memorized script, free use of mime, acting techniques, and other dramatic structures. " Creative Story Theatre" (Sills, 2000) is another more formal iteration of this genre, and is used to describe ever-changing performative structures that are created by artists or co-

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1998; Taylor, 2006; Zipes, 1995). Here, ethnographic narrative exploration directly influences and fuses with the world of theatre production, sociology, dramaturgy, and performance studies. The contact has brought about a revolutionary shift away from modernist theatre practice and toward what Puchner (2006) calls 'performance interventions', that is the combining of eclectic components of autobiographical material, older forms of ritual theatre, masking, mime, puppetry, as well as oral literatures, and folk histories, bringing them together and center stage.

The results have met with general popular success. The works of Smith (1992 and 1993), Ensler (2001 and 2005), and Kaufman (2001) for example, have become major icons and gained widespread standing and critical acclaim. All of these artists have one thing in common, they use storytelling as the foundation for their work and have collected narrative data by implementing qualitative inquiry projects and oral-history collection; ethnographic material garnered through processes like, or identical to, orthodox social science methodologies and methods, the backbone for play-crafting and production.

Where ethnotheatre practitioners diverge from social scientists is in the product of the research activity, here the entire paradigm shifts away from analysis toward empathic creative products. Artists more freely pick and choose which stories and rituals to make manifest and which to leave out. They lean toward the kinesthetic and away from the codified.

Because the essence of narrative discourse has always been ephemeral and personal it is important that any study using these techniques and frameworks seek better and stronger ways to link the disciplinary fields—using past models, present conditions, and future creations to engage in ethnostorytelling and ethnoperformance. It is within the realm of autobiographical, heuristic, and ethnographically-based art that the self and other can be observed most acutely—where we see work grounded in qualitative research and narrative inquiry as supportive of performative exploration, ones that are iterative, praxis driven, and transactional in their scope and situation.

C. Connecting to the SoTL Taxonomy.

The study attempts to address all four aspects of the SoTL Taxonomy (Hutchings, 2000), as follows:

A. The Scholarship of *What Is*: This study was designed to examine what happened in a specific university classroom during a yearlong investigation. This included observing and describing the approaches and interventions used to address specific outcomes as well as developing and reflecting on the processes that participants experienced in their teaching and/or learning.

B. The Scholarship of *What Works:* This study was designed with specific outcomes in mind. It was intended to be iterative in approach and to track the different versions of teaching materials and practices—examining their impact on students. It was hoped that the study would affect the approaches, ideas, and investigations of instructional design—especially as these influence deep understanding in the areas of story-performance, ethnodrama and ethnotheatre making (the topic/curricular focus of the course in question).

C. The Scholarship of *Visions of the Possible*: This study was iterative in nature and designed to examine the impact of pedagogical and methodological practices. The phases

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created within improvisation or informal systems and institutions such as gatherings, political rallies, and other similar events.

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of this study were formed in direct response to evidence and subsequent findings. The intent is to clarify teaching and learning.

D. The Scholarship of *Formulating New Conceptual Frameworks*: The project led to creating a new conceptual framework for teaching theatre in a General Education (GE) environment and also augmented and changed the researchers' assumptions and attitudes. Shifts in perception and disposition were one of the most significant outcomes of the study as it resulted in critical changes in course curricula as well teaching method/implementation.

II. Design and Implementation: Doing Systemic Inquiry in TH 460: Storytelling and Ethnodrama (460).

A. *Framing the SoTL Question.*

This investigation was designed in order to understand assessment and student learning within the course *Theatre 460: Storytelling and Ethnotheatre Course* (460), a GE course offered by the theatre department at this researcher's university. The curriculum was designed to involve students in a range of performance-based narrative processes including folkloristics, performance art, storytelling, autobiography, oral history, and ethnodrama making. The overall goal was to expose students to the field and involve them in collecting and telling stories effectively and performatively.

