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Through Our Eyes

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I am a dancer. A teacher. An improviser. My pedagogy is centered on the concept of embodied education, a model that invites students to bring their whole bodies to the learning experience. I invite students to learn with their minds, bodies, spirits, and emotions all present, intertwined, and interrelating. I pay attention to the energy in the room, the relationships between people, the body language in response to information, the inter- and intrapersonal, the kinesthetic. Needless to say, computers have not had a big place in my classroom.

Another important thing to know about me as a teacher is that my toolbox is well honed. I have a set of core activities that I use to teach different units of dance and theater and I can adjust them, expand them, scaffold them, and implement them flexibly on the spot depending on how students are responding. I am often skeptical about other people's methodologies; many of the lesson plans I find online or read about do not meet my standards of interesting, engaging, complex, embodied learning. I like to be good at what I do, and I am good at teaching with the tools in my toolbox. I am (embarrassed to say) sometimes hesitant to try new things. It overwhelms me, throws me off my course, and causes change in my comfortable, effective teaching practice. But, in the fall of 2008, I did just that. I overwhelmed myself by learning new things. Two new computer programs, in fact. This did throw me off my course, make me uncomfortable, and challenge me more than I had been challenged in a long time. However, taking on the technology opened doors, offered me a chance to figure out new ways to interact with my students, and provided entirely new modes for my creative process. Working with technology also raised a new set of questions about time, power, collaboration, and ownership. The technology provided many opportunities for me to feel overwhelmed, frustrated, and inept... and then with help and practice, I was able to feel successful, accomplished, and proud.

Through Our Eyes was a multimedia performance created in collaboration with my five modern dance students. Through video, sound, and dance, the piece shows some ways race has affected their lives. I did not set out at the beginning of the semester to make this project in my dance class. It was born out of a hard conversation, good listening, and a lot of faith. A big part of my role as an educator, whether I am teaching dance, theater, social justice, or sex education (all of which I teach at Crefeld), is to help young people find their voices, their opinions, and their ideas. It is also vital to me that I figure out ways to support my students not only to know what they think, but also to help them find ways to express themselves. When I have choreographed dances for my modern dance class in the past, I used a theme to inspire movement. The pieces contained images and energetic qualities related to that theme. The focus was on performance skills, ensemble building, and movement execution. This time, however, we decided to make a dance that was really about something.

One particular day, instead of asking my students to change their clothes and get out to the floor to warm up, I joined the conversation they were having as they entered the theater. They were engaged in an animated dialogue about the issue of whether or not our school should have a Christmas tree in the lobby. There was a lot of debate going around school at that time, and they were trying to figure out where they stood on the matter. I had taught all these students before in one capacity or another, and we have good relationships. In the spirit of teacher as generalist, I turned the moment into a learning opportunity. I asked questions, gave perspectives that were not being heard, and shared my personal opinion on the matter. As we wrapped up the debate, I appreciated them for their willingness to have hard conversations. I told them how much I liked having such interactions with them.

Suddenly, I had an idea: "What do you think about making a dance about something this semester, rather than my just teaching you some choreography?" They all loved the idea, but asked, "What would it be

about?" I didn't know. I had not thought about it before that moment. I suggested, "We are all women, maybe it could be about being female." No response. "What about racism?" I proposed. This wasn't entirely out of left field. We had had conversations in this class before about race. In the past, students would often unintentionally (but subconsciously?) line up for exercises according to their races. I would occasionally point it out, and they would laugh and comment on how strange it was that they had done that. The girls' response to my suggestion of a dance about race was an excited yes, followed by an outpouring of ideas about ways they could show how racism is stupid and hurtful. I checked and double-checked that they really wanted to do it. They all agreed, and we were off.

We started with the personal and the embodied. That is where I am most comfortable, and that is where I knew to start the creative process. I asked the students to write a list of things from the prompt, "I am white/black/mixed and that means..." (those were all the racial identities represented in our class). Each made a list and shared it with the group. Then I had them create movement that connected with one of the sentences they wrote. That became one of our movement sections. I also had them write about their earliest memory of knowing they were their skin color. I guided them through another dance-making structure based on the images, feelings, and characters of those stories. Sections of those dances became the bulk of the main movement part of the piece. [video]

It was clear to me that our dance project was going to need more concrete information in addition to the metaphor of movement and physical expression. I was curious to hear more about how race affects the students' lives now, and what their opinions were about racism. So I set up some class time for interviews, which needed to be recorded. Enter the video camera. I had to watch and edit this video. Enter iMovie.

