6-5-2013

The Play's the Thing: Embodying Moments of Integration Live, On Stage

Patricia G. Sandoval
Holyoke Community College, psandoval@hcc.edu

Jack J. Mino
Holyoke Community College, jmino@hcc.edu

The Play's the Thing: Embodying Moments of Integration Live, On Stage

Abstract

This study of an interdisciplinary learning community at Holyoke Community College, which combined adolescent psychology and theater, attempts to show that *embodied learning* is not only a valid means of knowledge production and integrative learning but can also function as a gateway to deeper integration of course material. The authors document instances of embodied learning with thick descriptions of student work derived from samples of student writing, presentations, seminaring, videotaped performances, and student self/peer assessments. While the findings reveal students were engaged in integrative learning of an embodied kind, the crucial intermediate steps such as improvisations and rehearsals that set the stage for embodiment were not documented. The authors conclude there is much to learn about the integrative function of embodied learning by examining everyday classroom transactions on the way to the final performance.

Patricia G. Sandoval is the Chair of Communication, Media, TheaterArt, Fine and Performing Arts at Holyoke Community College in Holyoke, Massachusetts.

Jack J. Mino is a Professor of Psychology at Holyoke Community College.

Keywords
embodied learning, documentation, psychology, theater, integrative learning

The purpose of this study was to explore how students demonstrated and experienced *embodied learning* in *Smells Like Teen Spirit: Performing Adolescent Identities*, a two-course interdisciplinary learning community which combined adolescent psychology and theater. As Wegner points out in an exploration of the role improvisation and imagination play in accessing body-based ways of knowing, "the more we invite multiple ways of knowing into our learning communities, the more we free people up to be themselves, and to engage in learning objectives from their own unique perspectives" (2009, p. 15). We wanted to know the extent to which students engaged in embodied learning, the form(s) it took, and how embodied learning functioned to facilitate integration in learning communities.

With an explicit emphasis on community building, interdisciplinary integration, collaborative learning, and integrative assessment, learning communities seem ideally situated to foster embodied learning. Boix-Mansilla describes *embodying* as one snapshot of interdisciplinary integration occurring within learning communities when, "a particular example or case is seen as a microcosm of various disciplinary connections, e.g., case studies on global production" (2007, p. 5). The embodying we describe here is more than interdisciplinary, however, and goes beyond cognition as well. Although students had learned about adolescent psychology in lecture and discussion, it was in their performances, and especially their rehearsals, where this knowledge became embodied, enabling students to understand psychology at a deeper level. Similarly, their understanding psychology at a deeper level informed and enhanced their stage performances. Through their enactments, the students literally became "bodies of knowledge."

One of our students, Emily, explains: "Expression was really crucial to the effectiveness of the interdisciplinary study approach. Incorporating theater into psychology really was a holistic approach to learning that included all the senses, even gustatory—pizza is now what adolescence tastes like" (Teen Spirit, 2012). In effect, the students embodied and enacted adolescent psychology through performances live on stage. Benedetti offers this insight:

> The actor is, in a way, an explorer of the human condition; he or she journeys into the life of the character and the character's world and then reports back to us by *embodying* the essence of what has been discovered, expressed in a heightened and purified form. (2012, p. 5)

What is embodied learning then and what did it look like in our learning community? A partial transcript of a post-performance reflection on student monologues serves as an introduction and preview of sorts.

Student 1: She controlled the stage...and you're so in your shell in so many other aspects. We got to see the real you come out.

Teacher: Go ahead, tell her, she needs to know...incredible comeback, incredible! It worked, that's because *you* did it.

Student 2: I was ready to cry and give you all a hug. It was funny to watch him shift, his eyes and everything, all his body mechanics just like teenage boys.

Teacher: You've got to be vulnerable, you've got to be angry, you've got to look out, and stand in the light. You can't just stand in one place.

Student 3: It was a good thing we were rehearsing a lot, it got so much easier.

Teacher: We were really feeling something. Timing has to be perfect, to stay composed because this stuff is kind of emotional. But you did it in such an honest way.

Note the references to the self or "you," the body, physical gestures, behaviors such as "cry" and "hug," emotions such as "vulnerable" and "angry," the process of rehearsal, and the importance of timing. This classroom conversation highlights some of the key aspects of a form of experiential learning known as somatic or *embodied learning*.