This study was designed in keeping with standards for qualitative and narrative inquiry endorsed by Patton (2001b) and Bresler (2004) and utilized a combination of qualitative approaches with an emphasis on narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) as a theoretical frame for looking at university students' perspectives and concerns regarding their own learning and abilities. Validity was established through a paradigm of authentic relativism, in that it depended on the design, research relationship, and reflections of participants in order to build an realistic, valid, and descriptive account (Maxwell, 2004). In this case, the processes of capturing a grounded and legitimate perspective were emphasized. Interpretive and theoretical validity were substantiated through 'collocation' analysis (Mello, 2002) and the inclusion of multiple participant perspectives—including divergent or negative strands (Strauss and Corbin, 1997). Findings were employed iteratively to refine questions, inform classroom practice, and create topical and responsive theories. Also, care was taken to capture a legitimate understanding of the study's context by presenting as complete a picture as possible of what participants, including the researcher, actually said, did, thought, and perceived. To ensure this, the research data was captured in multiple media sources including notes, logs, emails, scripts, surveys, and digitals recordings and video.

Finally, to ensure a valid account, triangulation of data was structured into the research design and plan. This included; a) using methodology that correspond to the design (narrative approaches); b) including on-going discussion and investigation of research questions; c) paying attention to disconfirming and divergent data; d) collecting data from multiple sources as a way of checking out researcher beliefs, assumptions, and biases; e) using video, written, and recorded data to capture the on-going instruction and learning; and f) using collocation and grounded methods of analysis, which align with the narrative and qualitative nature of the data points.

In July 2005 a research plan was submitted to the Internal Review Board, was approved, and awarded Exempt Status The study and its design were then reviewed and reworked through

participation in the university's Center for Instructional and Professional Development's (CIPD) SoTL Fellows program. After consulting with the CIPD director and staff, in August 2005, guiding questions for the study were completed: *Do the syllabus, course instruction methods, student outcomes, and assessment tools function holistically and successfully? If so, in what ways? What is the impact of the course on student learning and perception?*

B. Data Points: Gathering SoTL Evidence.

The study examined the efficacy of 460 for teaching and learning spanning two semesters over the 2005-2006 academic year. The first step was designing a scaffold-matrix intended to give a visual frame to the inquiry. Next was alignment of course goals and student objectives/outcomes with the scope and sequence of the curricula. Assessment tools were then designed that tied these various threads together.

In September 2005, 460 students were given pre, mid-term, and post surveys. In addition, 460 was documented through field-notes and teaching logs, which were kept on a weekly basis. Other artifacts used to augment these data were planning matrixes, syllabi, student writing, scripts, transcripts, video, and performance reports.

During the yearlong implementation of this study the following data were collected:
1. Detailed and running account of the planning and work sessions held in conjunction with UWM staff and colleagues, (7 sessions).
2. The development of planning matrices and syllabi.
3. Examination and documentation of course goals and outcomes and the alignment of these with method and practice(s).
4. Development and implementation of appropriate assessment tools.
5. Field logs and field notes kept that tracked activities, reflections, and processes during course instruction and implementation.
6. Interim reports and essays completed for CIPD.
7. Design and implementation of student questionnaire/surveys that addressed curricular issues, assessment questions, and larger research query (N=141).
8. Reflective papers written by selected students (N=4).
9. Midterm reports (N=34).
10. Final ethnodramas and transcripts (N=17).
11. Documentary video footage of classroom instruction and service-learning.
12. Iterative examination of nascent findings and use these to redesign course and practice, (in keeping with Grounded, Narrative, and Action Research methodologies), as discussed previously.

C. Research Site(s).

Previously, 460 had been tied to specific projects pertaining to the general field of storytelling and Devised/Creative Theatre (Lecoq, et al, 2002; Oddey, 1996; Sills, 2000). For example, in 2004, students had researched the *Amduat* (the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead) and created a storytelling production as a creative response to this artifact. Other 460 topics included *Super Heroes, Cinderella—A World Tale,* and *A Cosmic Web.*

460 was redesigned as a laboratory for the SoTL investigation by focusing exclusively on creating oral histories, ethnotheatre pieces, and ethnodramas. A matrix for course planning and

assessment was developed as well as a detailed grading rubric intended to organize and describe the learning outcomes. Surveys were designed that addressed students' learning, perceptions, and response to grading rubric. Participants were asked to respond to three surveys during the sequence of the course: one at the beginning, which acted as baseline, the second midway through the course, as a reflective check-in, and the third at the final class meeting after performances had been evaluated.

