

National Endowment for the Humanities

**The Immigrant Experience in
California through Literature &
Theatre**

Implementation Plan

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OVERVIEW

Background

The California Immigrant Experience through Literature and Theatre Institute (July, 2014) utilized theatrical performance as a method for engaging in issues relevant to deepening an understanding of the immigrant subject in both a regional and global context. With the premise that theatre performance offers teachers and education scholars a rich and intimate form of engagement with both texts and lived experiences, scholars in the program were introduced to a number of theatre-based techniques that explored literature through personal narrative, oral history, and documentation; discursive constructs such as “the border,” “the illegal”; as well as historical sites throughout San Francisco, the California Missions, and Angel Island.

Ping Chong, whose work in intercultural and documentary theatre has made him internationally renowned, led scholars through a three day workshop which culminated in the creation of a documentary theatre production which continued to explore the course theme of immigration. The institute concluded in a public performance of the work created, learned, excavated, internalized and externalized during the workshop sessions.

As such, The California Immigrant Experience through Literature and Theatre Institute has given me with insight into how performance shapes our understanding and relationships between people of diverse historical, linguistic, economic, and cultural backgrounds. Through historical tours, textual analysis, and performance based activities, the institute has provided me with theoretical and practical knowledge to utilize while writing the remainder of my doctoral dissertation.

Education scholars (Conquergood, 1991; Denzin, 2003; Lather, 2008; Weems, 2003) are interested in finding new ways of representing the populations in which they conduct research. Many have begun to focus their attention toward the ways in which performing personal and community narrative can be used to promote social justice in diverse learning communities. Performance has enabled these researchers to become more conscious of their role in knowledge production and how their day-to-day experiences, and others’ day-to-day experiences, are embodied.

A performative approach to education based research utilizes the body, seeks to transgress boundaries and borders, performs culture, and honours reflexive memory as a site of knowledge production. As such, performance based methodologies grounded in social theories of communication, anthropology, humanities, and linguistic studies are important tool for education researchers questioning power openly and dialogically in academic research. Rather than removing the body from the research process, performance methods enlist the communities they seek to represent through interviewing to enact cultural dramas, embody character through voice and movement, all the while enabling education researchers and study participants to become aware of representations of themselves and others.

I am a doctoral student at the University of Massachusetts currently collecting ethnographic data for my dissertation in Buenos Aires, Argentina. My work examines how popular adult educators and students perform visions of self, education, and community within the activist discursive tradition. New social movement models consider political performance to be a significant tool in combating political, social, and cultural oppressions. Political performance has been a way for newly arrived migrants from Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay, as well as *campesinos* from the interior of the country, to collectively voice concern and seek justice during times of political, social, and economic hardship in Buenos Aires. Performances can be seen in action on city streets; in front of government buildings; throughout parks and plazas; on the Internet, radio and television; and, in relevance to my research, in popular education classrooms and communities.

Understanding how performance and popular education intersect contributes to the growing knowledge regarding how disadvantaged groups build and sustain civic capacity, increase community engagement, and raise educational achievement levels where activism and education intersect throughout the world. For example—as activists within Buenos Aires work within popular communities as a means to bring about social change, educators in the United States similarly work within neighbourhoods and classrooms to combat challenges related to community disempowerment and an inequitable educational system. Studying performances in popular education classrooms

promises to not only shed light on issues relevant to communities in Argentina, but could be used by activists and educators who work with underprivileged populations in the United States by contributing to knowledge regarding democratization, education, and political and social mobility and sustainability.

Project Prospectus

My proposed project will build upon the documentary theatre style of Ping Chong and Company which utilizes personal narrative, movement, sound, and image projection to bring participants' histories, lived experiences, and personal narratives together in meaningful, interconnected, exploratory ways. The project's final product will be a video recording of documentary theatre performed by the teachers and activists who participated in my study. As supplement to my dissertation, I will compile a script made up of the activists' stories in conversation with one another and have interested participants from my study, as well as other actors, perform it. I will then video record this to play during my oral defence.

I will do this through the dramatization of my ethnographic fieldwork which includes activist educators' stories, collected fieldnotes, interviews, artefacts, and my own observational commentary. I have finished data collection and am now in possession of several hundreds of pages of raw text, image, video, and audio based material of classrooms, protests, school inaugurations, graduation ceremonies, etc.

While Ping Chong's documentary theatre work will be a guiding force in this project, in the interest of also bringing in some of the documented history of Argentinean social movements, I will also utilize some of the suggested techniques that participants in the institute learned to turn literature to theatre.

Project Participants

Latin American social movements envision a rearticulating of national borders and a reconceptualization not only of maps of people, nation, place, and the state, but the relationship between education, society, and culture as well. Building upon critical social awareness amongst community members and participants, popular education projects have developed within social movements as a means to support marginalized community members' educational development – women, youth, the unemployed, people of colour, etc., emphasizing social action and a hands-on approach to democratic pedagogy.