A somatic approach to education integrates, as an existential whole, the experiential history of individuals with their current experience. It implies an education that trusts individuals to learn from their ability to attend and to listen to the information they are receiving from the interaction of self with the environment. (Sellers-Young, 1998, p. 176)

In *Knowing and Being*, Polanyi (1969) argues that knowledge actually begins in the body; it is the embodied experience of "being and doing" (Matthews, 1998, p. 237). Kerka (2002) annotates a collection of resources on somatic/embodied learning in adult education and defines embodied learning as experiential knowledge that involves the senses, perception, and mind/body action and reaction (p. 1). She further reports that different scholars have used the term to explore claims that embodied learning is contextual, physical, perceptual, emotional, and/or identity-based. According to Bass and Eynon (2009), embodied learning is "learning that engages affective as well as cognitive dimensions, not merely through the role of emotion, but through creativity and intuition, through expressions of self-identity and subjectivity as the foundation of intellectual engagement" (p. 16).

Proponents of embodied learning charge that traditional approaches to higher education reinforce the Cartesian split, which privileges mind over body, head over heart, and objectivity over subjectivity, thus "strip-mining" the intellect and leading to not only the dis-embodiment but also the "dis-memberment" of the learner (Michelson, 1998). Fortunately, the academy is now beginning to shift from what philosopher Dennett (1991) called the "Cartesian Theater," to what cognitive scientists are theorizing as *embodied cognition*, i.e., recognizing that cognition or psychological processes are influenced and shaped by the body including body morphology, sensory systems and motor systems as well as the body's interaction with the surrounding world (Barsalou, 2010, p. 716). Even physics educators are getting into the act with *Energy Theater*, an "Embodied Learning Activity" (ELA) that promotes conceptual understanding by taking advantage of motor action in learning and using the human body as a "free, multimedia technology that is representationally flexible, naturally dynamic, conveniently available, and comes with an extensive suite of tools for symbolization (including gestures, vocalizations, orientations, grips, and so on)" (Scherr and others, 2010, p. 296).

Theater provides a robust pathway to embodied learning simply because it validates the body as the impetus and site of learning. "Acting requires that all aspects of your being—your body, voice, thoughts, and feelings—be available, integrated, and controllable. They are the tools of your trade" (Benedetti, 2012, p. 15). From the first script reading until the final curtain, breathing life into a character and play is a process. It is in this process where the body serves the actor. For example, a sigh, a glare, a smirk, or a chuckle can express an actor's feelings, thoughts, or emotions. "Emotion is behavior, anger, rage, fear, terror, pleasure, joy—all have a clear muscular and visceral shape" (Keleman, 1985, p. 235). Benedetti sums it up:

> You begin work not with the emotion but with the material you get from the script—the words your character says and the actions they convey—and as you experience the action, you discover the emotional life that it evokes. In other words, you do things in order to fulfill a need, and emotion naturally results from that doing. (2012, p. 59)

Indeed, it's our contention that the *Teen Spirit* learning community provided students with a deeply integrative learning experience because their learning was embodied. Their collective acting and lived experience increasingly blended over the course of the semester as they played out their understandings of psychology on stage, and, in turn, progressively and subjectively wrote themselves into the characters, the scripts, and ultimately the final performances. Boal wrote, "This is theatre—the art of looking at ourselves" (1992). In the outcomes-based

examination of student work that follows, it is our intention to make visible, the form and function of embodied learning as a means of knowledge production and integrative learning in learning communities.

Method

The primary data-gathering method used in this study was *documentation*. According to Rinaldi, documentation is:

> …the process of gathering evidence and artifacts of what happens in the classroom. Documentation is not only the process of gathering evidence and artifacts, but also a physical collection of evidence and artifacts, the reflection on and analysis of the collection, and the presentation of that collection, or part of it, in a way that makes learning visible to the [students] and the teachers. (1994, p. 4)

Making the "how" as well as the "what" of learning visible, documentation served as a teaching, learning, research, and assessment tool by capturing primary samples of both individual and collective student learning in the form of photographs, videotapes, and samples of student work, then making them public on our course website. We used a documentation heuristic consisting of a four-stage cycle: asking questions, capturing learning, discovering patterns, and going public. [To view this manuscript as a sample of "documentation," please see: *Making Learning Visible in LCs*.]