Participants of this study were students who randomly enrolled in 460, either as an elective within the theatre department or for GE credit. 21 students attended the course in Fall 2006 and another 26 participated in Spring 2007. Of these 47 students, almost one-third were non-theatre majors. The rest were split between the BFA and Theatre Studies (BA) programs—with the majority of BFA students registering for 460 in fall 2005.

1) Milwaukee Stories (Fall 2005): The subject of 460 (Fall 2005) dealt with "on (not) getting by" in Milwaukee. The concepts grounding the course were issues raised in the book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America* (Eherenreich, 2002) as they specifically related to life in and around the City of Milwaukee. Therefore, 460 was subtitled *Milwaukee Stories,* and was also linked to the BFA Acting Program, which produced the play *Nickel and Dimed*[4] (Holden, 2003) on campus in December 2005.

When 460: *Milwaukee Stories* began it centered on the experiences of working at or below minimum wage in Milwaukee communities' as well as participants' perceptions of what it meant to "get by" or "not make it" in urban Wisconsin. Students enrolled in the course learned basic ethnographic and social research techniques and were also taught basic coding and analysis through collocation methods (Mello, 2002). Participants were asked to use the new grading rubric as a way of reflecting on their progress and learning. This tool proved useful in shaping a shared language of critique within the 460 classroom.

After collecting interview data, students were assigned to work in production groups and required to create theatrical presentations that incorporated major findings and included data-specific stories and themes. 460 participants were also asked to embed other theatrical formats such as physical and creative theatre, mime, song, and storytelling techniques in order to create what Saldaña (2005) calls "interesting theatre:" honing ethnographic material so that it works within the structure of a play; has a beginning, middle, and end, an arc of dramatic tension, contains universal psychological/humanly identifiable themes, and includes empathic information that audiences can recognize. Works-in-progress were presented as midterms, then honed and reworked for the final 'exam.' Many of these were chosen to be included in a public production sponsored by the Theatre Department, entitled *Milwaukee Stories (*directed by Ms. Sheri Williams Pannel*)*.

2) *Elder Tales (Spring 2006):* In Spring 2006, 460 again focused on ethnographically contextualized theatre, this time concentrating on the title *Elder Tales*, this decision was influenced by the fact that the Theatre Department had direct connections the university Center for Age and Community.

Elder Tales students engaged in the same basic processes and protocols as their *Milwaukee Stories'* counterparts. However, this time the curriculum centered on beliefs and perceptions of death, dementia, aging, creativity, and person-centered care. A service-learning component was

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[4] Holden's play is an adaptation of *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America* (Eherenreich, 2002).

formally added to the course and students spent over 30% of course time interacting with elders at an assisted living center in the area. Here they worked with clients, staff, and patients creating narratives and eventually producing ethnotheatre and ethnostorytelling events, which were open to residents, participants, and the general public. In addition, a documentary was made of the *Elder Tales* Project.[5]

III. Findings: Reflecting on SoTL Evidence.

As study activities were implemented data were examined iteratively. In keeping with qualitative and grounded methods, findings were used to update and restructure both the classroom teaching and course curricula. In general, at the end of the fall semester *Milwaukee Stories* data indicated the following regarding course redesign:

A. *Success of Pre-planning Matrix.*

The matrix developed at the outset of the project proved to be a valuable teaching and learning tool. It focused the course, helped give context to the work, and visually framed the relationship between the learner and the instructor—interaction that was key to success in this study. For example, during preplanning (in August 2005) many small activities that had been central to 460 in the past were set aside because they were judged to be unconnected to course goals. The calendar for the course was significantly restructured so that projects might be worked on incrementally, a course packet with handouts delineating performance guidelines and interviewing techniques was created, and finally, new texts were selected.

