

Collages of Arts-Based Collaborative Performances on Social Justice

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Abstract

This visual narrative focuses on the arts-based learning aspect of a multi-year and multi-level collaborative film and dance performance project. We use collage as an arts-based method to represent the complex process of engaging students across multi-levels of education (graduate, undergraduate, high school, middle school) in a collaborative learning project. The collages included images captured during class activities and the final performances and demonstrate multiple outcomes of the project associated with arts-based learning, embodied learning, and crystallization of learning. The accompanying narrative provides context about the project including details about the collaborative process, course activities, and development of the final film and dance integrated performance.

Keywords

collage; arts-based learning; embodied learning; crystallization of learning; film and dance performance; social justice

Introduction

Performance of Social Justice is an arts-based collaborative teaching and learning project involving university graduate and undergraduate students and high school dance students to create dance and film integrated performances addressing social justice issues (Liao & DeVita, 2022). The project began in Spring 2016 and expanded and continued until Spring 2018, involved students creating activist arts from applied research about social justice topics that affect different groups of people, such as LGBTQ+, different abilities, and Black men. This project connects to larger discussions on teaching and learning through an arts-based social justice education framework

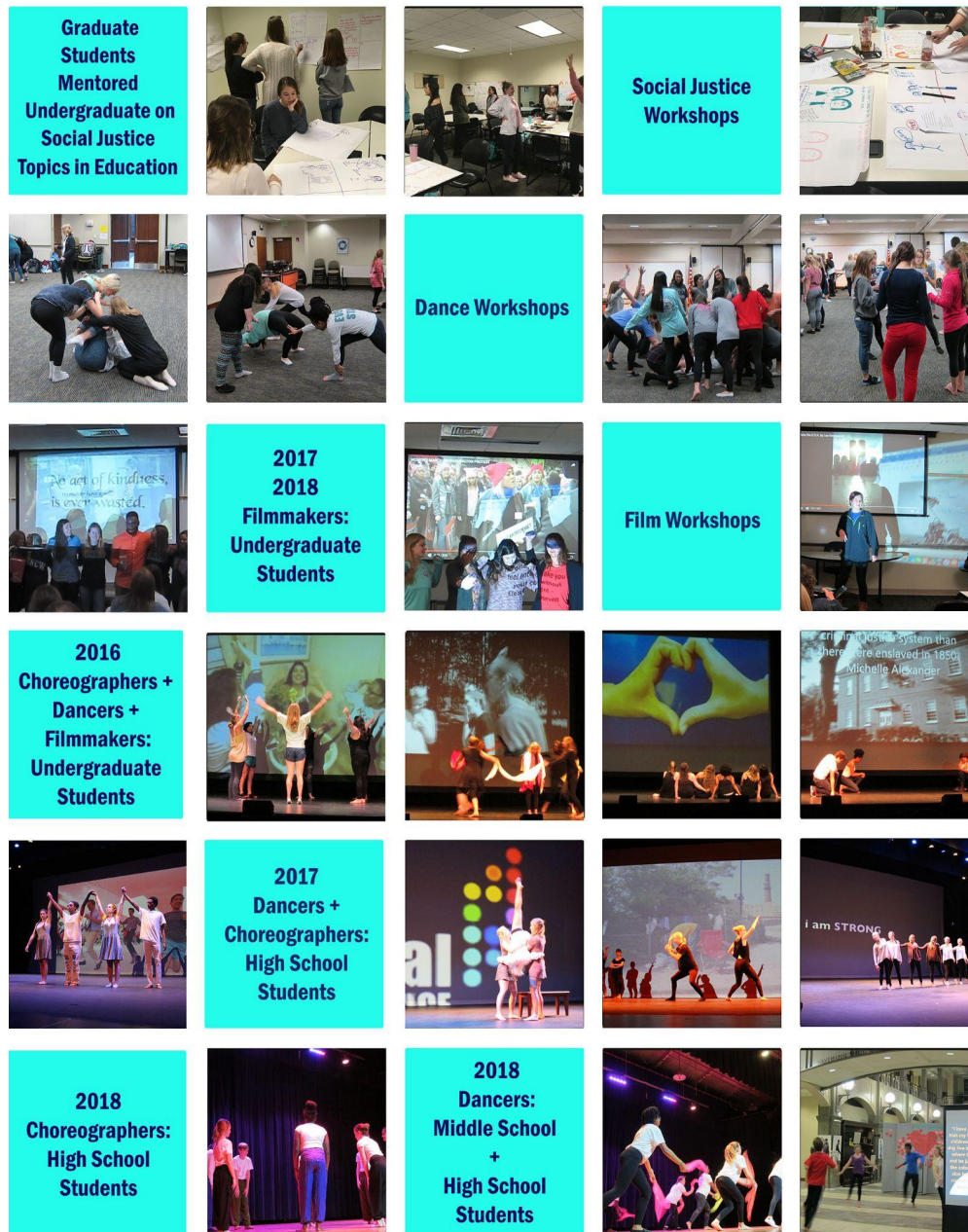
(Beyerbach & Davis, 2011; Dewhurst, 2014; Quinn et al., 2012). We consider the project to be a multi-layered arts-based approach to learning, teaching, and research, and an example of Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER) practices that integrates the *affects* of the arts with social justice learning (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010).