Two course offerings of the *Teen Spirit* learning community were sampled, the first in spring 2010 and the second in spring 2012. While quantitative data on student achievement indicated significantly higher course completion rates and grade distributions as compared to the stand-alone course comparisons, this descriptive study focused on the qualitative dimension of embodied learning in order to better "flesh it out", using *thick description*, that is, providing context and meaning to observations of behavior (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). *Embodied learning* was operationally defined as knowledge constructed from the interaction of self with the physical and social environment as evidenced by the following behaviors in students' writing, conversation, and performance: (1) use of the body—including movement, gestures, senses and perceptions; (2) expressions of emotion; (3) integrative understandings, e.g., performance is a fiction that is true; and (4) references to one's identity, e.g., autobiographical references.

Table 1 summarizes the major assignments used in the *Teen Spirit* learning community, the integrative outcomes sought, and the data sources used for this study. It's important to note that all performances were "socially situated," i.e., socially defined and communication-intensive (Bass and Eynon, 2009, p. 21),

involving classmates as rehearsal partners, stage crew, audience, and peer reviewers. What is absent, however, are the many exercises and improvisational "assignments" that students completed almost daily on their way to their final performances.

Table 1
Summary of *Teen Spirit* Assignments

Featured Assignments	Integrative Outcomes	Data Sources
Adolescent Collage	Understand how the concept of "performativity" relates to everyday adolescent life and the theater	Collage and class presentation
"Adolescent Moment" Monologue	Enact the understanding that performance is a fiction that is true	In-class application exercise in psychology, final draft of monologue, stage performance, and written and oral self/peer assessment
Auto-Musicology	Understand and enact the performative function of media/music culture, i.e., performance functions both as a metaphor and an analytical tool for framing and analyzing adolescence as a social construction	Electronic multimedia project and class presentation
Seminaring	Co-create integrative knowledge using multiple perspectives from students' experiences, the course texts, and stage performances	Seminar paper(s), videotaped seminar conversations, end-of-semester seminar portfolio with self-assessment letter
Two-Person Scene	Understand and enact the "transitionality" of adolescent identity development and stage performance	Written scene analysis and character development, stage performance, and written and oral self/peer assessment

In the section that follows, samples of student work from five assignments are spotlighted: adolescent collage, auto-musicology, "adolescent moment" monologue, seminaring, and two-person scene. In each case, the samples were examined for (a) the presence of embodied learning; (b) the ways that embodied

learning supported the integration of the two disciplines (acting and psychology); and (c) the kinds and qualities of integration in student work.

Results and Discussion

Adolescent Collage

This early assignment provided students the means by which "[their] own identity and self-knowledge are the main sources for any character [they] may play" (Hagen, 1973, p. 29). An important first step in the psychological study of adolescence is the definitional challenge—what is adolescence? For this introductory assignment, students were asked to create a multimedia collage from current media sources (print and/or electronic) that depicted their definition of adolescence. They then presented it to the class as a way of introducing themselves and their current thinking about adolescence before they encountered the course material—a pre-assessment of sorts. Similarly, it provided an opportunity for them to "take center stage" and perform, by re-presenting themselves and going public with their thinking; in the second week of class students were *experiencing* how the concept of "performativity" relates to everyday adolescent life and the theater.

As the sample adolescent collage shows in Figure 1, students included both generic and personal representations of adolescence, but in their class presentations, their narrative almost always took an autobiographical turn. While this sample collage represents the challenges and possibilities of adolescent identity development, during the presentation the student referred to her own struggles with identity formation at each of the developmental stages depicted in her collage (e.g., early adolescence, late adolescence, and emerging adulthood.