These changes proved effective. Data show that on surveys, 460 students consistently indicated that they had formed a cohesive understanding of what the course objectives were and how they were meeting course criteria (in previous years teacher evaluations had shown that the instructor rated lowest in clarity regarding grading and assessment). Also, a majority of students (over 70%) felt that they had learned a new skill (ethnotheatre and ethnostorytelling) and that they had succeeded because the course had been infused with both hands-on projects and research-based inquiry: "*I learned the most in this class through doing the research for the class and then putting the stuff into a rehearsal process*" (Junior, BFA Major)[6].

B. *Success of Assessment Tools.*

Students had opportunities to see others' work *as well as* reflect on their own processes through the use of the detailed rubric developed for this study. The rubric supported student learning by providing students with a useful tool for examining storytelling and ethnotheatre processes as well as created a common language for assessment. In class, the rubric was used to evaluate the ethnotheatre cannon (for example, *Fires in the Mirror* and *Vagina Monologues*) as well as evaluating student generated projects. Data indicate that the combination of inter and

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[5] The *Elder Tales* documentary, produced by Luther Manor and directed/filmed by Alex Torius, premiered in June 2006 at the Creativity and Aging Forum on campus.
[6] All data quoted here are indicative of the complete data set and are used as exemplars and/or models that support findings. Data are identified by student source. ***All data excerpts are indicative of the entire data set and are used here as exemplars only.***

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intra-personal assessment was significant to all but two students. Most students commented that they learned a great deal over the course of the semester through assessing others.

> One of the things that really helped me was having a chance to watch other storytellers and then discussing that [rubric] and what worked and what didn't.
>
> (Sophomore, BFA Major)

C. Process vs. Product: Constructivism.

A large minority of surveys from *Milwaukee Stories'* data indicate that the mode of instruction sometimes created confusion and dissonance.

> There was confusion at the beginning what to do early on based on the teaching style. That was a bit frustrating. But then [the teacher] made it clear and some things were intended to be confusing so that we could do things our way and not any one way—for creativity—and now I think either really specific guidelines and rules or no guidelines and rules is the way to go.
>
> (Junior, Theatre Studies Major)

> For me, I had a difficult time understanding and adapting to the layout of the assignments. I am a bit over organized and the 'freedom' of the class required a bit of adjustment.
>
> (Junior, Theatre Education Major)

Two students, responding to final surveys, complained about having to do "*too much research.*" One commented, "*There was too much interviewing and transcribing and not enough actual storytelling or theatre.*"

> I think that in this class the process is the criteria. It is not just about doing an end product that needs to be taken into consideration, the development of what I did—and I am excellent! Is what counts.
>
> (Sophomore, Theatre Major)

While these comments may not be surprising, 460 students brought up a legitimate question: How to encourage constructivist and hands-on learning approaches while at the same time supporting students acculturated interest in, and comfort with, more traditionally oriented methods?

D. Course Redesign.

Reflection on findings discussed above brought the research study to its next iteration: How might the course be redesigned in order to assist students in framing and defining aesthetic and creative tasks? How might students be encouraged to produce and practice ethnotheatre

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procedures without sacrificing a free-flow of ideas and intuitive open-ended approaches? These were factors that the study attempted to address in spring 2006 *Elder Tales.*

Subsequently, *Elder Tales* was designed in winter 2005 with nascent findings from *Milwaukee Stories* in mind. The redesign process focused core content more firmly on the philosophical and epistemological questions and perceptions of theatre making. It also attempted to clearly identify creative processes, infuse constructivist discourse into the every-day course work, and practice meaning-making through experiential procedures, learning and making use of a specific language of critique and evaluation designed to lead students to insights into the process of production; what Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) call "*the major dimensions of the aesthetic experience*," i.e. learning about creative processes through experimental production.

Data show that course redesign led to practical changes in 460, among these was a further refinement of course calendar and handouts along with a specific service-learning project required of all students. Also, course instruction was strengthened as it further focused on creating performances, using visual and kinesthetic processes to develop performance pieces, and working on material iteratively, incrementally, and over time. These changes, in turn, led to significant benefits such as deeper learning of course content, better skills acquisition, and a broader interest in the subject matter. Students reported learning more about themselves and came to respect the process of making ethnotheatre as well as valuing the end product.