Popular schools throughout Argentina have been one of the most influential groups in creating an alternative educational project. Popular self-managed schools were born in the late 90's as a result of deep structural crisis in the Argentine education system. Social movements, authorities, and business organizations stood shoulder to shoulder thinking and building new ways of doing education.

What they came up with are schools that are public, popular, self-run, and free for youth and adults working within social movements, territorial organizations, and recuperated businesses. Considered a political pedagogical project, popular schools have pushed to make education a right for everyone, countering neoliberal politics and the detrimental effects such politics have had in Argentina including increased poverty, unemployment, and other means of social disenfranchisement.

To maintain the popular rebellion, as well as to encourage alternative forms of community development, popular schools utilize workshops, alternative modes of communication, and student centers as distinct alternatives to the representations of barrio life in the media and to the public – narcotics, hooliganism, and abject poverty. Held in encampments, settlements, and cooperatives, popular education classes ensure that younger generations have a clear sense of current politics and an understanding of Argentina's history of social activism, as well as access to general education.

This documentary theatre project will focus on the particular stories of a group of popular women educators with whom I have had several discussion with regarding their migratory trajectories within social movement based popular education projects. Though popular educator training workshops and classrooms are filled with both men and women, I have found women often the majority, as well as the ones whose trajectories were affected most by things like jobs, family responsibilities, as well as sexism within not only society at large, but the movements as

well. Through the dramatization of their stories, this project will reveal the work that takes place in-between women educators, what brings them together and yet also what separates them at the same time so that each participant contributes to a popular public space in her own way.

Participants for my study were initially chosen from and followed through various site visits and relationships I formed with various popular educators in Buenos Aires – from popular educator training workshops, to popular education schools, a classroom inauguration celebration, to a library and multipurpose room/end of the school year celebration, and a graduation ceremony. Because the length of time in the field was limited to two years of data collecting, I was not able to follow each educator through to the beginning, middle, and end of their trajectories as educators in popular education projects. This work will instead present a methodological bricolage of educators' life experiences as they flowed between different stages of their careers, in order to represent the full scope of their educator trajectories in the popular education project.

ORGANIZATIONAL PLAN

Preparation

As all of my data collection is complete, the next steps involve sitting with the data and writing a script. In order to do this I will consult some of the material presented to us during the workshop including documents sent in an email with the subject heading "A Few Resources from Ping Chong and Company" (UE Interview Packet and UE Scripting Techniques in particular).

Execution

In order to write the script I will use the Ping Chong model that was taught to us, and in which we practiced with, during the institute. This involves weaving stories together, watching for places where narratives may bump against one another thematically, emotionally, subjectively, or split apart.

Once I have developed a solid script I will then ask participants from my study if they could provide feedback, elaborate, or change any of the material, as well as if they would like to work on performing them or if they would mind if their stories were performed by other actors. I have connections to someone here in Buenos Aires who actually owns a theatre and has many contacts in the Buenos Aires theatre community. She has already agreed to assist in any way she can to execute the project.

This project will be an accompaniment to my dissertation's oral defence. While I would love to bring the actors involved to the United States, the cost is just too high and impractical. As such, I would like to digitally record the production to show my committee members.

Follow-up

I will devise a draft script and later show it to the participants in my study. I will do this to ensure I am representing their words and stories justly, and will consider their edits and input. I am in the process of applying for institutional IRB approval. As such, I have already gained permission from participants to use their stories and experiences they've shared for research purposes.

STAFF PLANNING

Operations

In order to represent my study participants justly, I would like to ask assistance from one or two people familiar with stage production. This will allow the script that I write and co-edit with participants to come to life, so to speak, in a visual way.

Technical

Once the script has been staged, I will need recording equipment, a stage, audio visual equipment for projections and/or audio. As such, I will need the help of a tech assistant to ensure these things are running during the time of the shoot.

As the actors in my study all speak Spanish, and the audience who will be view the recorded document will primarily speak English, I will need an assistant to help translate subtitles for accuracy, as well as assistance embedding them in the video itself.

CONCLUDING

Lessons Learned

As mentioned, the goal of this project is to utilize alternative or new ways of representing academic research that are not strictly text based. It is to tell the stories of individuals that speak to the broad range of our human experiences – through sound, visuals, music, dance, color, light, texture, etc. I believe this supplement to my dissertation defense will bring to life the characters that have made up my ethnographic study and present them presenting themselves in ways they feel can best tell their stories. This work can help other researchers struggling with representing communities that are different from their own, and perhaps can shed light on ways we can offer our work as researchers to a broader audience.

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