Figure 1: Adolescent collage sample

Auto-Musicology

As the title of the second assignment suggests, the "Auto-Musicology" project reinforced this trend toward autobiography explicitly. Students were asked to reflect on their teenage years, 13–18, and identify/describe the music (e.g., songs and/or albums) that best captured their adolescent experience during each of those years. In their narrative, they were asked to address the following questions: What informed their choices—why did they make each of their selections? To what extent did the music they select "shape" their adolescent experience (i.e., life imitates art)? To what extent did the music they select "reflect" their adolescent experience (i.e., art imitates life)? Could they discern any pattern(s) emerging from a review of their musical selections (i.e., adolescent themes)? How important was/is popular music to their identity development? Students used *Google Sites* to write up, represent, and report their narrative essay in a multimedia format (e.g., text, images, audio-tracks, and/or video). For example, Anne's Musicology demonstrated her understanding of the dynamic way music-culture both shaped and reflected her adolescent identity:

> I am starting off with two of my all-time favorite songs—*Call on Me* and *We Used to be Friends*. I selected these because they introduce my approach to my auto-musicology. What I see on the inside, and what others see on the outside. My internal soundtrack, for my "personal fable". And my external soundtrack that punctuates events, people and seasons of my adolescence. And when they finally merge. [View and listen to Anne's Musicology]

The result of this assignment was a revealing collective self-portrait of teen angst and anthems—a virtual soundtrack to their teenage lives, both real and imagined, marked by spontaneous outbreaks of song and musical testimonials throughout their presentations. Due to the popularity and success of the Auto-Musicology, we extended the assignment to include an improvisation where students showcased the meaning adolescents derived from music and/or musical lyrics. They improvised with the resources they had at hand—the time constraint we imposed, the subject matter we delivered, their lived experience, and their own imaginations. Their improvisations ranged from lip-synched dance numbers to heartfelt mini-dramas. It was evident from the combination of the Auto-Musicology presentations and subsequent improvisations that students understood the integrative function of performance in this learning community. They used performance both as a metaphor and an analytical tool and enacted a framework for analyzing adolescence as a *social construction*—e.g., pathologized,

criminalized, and demonized—and how adolescents enacted, contested, and sometimes transformed these constructions and social positionings.

"Adolescent Moment" Monologue: Spotlight on Jenny

Originating as an in-class exercise, this assignment asked students to reflect on their teenage years, and recall an "adolescent moment"—an experience that was emblematic of adolescence in general. They were then asked to consider what distinguished this experience as "adolescent" and shape a narrative/written assignment, which was to be used as a script for their monologue performances. Here is a brief description of the monologue performances—a "textual montage," if you will.

- Parent–child relationship: "Whenever we argued, I didn't like the fact that he always won."

- Moving to another town: "I was one teenager, one among thousands, a transient."

- Friendship: "He's got a good heart; he's just lost right now."

- First love: "It was love and it was wonderful and horrible at the same time."

- Lost love: "Bringing so much fear of how we're going to part."

- Crisis and confusion: "I didn't know where I wanted to be or anything, I just felt lost."

- Teen angst: "I wanted that whole poster blue because it signified my adolescence."

- Parent–child conflict: "All I want for my birthday is a simple tattoo."

- Moral dilemma: "Should I steal it? I won't do it, I'll die, I'll just die."

- Discrimination: "They called me names like Pocahontas, even slut."

Since readers do not have access to the actual video montage of students' monologue performances described above, it might be helpful to shine a spotlight on Jenny's work. Our purpose in highlighting Jenny's monologue is twofold: first, it is an example of an integrated assignment of the two disciplines for this learning community; and, second, it illustrates once again how the fundamental acting technique of improvisation is a perfect vehicle for embodied learning.

Scripts in hand, students were now ready to embark on developing a scene emblematic of adolescence. The process included improvisation, memorizing, and

rehearsing. Final performances required set dressing, costumes, and props. Jenny titled hers *The Pocketbook*, and her unfulfilled desire for a "must-have-at-any-cost" adolescent female accessory captured family conflict in its truest form. Lines such as, "Should I steal it? I'll die, I'll just die," set her well on her way to creating a scene filled with angst, terror, fear, desire, and, most importantly—need. "*Need* is the greatest help in doing a monologue" (Shurtleff, 1978, p.189). There was no doubt, Jenny needed the pocketbook: it was in her script. But she had to put that need into an action. Benedetti states that:

> At its root, (actor) means "someone who acts," who *does* something. Whatever your need, if it is urgent enough, you *do* something about it. You *act* in order to achieve some objective that you hope will satisfy your *need*…Immediate and urgent needs cause actions in the pursuit of objectives within given circumstances. There are four elements: needs, actions, objectives, and circumstances. (Benedetti, 2012, p. 41)