E. Learning to Listen.

The refinement in instructional guidelines and the instructors' own learning curve in mentoring students in the collection and use of the stories of 'others' seemingly paid off in an increased feeling of success. In exit surveys, a majority of *Elder Tales* students reported that they learned about theatre and storytelling not simply through doing, practicing, and improvisation, but also by listening to the stories of others. Over 80% of students reported that they learned to *listen* to elders. Listening in turn, they observed, led to understanding, deeper and/or more complex knowing, and perceiving the value of others.

> I learned that the important parts are about life and knowledge and these are not just found in a book, but that talking and listening to people's stories is great knowledge in itself.
>
> (Junior, Criminal Justice Major)

> I am really curious and I like learning. This course got me excited and that made me listen and then speak back. At first I was afraid to fail, but I gained confidence and used my imagination and creativity to make [the ethnodrama projects] meaningful.
>
> (Sophomore, Psychology Major)

> I learned to listen; I was pleased with what I heard. I learned age is nothing. We are all people and some of the elders have wicked and almost pornographic senses of humor—despite their years.
>
> (Junior, Film Major)

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F. Learning about Life through Ethnographic Theatre and Storytelling.

In exit surveys, over 75% of students in both fall <u>and</u> spring showed evidence of developing a foundational knowledge of ethnotheatre procedures. For example, they clearly defined the concepts of ethnodrama and ethnotheatre: "*It's social change*," "*making theatre from the struggles of people*," and "*bringing about a cultural awareness and understanding…of this society.*" During *Elder Tales,* however, students seemed better able to inter and intrapersonally connect the fundamental concepts of ethnoperformance to specific experiences and functions. Spring semester students were more engaged and identified with material more significantly.

Students in both fall 2005 and spring 2006 reported learning best through developing performance pieces. However, a majority of *Elder Tales* students added that they also gained new and significant knowledge by interacting with the elders and through group interactions with peers. (By contrast only two *Milwaukee Stories* students mentioned their experience with informants as being important.)

> What my group and I learned, we came to the conclusion that every [person's] story is very unique and that it doesn't matter who the person is, where they came from, or if someone has dementia or not. We decided to make our final play a presentation…to celebrate…life and all the life stories [we heard]. We are all born into this world and we all have our own stories…I now see that I have a lot more to go in life. Taking this course has taught me some important lessons. Number one: it is OK to get old, and number two everybody has their own story, and number three everyone is unique in their own way.
>
> (Sophomore, Theatre Studies Major)

> My participation was patchy at the start. I soon learned and discovered a whole new self inside me. I grade my learning as an A. This was because I worked hard in my projects and with my group. I learned through this that even though we can be in the worst personal crisis, we all have value. We all need each other. Art is key and creativity is the way we communicate spiritual value. I am astonished. This is the class I thought I would fail for lack of clarity and interest. But it was the class that challenged me the most –to find myself as artist and a person. And then it acted as a sounding board for my artistic and spiritual endeavors. This class played an indispensable role in turning my life around. I needed this class in my life. I cannot say more. I cannot say enough to praise this course… Truly a life shaping experience.
>
> (Sophomore, Art Major)

G. Developmental Learning.

Did the arts-based curriculum and instruction provided in 460 significantly advance or affect student-learning outcomes? Did 460 encourage students to develop new learning and

knowledge? Was the class holistically connected and did it deliver the projected curriculum? Findings suggest that 460 participants benefited from the ongoing shifts in structure and procedures. Further, the design of the course had impact on students' development and learning.

> I think that the things I have learned are not definite like a 1+1=2 experience. It's more of a knowledge that I've gained and knowledge that I can take with me and use in many situations.
>
> (Freshman, Theatre Studies Major)

The combination of being compelled to listen to stories of others, reflect on the stories as data, share personal stories, and finally to produce (incrementally and over time) a performance piece that did not simply report information but presented reflective dimensions of the material, which led to significant and deep understanding, knowledge that students could potentially use in multiple situations and fields of study.