In this visual narrative, we focus on the arts-based learning in the project. We share collages of project photos and videos to represent the complex process and learning outcomes through visual art. Collage-making in our research is a process of selecting short moments from the lengthy project and composing the images to reflect and tell stories of students' learning. Collage-making is an arts-based methodology that can help conceptualize ideas and make meaning of complex relationships (Butler-Kisber, 2008; Roberts & Woods, 2018). This visual process of collage-making produced new perspectives to understand the project. Unlike text narrations, images show the bodies, movements, and connections with the films visually. Thus, this process produced new ways to interpret the project. The collages also demonstrate how our collaborative activist art-making is arts-based learning (e.g., Beyerbach & Davis, 2011; Dewhurst, 2014; Quinn et al., 2012), embodied learning (e.g., Sy, 2013), and crystallization of learning (e.g., Abramo, 2017).

Arts-Based Learning

Figure 1

Arts-Based Learning Process Collage



Note. This collage shows the photos from each project step, documenting the process of the project and showing how different art forms are involved in each step to form an arts-based learning experience for the students. The art forms include comics (social justice workshops), tableau (dance workshops), video projection (film workshops), and film and dance-integrated performances (final performances; photos from the last three rolls).

Our collaboration started in 2016 when students from Liao's undergraduate teacher preparation course (EDN 414: Integrating the Arts in the Elementary Curriculum) were paired with students from DeVita's graduate-level course for higher education administrators (EDL 558: Social Justice Topics in Education). In the first year of the collaboration, our goal was to encourage students to work collaboratively on the development of a film and dance-integrated performance that represented students' learning about specific marginalized populations. The graduate students engaged in applied research projects about marginalized groups (e.g., Black males, LGBTQ+ individuals) to inform what they then taught to the undergraduate students about those groups; the undergraduate students then used what they learned from their graduate student mentors to develop a film and dance performance that represented meaningful themes about the respective marginalized group. We, as the instructors of the respective courses, facilitated communication and workshops with all students to help the project's development of a final performance. We also integrated regular reflection assignments into our courses to gauge students' development from the experience. Student reflections revealed several meaningful outcomes related to the holistic development of students engaged in the projects. For example, in the post-reflection survey one student noted,

In my pre-survey I talked about how this project would help with interactions of people and new offices. It would allow self-growth and development on the topic as well as myself. I feel that this class was very aligned with everything that I believe would occur and even exceed my doubts and expectations. (Student reflection, personal communication, May 2018)

However, reflections from the undergraduate students engaged in the project also emphasized the stress they felt towards the performance, particularly the movement (dance) component of the project. Thus, in subsequent years we engaged with dance students from a local high school as a way to enhance the arts-based learning that occurred and to utilize the skills of the dancers. The project became more complex each year by adding high school dance students in 2017 and middle school students in 2018. The additional layers of complexity provided additional opportunities for learning as well as the high school students got to learn about social justice topics while enhancing their dance training. When we added middle school students in 2018, the high school dancers' learning was further enhanced with opportunities to teach to and choreograph on the bodies of younger students.