Jenny's circumstances were clear. She was an adolescent without money. Her need was embedded in the title, *The* Pocketbook, not *A* Pocketbook. "If need causes an action directed toward an objective" (Benedetti, 2012, p. 42), then Jenny needed to figure out her action for the scene. Students were asked to bring in props for their scenes. Jenny brought in a variety of items but most importantly a pocketbook that reminded her of *the* pocketbook from her adolescence. In rehearsal, she tried different ways of physically handling the pocketbook until she realized when and how she would use it in her scene. Jenny's "doing and not telling is the single most important profound concept in the contemporary view of the actor's art. It is summed up by the term *action*" (Benedetti, 2012, p. 39). Jenny's action was to grasp that pocketbook and hold it with all the passion of an adolescent seized by her circumstances at that moment in time.

Figure 2. Jenny's "Adolescent Moment"monologue performance

By using her entire body as shown in Figure 2, her fear, terror, desire, and need of the pocketbook were evident. Clearly, the grimace on her face reflected her authentic emotions as she grasped the pocketbook, portraying an adolescent crisis of conscience *and* a truthful acting scene. Further, Jenny's monologue echoed what Hagen describes as the *presentation* actor, one who "attempts to reveal human behavior through the use of herself, through an understanding of herself and consequently an understanding of the character she is portraying" (Hagen, 1973, pp. 11-12).

Jenny and her classmates concurred. In Jenny's self-assessment report she captured the embodied nature of her scene:

> I strove to give it my all. Relive the moment in its entirety. Resurrect the joy, the worry, the fear, the pain, and the sense of being totally alone that I felt in that moment years ago. I hoped to revitalize those feelings in my audience. I wanted them to not only believe me but to *feel me*.

Not surprisingly, a classmate offered a similar insight in her peer assessment of Jenny's monologue: "Although her character was her, she was able to channel the emotions she was feeling at the time the event actually happened...she *embodied* the dramatic insecurities of a young girl" (Teen Spirit, 2010).

Seminaring: Spotlight on the "Teen Spirits"

One primary teaching and learning activity of this learning community was the analysis of course texts and students' responses to the texts using small and large group discussion or *seminar.* According to Harnish (1995), "a seminar brings together a group of learners who have done some preparation, including having read, thought about, and written about a particularly good book. In the seminar the group is responsible for exploring the text and probing the ideas people have brought from their individual reading of the text" (p. 1). The overall seminar assignment consisted of three parts: the seminar paper, the seminar conversation, and the seminar portfolio (with written reflection and self-assessment). Over the course of the semester, seminaring helped students explore a diversity of perspectives, developed their skills of integration and synthesis (of students' personal experiences, the course texts, and the stage performances), and provided a forum for student voices that affirmed one another as co-creators of knowledge.

In the partial transcription of the seminar on "Identity Statuses" that follows, the "Teen Spirits" are responding to an article by Marcia (1980), "Identity in Adolescence." Marcia presents empirical data regarding his theory of identity

statuses (e.g., foreclosure, diffusion, moratorium, and achievement) and a variety of personality correlates such as anxiety, self esteem, authoritarianism, moral reasoning, and autonomy. Students began by testing their understanding of the theory by applying it to their own life experiences. A very lively discussion ensued regarding the impact of the environment on identify formation. One student expressed the insight that "similar environments" can produce very different identity statuses. Students then concluded the seminar with some deeply integrative questions about the effects of environment on human development.

Student 1: ...and that's probably exactly what I'm going through right now [*identity foreclosure*]. It's not that I don't care what I do, there's no real push. Being at home with parents, no one forcing you to move out; you're just hanging out in the present.

Student 2: So is it an internal thing that makes some people...is that what differentiates *identity diffusion* from *identity achievement*?

Student 3: I think it goes back earlier than adolescence.

Student 1: Like me, everyone tells me I'm spoiled. Everything has always been given to me and I never really had to work hard for something I wanted. I don't have to pay bills, I don't have to pay rent, and I don't have to pay for my car. I don't have to pay for anything. So it's like, "I want to keep it that way."

Student 4: Exact opposite for me. We're both the same age [17] and I feel *identity achieved*.

Student 5: Yea, that pushed out of the nest thing.

Student 4: I wrote, "Ran out screaming!" I got identity achieved really early. I went to college at 16 because I was done and knew what I wanted to do.

Student 6: But don't your parents start you off...