Faculty at Portland State University (2007) developed an all-purpose rubric for assessing student learning in five major areas/goals (critical thinking, communication, quantitative literacy, ethics and social responsibility, and diversity). The rubric has also been widely adapted both on and across campuses. For purposes of validity and triangulation, the Portland State University tool was adapted and used here to reflect on development of students and show outcomes.

Using the six levels of competency suggested by Portland State University (2007), 460 students were assigned a score, based on their responses to surveys, at the beginning and end of their experience (see Table below). Data show that most 460 students (over 93%) began the course at a Level 2—meaning that they demonstrated a basic ability to identify and discuss their own perspectives in the broader context of the course—but that they rarely discussed the perspectives of others.

Table 1. Rating Developmental Shifts in 460 Students' Attitudes.

% Of students (N-47)	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6
Beginning of course (September/January)	76%	16%	4%	4%	0
End of course (December/May)	4%	10%	34%	43%	10%

At the end of 460 most students had progressed and 10% of students' responses could be rated at level 6. It should be noted, however, that when these data are broken down by semester there is evidence to suggest that the spring 460 supported a greater jump in developmental scores.

> This class has made me think more about old age and getting older. I've learned that it is important for me and the older people I talk to; and to continue to share stories and think back on memories with each other. My parents are of an older generation and now I want to learn more and more from them as we all grow.
>
> (Junior, Theatre Studies Major)

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Dispositions Rubric[7]

Score of 6 – Consistently does all or almost all of the following:
- creatively and comprehensively articulates social issues (classism, poverty, and/or aging) in performance related projects, and uses specific evidence gathered from others.
- demonstrates multiple sides of these issues
- questions what is being taught
- constructs independent meaning and interpretations
- presents well-developed ideas
- demonstrates a deep awareness that is manifested concretely in the final performance projects.
-

Score of 5 – Does most of the following:
- analyzes social issues (Classism, poverty, and/or aging) in performance related projects, and uses specific evidence gathered from others.
- makes thoughtful connections between this area of study (classism, poverty, and/or aging) and its effects on lives, ideas, and events
- discusses explicitly how a deepening understanding of (classism, poverty, and/or aging) has influenced personal opinions, decisions, and views on the role of self in society

Score of 4 – Does most of the following:
- thoughtfully analyzes, in a scholarly manner, a situation or situations in which (classism, poverty, and/or aging) have played an important role
- begins to investigate connections between areas of controversy and to extrapolate meaning from specific examples
- applies learning (classism, poverty, and/or aging) to issues that arise in everyday life
- contemplates the impact of personal experience in the context of (classism, poverty, and/or aging)

Score of 3 – Does most or many of the following:
- exhibits a working knowledge of (classism, poverty, and/or aging)
- applies understanding to some topic(s) but offers no independent analysis
- references issues (classism, poverty, and/or aging) as a subject of personal inquiry
- begins to question established views
- contemplates in some way the value and impact of individual choices and personal action on one's broader community

Score of 2 – Does most or many of the following:
- mentions some issue(s) involving (classism, poverty, and/or aging) and/or talks about them in a general fashion, but does not discuss these areas in a meaningful way
- contains some evidence of self-reflection in the area of (classism, poverty, and/or aging) but this reflection is superficial and reveals little or no questioning of established views

Score of 1 – Consistently does all or almost all of the following:
- displays little or no engagement with the subjects (classism, poverty, and/or aging)
- demonstrates little or no recognition of (classism, poverty, and/or aging) as subjects worthy of personal inquiry

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IV. Conclusions: Analysis of the SoTL Evidence.

A. Watching and Performing: Combining Constructivist and Behaviorist methods.

The instructor was interested in creating constructivist and experiential modes of inquiry, believing that each individual learner constructs knowledge and that information is not necessarily gained through memorizing a series of facts or skills. This philosophy is based on the assumption that learning and knowing are dimensional experiences and can be gained best

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[7] Adapted from the Portland State University Studies Ethical Issues and Social Responsibility Rubric, Downloaded 1/18/07 from www.pdx.edu/advising/unst_goals.html

through educative hands-on processes—further the best way to learn is with others in socially constructed formats.