The project inspired the use of technology, not the other way around. I had a creative vision about my students sharing their experiences. The technology passively presented itself as a creative tool—if it hadn't been in my possession to use, I would not have thought to find it. The technology became central to the project, but it was not the inspiration in any way. I needed a replacement computer two years earlier and had requested a laptop so that I could project movies and other presentations in my theater space. While I am not here to advertise for Apple, iMovie and Garageband really welcomed me into the "do-it-yourself" world of creative projects. I requested a Mac, knowing that my choreographer and other performance-related friends were all using technology in their work. Even though I didn't expect to be doing so myself, it seemed wise to have the capabilities, in case any student wanted to make a cool movie or mixed media project. In fact, the truth is that just having the capability allowed me to conceive of a project that might use such technology. Having it so easy and accessible was the key to my bothering to try. That, and a great human being keeping me company as I learned the ropes. I needed her guidance and encouragement to get me past my judging, impatient voice of "I don't know how."

As I was watching the interviews, I had the vision that our dance project should have a video interlude or overlay. I wanted to edit what we had recorded into a short documentary. Sara Blattner, Crefeld's incredibly supportive tech person, sat with me and taught me how to use the program. It was remarkably easy, especially because Sarah modeled asking for help. Any time she couldn't remember or figure something out, she would ask the help menu in the program. Together we taught me all the basics of editing, and I got going. I stayed for hours after school. I used my free time to watch and edit our footage. I was engrossed, enthralled, and really impressed with myself. Pardon the crassness, but it felt really bad-ass to be making a movie.

It was during this editing process that I had my first moment of reflection about media consumption, and my first glimpse at the challenges of being a director of a complex creative process intended to portray multiple perspectives. I was spending hours editing the video after school and during my free periods, while in class, we collectively spent our time working on the dance section of the piece. I was sculpting the video into what I thought our piece should say. I was choosing which lines and stories to take and which to cut. The most striking aspect of the editing process was how much power I had to represent—or misrepresent—someone's ideas. In one clip, one of the white young women was talking honestly about privilege and her whiteness. If I clipped her segment in one spot, she could easily be misinterpreted as a rude, even racist, white person. If I clipped her section just a few words or a sentence later, her words had context and she appeared thoughtful and insightful. I was shocked and disturbed by the power I realized I held in that moment. And yet, I still wasn't able to see how much of the power I was holding on to.

I shared my insight about editing with the class. They listened, and we had a short conversation about editing in the media that they consume—reality TV shows, news shows, advertisements. It was a fruitful conversation that never would have come up in my class without this project. Or if it had come up, it would have been abstract and theoretical, not personal. In this case, however, it was not theoretical. They were exposing their personal ideas and they had a stake in these concepts because it wasn't just a critical analysis discussion; they were expressing their voices, and their real, vulnerable stories and ideas.

We were about halfway into the creation of the piece. I was so excited about "my project." I was talking to friends, family, and colleagues about it. I was so impressed with the interesting stories and insights of my students. I was equally impressed with my own ability to make a new kind of creative expression, and to use this piece of technology that I had previously assumed was out of my reach. My story in my head was that making movies was either too cool, too complicated, or just not what I did. But here I was, successfully figuring out how to make a movie. I discovered tricks and tools that Sarah hadn't shown me, having a deep and authentic learning experience of exploration, trial and error, and remaining completely interested in both the content and form of my learning.

And my students were getting apathetic.

I could not for the life of me understand why the girls were so lazy and uninspired. It was like pulling teeth to get them to work on the dance in class. How were they not inspired by their own work? How did they not realize how revolutionary our piece was?! And then it occurred to me: I had taken their project away from them and made it mine, all mine!