The arts-based learning collage (Figure 1) shows the arts-based learning process in workshops on social justice, film, and dance, as well as the final film and dance-integrated final performances. Each workshop utilized a different art form, as described in the figure note. The collage enables us to see the whole multi-year project condensed in a bird's-eye view map. Therefore, we were able to understand the project from a different perspective. The visual representation not only displays how students were engaged in the art-making process in each step but also the relationships between the steps. For example, the tableau performances in the dance workshops are the embodiment of the feelings of social justice issues depicted in the comics in the social justice workshop. The photos from the film workshop show how students learned about this strategy and later applied it to the final performance. The image juxtaposition of the steps is also a dissection of the project, which exposes how the workshops are the skeletons supporting the project.

Embodied Learning

Figure 2

Embodied Learning Collage



Note. The collage from the dance workshops exhibits an example of students' embodiment of social justice. Each group of students created a tableau performance showing how they represented an oppressed experience. For example, students in this collage included some kinds of posture, such as lowering the head or bending their body, to embody the oppressed. There are also contrasts in the performance showing the power over the oppressed.

Our arts-based project provided all students with an opportunity to embody learning in ways that were authentic to their field of study. Framed by principles of experiential learning that encourage “learning by doing” (National Society for Experiential Education, 2013), we integrated

opportunities for embodied learning into each layer of the project. The graduate students participated in an applied research project where they learned about marginalized groups through a series of experiential learning activities that required them to engage directly with the marginalized population that was the focus of their project. Graduate students then had to teach other, younger students—similar to those they will work with in practice—about their marginalized group and mentor them on how to appropriately represent that learning using media (film) and movement (dance). The undergraduate students engaged in the project were required to develop and produce a film that represented themes about their marginalized group (all years) and to collaborate with (2017, 2018) or actually perform movements (2016) that represented those themes as well. The collage of the embodied movements of social justice moments (Figure 2) is the embodiment of this learning process. Although the diverse and layered groups presented challenges in communication and logistics, student reflections revealed the value in working across groups. One graduate student noted that:

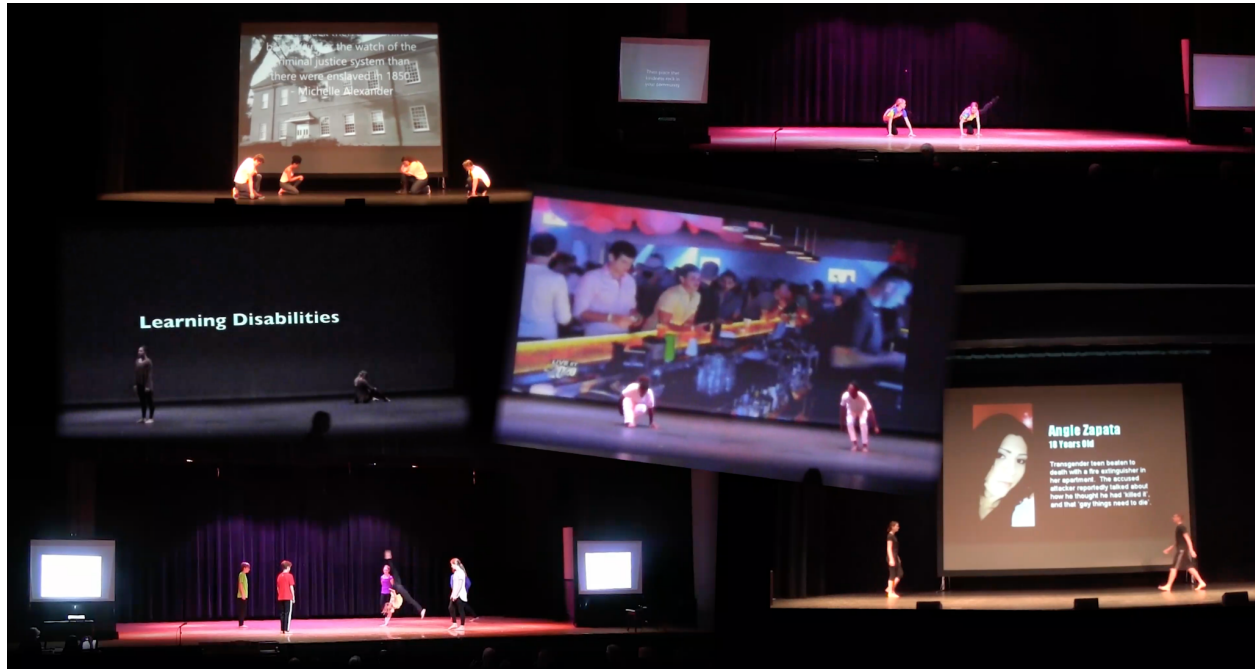
By working with our [undergraduate student] group I gained better skills on advising students instead of just spoon feeding them.” Another student stated that “I became more comfortable with leadership and personal foundations through working with my group on the social justice project and engaging in activities inside and outside of the classroom. (Student reflection, personal communication, May 2018)

