Grant Project Status Report

In order to develop the Equity, Access, and Inclusion in Education and Performance course, I collaborated with Professor Kate Trammel. Professor Trammel and I both have experience in equity, access, and inclusion within the performing arts, but in different areas of study. She is focused on dance and community-based work, whereas my area of focus is in theatre and school-based practices. Together we were able to develop and co-teach a course that served a wider range of students within the School of Theatre and Dance.

The course was designed to use embodied, active, and arts-based learning as pedagogical tools to explore issues of diversity, equity, access, and inclusion. The course moved beyond dialogue (speaking and listening only) into dialogic exchange through multiple modalities in order to make-meaning both individually and collectively. We focused on both community-engaged and school-based practices in order to explore the relationships between theory and practice, education and artistry, process-based and performance-based work, and makers and audiences.

As we worked through the semester to collaboratively interrogate, define, and re-define the terms equity, access, and inclusion, we explore social justice, implicit bias, reciprocity, privilege, systems of oppression, intersectionality, and asset-based education by viewing, participating, reading, discussing, listening, and creating. Influenced by the artist-scholar Liz Lerman, questions became a central aspect of our work together, acknowledging that as we dive deeper into this work more questions may arise than answers.

This specific course focused on the central inquiry of What does equity, access, and inclusion look like in education and performance? In order to explore this big question, we investigated the work being done in schools and communities within the fields of dance and theatre performance, applied arts, and diversity education. We developed specific units of study which included: socioeconomic status and class, race, ability, gender and sexual identity, and age. Throughout each unit, we highlighted specific companies, artists, and practices. Each unit culminated in a project. These projects included community asset-mapping, a self-reflection paper on privilege and race, a resource guide for working with differently-abled individuals in a specific arts context, an ethnographic performance, and fieldwork at VMRC.

Finally, Professor Trammel and I wanted to not make our voices the only “expert” voices in the room. For this reason, the class worked with five different artists throughout the semester, each paired with a unit of study. This included a dance instructor and choreographer who works with underserved and at-risk youth, an applied theatre artist focused on anti-racism education, a visiting choreographer whose work investigates embodied cultural expression through dance, a disability and accessibility scholar in the field of theatre, and a trans playwright from New York City.

Through my personal interactions with students and their corresponding assessments, I began to understand the need for a course like this within the School of Theatre and Dance. While the students came to the classroom with an eagerness to learn, their reflection papers and assignment hinted at the desire for their college classmates and university instructors, as well as outside artist and educators, to also be aware of these specific practices and for all to understand how to ethically implement the work. This pushed the students from being receivers of knowledge to becoming advocates, allies, and practitioners.

Left: After reading and discussing in a small group, students embody the definition of equity.
Right: Students visually map question cards that they have created to find connections between ideas.
Reflection on Grant Project

This project focused on the development of a new course. The grant money was used for professional development which included attending several conferences and workshops, speaking and collaborating with experts in the field, and time to research, read, reflect, and implement. Some key take-ways that I learned through the pilot of this course was how to present this specific information to an undergraduate population in an engaging way and how to unpack issues of diversity with a rather homogenous class. In addition, with Professor Trammel, I was able to learn how to make this course work for dance students as well as students focused on working in community settings, in addition to serving theatre licensure students. A few lingering questions remain: How do we recruit a more diverse group of students to take the course? How do we, individually and collectively as a department, college, and a university, work to enact the practices learned in the class in our daily work? How do I continue to revise and refine the syllabus and course content to reflect current and emerging practices in equity, access, and inclusion in dance and theatre? Should this course be cross-listed with other departments or minors across campus?

Student Reflections

In their final papers, students were asked to reflect on their experiences in the course by answering three different prompts. Below are excerpts from five different papers which serve to highlight the embodied, active, and arts-based pedagogy used within the course in addition to the course structure and content.

“By actively engaging in the course content through ‘playing’ I was able to imagine how this work with equity, access, and inclusion would apply in a real situation which I didn’t expect. Every time I entered the class, I brought a level of excitement that I did not realize I would contribute.”

“Coming into this class I really did not know what to expect. I came in believing this class to be much more black and white in nature than it was. I was expecting it to be more of a class that simply taught curriculum like ‘right’ versus ‘wrong’ factual material. However, I found this to be quite the opposite. It was a lot more discussion based, and a lot of discoveries were made through questioning and my own individual research and reflections. It was also more hands-on which really helped me grasp concepts better. I had no idea of the numerous different subjects that fall under the concepts of equity, access, and inclusion.”

“I think a takeaway that I did not anticipate was discovering so much kindness in the room. There were a handful of times when students would find discomfort in the activities and there was always at least one person to say it was okay and we would get through it. There have only been one or two other classes that I have felt the same sense of nurturing and I was really appreciative of it. Another thing that I see as a takeaway that I only half anticipated was the sources that we used for responses were typically very informative, and ones that I would be interested in looking back on if I were in a specific situation or trying to teach a specific group of students centralized to that topic.”

“One of the many takeaways that I didn’t anticipate was being able to apply these concepts across the board in every aspect of my daily life rather than just in my art. I also didn’t expect to connect with my classmates and peers to the depth that I was able to. I learned just as much from them as I did from the readings and class activities which I find incredibly valuable. I think that the makeup of our class largely contributed to the ideas and tactics for creating equity, access, and inclusion that I took with me.”

“After taking this class, I feel more equipped than ever to teach the arts in low-income city schools. Of course, I still have so much more to learn, but this class has helped me grow immensely and gain more insights into other populations of people. The only takeaway I did not expect (but maybe I should have) was learning through hands-on activities with my peers rather than by lecture. I am so happy with the way this class has opened my eyes to the many ways I can use equity, access, and inclusion in my future work as an arts educator, as well as a world citizen.”

Future of the Course

Equity, Access, and Inclusion in Education and Performance will next be taught in Fall 2020. The course will be required for theatre and dance education licensure students but will remain open to all theatre and dance majors. This course is now part of the catalog and will be taught at least once every four semesters.

Attachments

Fall 2018 Course Syllabus