I realized quickly that my own excitement about using iMovie and my role as the director to move the piece forward had gotten out of balance with the ultimate goal: for the students to share their experiences and thoughts on racism. While the students' voices were the heart of the project, they were not in charge of the project. Though I was facilitating a progressive – perhaps radical – project, I had lost track of the equally progressive and radical value of keeping the students in charge of their own learning. Their artistic voices had to be part of the design of the project, not only their stories as the content. The students had to be workers, guides. I prompted them by asking, "What do you want this project to say?" When they were in charge, the students were actually rather resistant and shy about creating a piece that would challenge their audience. I wanted the piece to rile people up, make them think, make them uncomfortable. The girls wanted to raise awareness, but they were not interested in making big waves. Despite their powerful and sometimes painful stories, when asked what they wanted to say they would reply, "Race isn't that big of a deal." I had to step aside a bit and let them decide what the piece should say.

Garageband was the tool that allowed the students to have more agency in the design of the project. We all agreed that we needed more voice in the soundtrack and that was easy to record on the spot with this audio recording program instead of all the steps and editing necessary with the video recording. After we recorded more of their thoughts, I did the grunt work of going through all the material and edited out the content that was clearly unnecessary (the repetitive talking, the umms, and the giggles). Then, we took class time to sit with the computer and listen to the useable clips. The students chose which parts to use and what order to put them in. Also, we realized we needed to create sections that didn't exist that would feature voices that we wanted to be present in the piece but had not come up naturally. At this point, the girls encouraged each other to say the harder stuff, to speak up with loud, strong voices, to say what they meant. When the students were more in charge and when they were leading each other, the project was at its most vibrant. They gave me permission to do the final editing and use my judgment. In fact they desperately wanted me to stay in charge of the big picture, perhaps because I had accidentally set it up that way and they were scared to have more control and agency. I ran the final product by them several times for comments, feedback, and tweaking. Finally, we settled on the soundtrack and set out to rehearse sound and movement together.

In the performance of *Through Our Eyes*, technology allowed the students' voices to be heard in a way that they would not have otherwise been comfortable sharing. They were able to speak openly, honestly, and deeply in the context of our group. They showed and shared parts of themselves that they had not been comfortable sharing in public. They delved into discussions and critical thinking that were not otherwise part of their social lives. Being able to record these intimate conversations allowed them (or me, really, with

their permission) to have their voices heard on a larger scale. The students gave me permission to facilitate a question and answer section after the show. In the moment, however, the students were very shy and reluctant to discuss their experiences of race and racism. They were proud of the dance piece, and of their ideas, but in some real way, they needed the technology to do the talking for them.

This experience challenged me on so many levels. Learning to use the new technology feels like a huge success. I feel proud and impressed with myself, and thrilled to have mastered these new tools. I continued to use iMovie to edit the recording of our winter show, allowing students to have copies of the performance, something we've never done before. I am using Garageband again in my current dance class, as the students work on a project that answers the question, "What is it like to be your age?" This time I simply offered it as an option in their creative processes and I only recorded when and what they suggested and organized. I only edited with them by my side. I continued to struggle with how much of my opinions and direction made sense to put into the process, but I think that is a lifelong learning process for any educator-director.

The questions and challenges posed by the technology within my performance classes were interesting, provocative, and helpful for my growth as an educator. I don't think, however that those challenges were unique to the use of technology. I think they were a product of being awake to the experiences of my students while co-creating a performance piece. This attentiveness was heightened because I was trying new things, using new tools, causing my teaching to be fresher and perhaps messier. In addition to providing the stumbling blocks that woke me up, the technology also offered my students a medium to express themselves in a way that they were not otherwise comfortable doing. Whether because of their familiarity with media, or the distance and safety it gave them to share their ideas, the technology allowed my students to push themselves and to challenge our community about racism, an issue we all need to be more awake to.

The Crefeld School

The Crefeld School, a longtime CES affiliate, is an independent school in Philadelphia serving grades seven through twelve. Crefeld is a school of new beginnings, welcoming students seeking an alternative educational program—one that is progressive and college preparatory. Crefeld supports students to pursue high academic standards in a relaxed and collaborative atmosphere, while simultaneously promoting appreciation for artistic creation and civic responsibility in a safe, nurturing, and supportive environment that provides learning and emotional support, combined with a holistic, systemic approach to each student.

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