As future teachers learning about arts integration, the undergraduate students had an opportunity to embody the teaching practices they will utilize in future work with students. This embodiment helps them to better understand the emotional and physical nature of arts-based learning. The high school dance students engaged in the project had the unique opportunity to embody their learning as choreographers, performers, and teachers. Beyond learning dance techniques, the high school dancers learned to work collaboratively with multiple stakeholders, to use abstract concepts to inspire movement, and to integrate dance with other forms of art (film). Additionally, the middle school students also gained an opportunity to learn about these social justice topics when the undergraduate students went to the middle school and taught a lesson on the topic to the six-graders and facilitated embodied learning through the class arts exercise, such as tableau. The culminating performance provided all students engaged in the project with an opportunity to demonstrate what they learned as a public embodiment of learning. The different layers of teaching activities enabled students from all levels to engage in level-appropriate learning activities about social justice.

Crystallization of Learning

Figure 3

Crystallization of Learning Collage Animated Gif



Note. The animation is a collage of different clips from the final performances. We chose the Gif format to create this collage because, unlike in a video format, a Gif allows an endless loop of auto-playing. The looping metaphor implies that learning about social justice is endless, and the final performance is not the end of the arts-based learning project. Link to the Gif animation:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SxULyZhEMQrg3_1gQdC6Iwus2AufJnuO/view?usp=sharing

This arts-based project helped push students outside of their comfort zones, which contributed to deeper learning, and required them to develop a mixed media, collaborative performance that represented crystallization of learning among participants. As one student noted in their final reflection:

It was helpful having a partner for the project because it afforded us the opportunity to explore something new with someone familiar; I think having a partner helped me get even more outside my comfort zone than I would have alone. (Student reflection, personal communication, May 2018)

Indeed, the course-embedded reflections helped to scaffold students' learning and development by asking them to draw from past experiences and learning to inform their engagement in the project. Another student poignantly summarized that

The social justice project provided me the opportunity to elaborate on what I learned in the class and apply it to other disciplines I might not have thought of including dance. The importance of collaborating with different departments and cohorts came to light after partaking in this social justice project. (Student reflection, personal communication, May 2018)

Centering social justice topics as the content and inspiration for the performance allowed students to connect personally to the project as well. Thus, one aspect of crystallization of learning occurred at the student level; as demonstrated through critical reflections, students at each level drew upon a range of sources to help them understand and represent their learning. While our courses provided structure for this learning, students drew from prior and current learning experiences to develop their full understandings and final representations. The animated collage of the final performances (Figure 3) represents an example of crystallization of learning that occurred across the levels of students engaged in the project. No final performance could be realized, in fact, without crystallization of learning among the stakeholders, and every group across the three years of the collaboration produced a complete activist performance that successfully integrated dance and film.

Conclusion

The collages in this visual narrative inform the evidence of arts-based learning. This arts-based approach to learning can serve to strengthen the learning experience and outcomes for the students. Indeed, this project demonstrated how an arts-based approach can be applied to engage students in collaborations across different education levels and schools. Students were involved in learning and thinking about social justice concepts through the arts, which challenged them to learn through embodied and experiential learning experiences. Our experience confirmed that arts-based collaborations can provide mutually beneficial outcomes for all students. Each group of students played a meaningful role in the project while also benefiting from exposure to social justice topics and the use of the arts to conceptualize learning¹.

¹ If interested in learning more about the design and structure of the courses and project, including logistics of the partnership, please see: Liao, C., DeVita, J. M., & Walden, L. P. (2018). Bridging educational communities to creatively explore social justice topics through film and dance. *School University Partnerships: Furthering the Education Profession: Partnerships in Action*, 11(4), 87-103.

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