Student 4: But that's also circumstantial because my father was a deadbeat drug addict—he never told me to do well, and my mother just told me to not get pregnant, but I still strove to do really well.

Student 3: That's how the whole thing comes into play. How does your environment shape who you're going to be? It's like some people are so similar but you wouldn't expect them to be so similar because of their upbringing being different. You [referring to Student 4] went through crap with your parents, and that made you "identity achieved."

I went through crap with my parents, and that made me a "moratorium."

Student 4: Going back to what you were saying [referring to student 2], it could be internal or external.

Student 3: But we still have what it says in here [referring to the article]. I wrote down a bunch of quotes. You [referring to student 4] believe kind of the opposite [referring to identity statuses], but we have the same interests and same traits. However, on page six it says: "identity achievement and moratorium tend to take more responsibility for their own lives." On page seven it says, "that identity achievers and moratoriums were freer in impulse expression than the other groups." And what really got me was, "that identity achievement and moratoriums showed greater cultural sophistication, which is interest in art, music, and literature." And that is true for the two groups. I find they like the same things, they do the same things, but they have different reasoning. Like you [referring to Student 4] were probably just trying to be independent and prove yourself and progress. While I was so busy trying to find myself and try and push the bar and find out and express whatever I was going through.

We would like to make three points about this seminar sample as it relates to embodied and integrative learning. First, one way to classify this seminar is as a classic *exploratory conversation,* when speakers "engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas and while disagreement necessarily occurs, reasons are given" (Mercer, 2000, p. 98). What's revealing about this excerpt is that while the theory of identity statuses was being explored using what Boix-Mansilla and Gardner (2000) call "common sense integrations," it was the students' personal experiences with identity development that provided a bridge to the more abstract psychological theory on identity statuses. Even as students became more skilled and intentional about connecting psychology and theater throughout the semester, we observed that personal experience or the students' sense of themselves almost always acted as the gateway to their integrative work.

Second, while not a theatrical performance per se, seminaring as a student-led conversation in response to primary source materials can also be considered a performance (Fiksdal, in press):

Performances in conversations are similar to those in theater, dance, and musical ensembles because they are all rhythmically based performances. By that I mean that conversations fundamentally rely on the timing of each person's entrance on stage—or into the piece—the

coordination of conversational moves and gestures, and the effects of the dramatic or musical pause all reflect this reliance on time and timing.

The seminar conversation as an embodied performance is perhaps most apparent as students engaged in a process of "re-membering" (Michelson, 1998) their identity formation experiences, which facilitated a learning dialogue between their implicit embodied experiences of adolescence and the conceptual aspects of the theory of identity statuses. Michelson asserts that:

…as a function of memory, experiential learning is more properly understood as an act of *re-membering*. I want to make the case that experience is itself located in the body as well as in the social and material locations that bodies invariably occupy, and ask what a theory of experiential learning might look like that re-members body and mind. (p. 218)

Witness Student 4's response to a comment by another student about being pushed out of the nest, "I wrote: Ran out screaming!"

Third, it's important to note that the seminar often functioned as a seedbed of integrative knowledge where students tested their interpretations of the text and collectively constructed new knowledge, however preliminary. This was the case in regard to the *threshold concept* of identity statuses as transitional states, which was not yet assimilated, as evidenced by students' self-references as "identity achievers" or "moratoriums." Meyer and Land write, "A threshold concept can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress" (2003, p. 1).

As with many constructs in developmental psychology, identity statuses can be thought of as *transitional states,* or changes over time in the adolescent identity formation process. These transitions or changes are domain specific (e.g., family, friendships, occupational, sexuality, etc.) and situation or context dependent. Similarly, in acting, the character and scene is always changing, in transition through a dynamic process of recreation during rehearsals and beyond opening day. "In the live theater, the opening of a show is never the completion of an actor's work, but only the start of a new phase of the growth process. Audience responses are an important element in the rhythm of a scene, and you can fine-tune the shape of your action accordingly" (Benedetti, 2012, p. 128).

In an attempt to move students closer to the threshold concept (e.g., identity statuses as transitional states), this conversation was excerpted and posted on our

course website with the following prompt: "Identity development = nature + nurture + ?" And while this *revisiting* of their seminar didn't produce the expected understanding of transitionality as evidenced by student writing, it is consistent with Fenwick's contention that learning from experience occurs primarily "within action, within and among bodies" (Fenwick, 2000, p. 127), not as a cognitive event during the act of reflection. It did, however, prime students for their next assignment—the two-person scene.