Data from this study indicate that students do not necessarily agree with, nor are they comfortable when presented with, Constructivism as an epistemological or pedagogical approach. Rather, many are situated to be more at ease with behavioral and social learning approaches, like those discussed by Bandura (1986)—the foremost proponent of "observational learning" and social modeling.

It is often assumed in theatre education that improvisation, game playing, and production/performance are key significant educative experiences. However, findings from this study suggest that, even within a course that focuses on the performing arts, students are more likely to be motivated by a combination of traditional and constructed approaches: modeling, listening, observing, role-playing, and experimentation. It is suggested that in future SoTL studies investigations explore the impact of mixed pedagogical methods—especially in university contexts.

> I learned by getting in there and doing it. I also learned that they way to do it is to work your way through and wrong or doing it right it's that we learn to ask questions and not be afraid of the wrong ones. It's that we get to see what others do too.
>
> (Sophomore, Theatre Education Major)

> I learned that I love to participate and that I really am willing to jump up and try and even if I look like a fool in front of the class I love learning this way…in this class I began to realize what other people are seeing and doing.
>
> (Senior, Spanish Major)

> I leaned most by doing group work, scenes, and practicing. I also learned a great deal from watching others. I liked watching the instructor and how she passes on what she knows, also looking at the performances and things like Fires in the Mirror.
>
> (Sophomore, Theatre Studies Major)

B. *Social Science vs. Arts-based Methodology.*

During the course of this study, social science interviewing and oral history collection was included as an essential part of the 460 curriculum. However, methods for teaching these skills significantly changed in response to this study's findings.

In August 2005, during preplanning and course development, most of the protocols and guidelines for teaching 460 students about social science method focused on standard ethnographic and oral history collection. 460 lessons were designed so that students might be introduced to open-ended interviewing and folkloristics. Guests from Sociology and Women's Studies presented lecture-demonstrations. Finally, an ethnographic simulation was created that required all students to practice collecting interviews in role.

All of these activities and materials resulted in raising 460 participants' comfort levels and abilities. However, once in the field, much of what had been practiced did not prove

practicable. This was especially true during *Elder Tales.* Participants quickly became frustrated with the open-ended question/interview technique. Instead, elders continually requested that the students "*tell stories to me.*" By the fourth service-learning visit all but one *Elder Tales* group had thrown out the protocols developed in on campus sessions and were talking, sharing, listening, and recording together. As a result, the stories of elders and the stories of students became intertwined in the data. In this atmosphere, the one consistent format that stayed useful and strong was listening. Listening, more than any other experience was most appreciated by students.

This study suggests that different data collection models should be developed and used, especially in arts-based settings. It shows that the social science model is limited—especially when one wants to establish rapport, rapprochement, and encourage collaborative creative activity. In future this study suggests that when ethnographic theatre and storytelling courses are taught the protocols and guidelines be redesigned to include more collegial interface and that listening as a collaborative interface be focused on.

> I learned how to really listen to people and discover what it means to most of them. I've learned not to prejudge people. I've found that in a project like this it is conversation not interviewing that counts.
>
> (Senior, Theatre Studies Major)

> It took a little time but we discovered that w could let them go and talk and listen and not follow the rules. It worked better that way.
>
> (Sophomore, Anthropology Major)

C. Working and Learning.

Did the course meet its stated goals? Did participants end with a more mature idea of how to be makers of ethnotheatre?