Two-Person Scene: Spotlight on Michael

Once the monologues were performed, critiqued, assessed, and self-assessed, the students were ready for the next scene: a two-person collaboration to create a staged performance of fiction that is true. As Benedetti notes, "truth is a personal matter driven by life experience of each artist, and part of a serious actor's job is to discover what he or she recognizes as truthful in a performance and what he or she has to say about the human condition through acting" (2009, p. 6). In search of truth, students need tools, and they come in many forms: improvisations, writing exercises, rehearsals, discussions, feedback, and more rehearsals. Following theater protocol, a final performance date/opening day was set. And although the final performance is the goal, it is the learning along the way—the process—that is the "way." Students were given scripts, which were intentionally vague. It was their responsibility to make decisions about their characters and scenes based on Shurtleff's guideposts and observation that "there is little else an actor can use as source material but his own emotional life" (1978, p. 4). Michael's scene involved two adolescents dealing with loss. It begins:

> A: What's up?
> B: My dog died.
> A: Damn, sorry to hear it. What happened?
> B: Poison.
> A: Somebody poisoned your dog?
> B: No. He just ate something that was poison.
> B: Man, that would be awful if someone poisoned your dog.
> A: Well, nobody did, so just shut up.

The origins of Michael's character development began with an insight on the seeming overlap between identity statuses described in Michael's seminar paper.

> There are many indications in the research that show that individuals classified as "Foreclosures" are not, as they would seem to appear, stable and firmly established in their identity. On the MMPI they had

high rates of conflicting comments, which would indicate insecurity as well as high levels of anxiety. These characteristics are most closely related to "Moratoriums," and I would argue that this is because foreclosures have prematurely developed boundaries of identity and they are actually in a constant state of insecurity...this implies that foreclosures are actually in a state of an internal crisis of identity but they are seeking refuge or security in the identity that has been chosen for them.

Michael then carries over this insight to his character description prior to his performance of the two-person scene:

And me chilling on the couch with my dog, having some brewskies and lazing around on my day off. And I'd be working my ass off and going to night school and I'd come home and my dog would be like, "Yo dude, what's good?" ('Cause I always imagined if my dog could talk he'd talk like that.) And now my dog's dead 'cause of some stupid load of bull, and my dream isn't really destroyed but part of my fantasy has been taken away from me...I've been acting pretty bitter and taking it out on people around me."
[His venting and grief are partially characteristic of the "personal fable" (Elkind) and him using his work as the place to drop bombs like "my dog died" is parallel to utilizing an "imaginary audience" (Elkind) to center the scene on himself.]

Michael developed a complex and interesting character following all Shurtleff's guideposts. Guidepost 1 is relationship. Shurtleff writes, "Creating relationship is the heart of acting. It is basic. It is essential. Start with the question: What is my relationship to this other character in the scene?" Michael and his partner originally decided they were simply co-workers. However, through class discussions, they realized that a more interesting choice would be long-time friends. This gave him more to work with in terms of complexity. An improvisation exercise led them to decide on a warehouse, because this "place" would give them the opportunity to "physicalize—to act with the whole body as an expressive instrument" (Jones, 1993, p. 27). It is showing a physical expression of an attitude during dialogue, again not telling but showing. Telling comes from the head, showing comes from intuition. In communicating to an audience, the role played by words does not exceed 35%. The balance of communication relies on nonverbal cues. The physical traits of body and voice are the means the actor has to create a character. Inner emotion can be physicalized through muscular

awareness, including facial expression, posture, breathing, bodily positions and gestures.