Students in this study contextualized their learning role as being part of the work ethic or in working-class terms: "*I worked really hard so I should get an A,*" was a very common comment written on surveys. Students also discussed the expectations placed on them in utilitarian terms: "*just let me know what to do, what does it take to do what you [teacher] want?*"

This idea, that assignments and class related activities were a "job," was expressed through the expectation that grades should be awarded in direct relationship to the difficulty experienced in accomplishing the course activities. In a majority of the students' minds, exploration of knowledge and ideas seemed to play a secondary role to "getting things done." In addition to this somewhat narrow view of the student role, (just tell me what to do and I'll get it done as quickly as I can), students looked to their instructor and/or audience for approval and recognition. Audience approbation was the most important indicator of successful learning. Immediate feedback was sought, evoking in the mind of the instructor an image of the classroom as a manufacturing plant, the professor as a foreman, and students as factory workers.

For many 460 students, the difficulty of a task did not necessarily mean that the task was a better learning experience or that it was in any way related to understanding. Getting the assignments done was seen as most important. This is what DiSessa (2000) refers to as the

"regime of competence;" a habit of mind that assumes learning is a series of skills built through repetition and practice leading to success and expertise.

However, students viewed the profession of performing, "being an artist," and acting quite differently. Artists "*were creative*" and "*did things outside the box.*" It is ironic that the 460 participants perceived higher learning as a place where work had to be accomplished in the most efficient manner while at the same time attributed learning artistic processes to "*creative and original.*"

Data show that student perceptions of the 'habit of competence' did not necessarily change; instead student perceptions of learning to become ethnodramatists, i.e. artists, became more inclusive. During *Elder Tales,* for example, students began to put the idea of *working hard* together with success in learning about themselves and others. Further, a significant minority of students felt that through concentration and commitment they had learned about theatre making, themselves, and others.

V. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Study.

Although deliberate care was given to the study's design and implementation, (see previous discussion), the findings and analyses suggested here are certainly case specific. This study is person-specific as it examines one researchers' perspective only. Also, it should be noted that most participants had positive experiences and that divergent and negative data were not common. This could have been the result of the fact that students, who were graded by the instructor, were attempting to flatter in their responses.

Further, the study is an investigation that took place within a single year with a very specific group of participants. As such, any replicability or universal claims would be difficult to make. It is supposed that with different instructor/researchers and other students the results might be dissimilar. However, it is impossible to rule out all biases in any study be it qualitative or quantitative, the research attempted to create multiple opportunities for the researcher to reflect on and face her assumptions and beliefs and to balance them against emergent theories. Further, the study is rooted in narrative and arts-based explorations and was implemented with theoretical and analytical validity in mind.

On reflection, the biggest surprise was the overwhelming enthusiastic response of the part of students' to *Elder Tales.* This may have been due to the subject of the course itself rather than any changes made on the part of the researcher. In shifting the focus of the course, from issues surrounding poverty (fall) to aging and dementia (spring), the participant experience altered.

Milwaukee Stories, although based in familiar geography was not always connected directly to students' own experience. Aging however was and is. Although there is no data to substantiate this reflection, the author/researcher suspects that some of the overall success of this study was due, in part, to the intra personal and inter relationship that investigating elders' lives engenders.

The course is now in 'flow' and has a foundation that is and remains useful to the author as she continues to teach ethnotheatre. Also, by attempting to clarify and organize the constructivist style of teaching it is felt that the study has led to insights regarding how to incorporate observational learning and other more traditional formats used in university teaching. Future studies will examine how behavioral and Socratic forms work in conjunction with constructivist arts-based pedagogy and methods.

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Future studies will also investigate the link between empathic learning and students' interest in "listening" and in designing more ethnographically specific courses, especially ones that focus on important social issues—but ones that are outside the 'norm' for university students. For example, in summer 2007 and again in fall 2008, 460 will concentrate on the experience of nurses in combat and triage situations. Students will be given opportunities to explore the history and stories of the first USA nurses in combat (those during the Civil War), first nurses in military uniform (i.e. rank) and combat (WWII), and nursing in other significant emergency care events (9/11, AIDS clinics, Hurricane Katrina, etc.).

In conclusion, and with limitations in mind, it is felt that this study demonstrates the power of inquiry—the impact that the scholarship of teaching and learning had on one particular course during a full academic year. The improvement and significant shift in student learning and perceptions that occurred in the second semester would never have been possible had it not been for this investigation.

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