Michael had a fairly easy time conveying anger in the above scene as "B," but the scene moved toward sadness, loss, and compassion for "A." Although Michael had a grasp of this intellectually and he was able to describe this in his character description, he struggled with conveying sadness, loss, and compassion on the stage. Shurtleff writes, "It is not enough for the actor to feel, if that feeling is not being communicated" (1978, p. 63). During feedback following an improvisation, we asked Michael if there was a way he could use the action of moving boxes to show his feelings. It was during the improvisation, when naturally, spontaneously, and truthfully, he started slamming the boxes in anger and then naturally, spontaneously and truthfully, he slowed his movements down when feeling sadness and compassion. In *Acting Through Exercises*, Gronbeck-Tedesco writes, "that the body is not just an outer, expressive medium for the actor's inner life; it also performs an impressive role by helping to stimulate and shape that interior world of associations, memories, impulses, and feelings" (1992, p. xxviii). As was the case in Jenny's monologue, a peer assessment of Michael's performance emphasizes the emotional intensity of his two-person scene:

> Everyone did phenomenal with props. It was great how Sam and Mike were just moving boxes yet it really made their working environment and the way they reacted towards each other feel genuine. I also really thought they displayed true vulnerability with each other. Sam and Mike definitely made the scene as emotional and vulnerable as it could be.

During the improvisation, Michael was a living, breathing, acting example of embodied learning as he allowed his body to find the emotions he needed to portray the scene truthfully. And it was in the context of this two-person scene that Michael was able to enact his understanding of the transitional nature of identity statuses live on stage. In his post-performance self-assessment, Michael once again recounts, then signifies, how his character "moved from" identity foreclosure "into" identity moratorium.

> As far as determining my identity status I would argue that my character had preemptively chosen his future identity, which involved moving out with his dog (his best friend), and upon the death of his dog was put into a crisis about who he was. So my character *moved from* foreclosure *into* his current state of moratorium, marked by his

anger and confusion in terms of how to treat the loss of something so central to his identity.

Conclusion

The evidence suggests that embodied learning is a credible avenue for knowledge production and integrative learning. As the "Teen Spirits" demonstrated, the body can be the impetus and the site of learning, creating change and enacting new cognitive, affective, and behavioral possibilities. Consequently, this study has implications for course design and classroom practices in learning communities. Faculty need to be aware of how student experiences can be explored through the body, integrating embodied knowing into daily classroom practices, using what Bass and Eynon refer to as "embodied pedagogies" (2009, p. 17). Their suggestions for ways to scaffold embodied learning, although applicable to all college classrooms, are especially relevant to learning communities due to their shared time, space, and integrative purposes:

- Designing for embodied learning requires scaffolding ways for students to know more than they think they know—through exploration, invention, and reflection.

- Designing for embodied learning means acknowledging the role of affect in the engagement of ideas and helping students to engage their emotions cognitively.

- Designing for embodied learning requires expansive criteria for assessment that accommodate multiple learning dimensions.

Perhaps most relevant to this study of embodied learning in learning communities and a major limitation of this research is Bass and Eynon's suggestion "to capture intermediate learning processes in student work," *not* just outcomes (2009, p. 15). As we discovered in the conduct of this study, the immediate learning processes for students were accomplished in the daily transactions of our classroom, particularly in the form of *improvisations*, acting exercises, rehearsals, and even practice presentations. In fact, it is the technique of *improvisation*—"intuition guiding action in a spontaneous way" (Crossan & Sorrenti, 1997)—that holds great promise as an "embodied pedagogy" that promotes learning across most disciplinary and interdisciplinary contexts. Berk and Trieber suggest there are four major instructional reasons for using improvisation in the classroom:

1. It is consistent with the characteristics of the current generation of students, also known as the Net Generation,

2. it taps into students' multiple and emotional intelligences,

3. it fosters collaborative learning by helping to build trust, respect, and team spirit, and

4. it promotes deep learning through active engagement with new ideas, concepts, or problems (2009, p. 33).

They describe how four generic improvisational exercises were used in a course on mental health and their analysis (as well as our own) suggests, in agreement with Wegner, that "improvisation can serve, therefore, as a form of inquiry, in that new knowledge unfolds during the course of improvisation" (2009, p. 4).

The use of improvisation in the learning community classroom can lead to other important outcomes. Beginning with their first improvisation on the first day, students bonded. The initial improvisations were intended to serve this purpose and they worked. Later, the improvisations were intentionally directed toward aiding in student scene work as they integrated relevant psychology concepts into their performances. Improvisations not only "get the actors to think...about human behavior, conflicts, and inner relationships" (Jones, 1993, p. 1), but they also provide opportunities for students to discover that they "know more than they think they know—through exploration, invention, and reflection" (Bass and Eynon, 2009, p. 17).

We constantly changed the groups and pairs so that everyone had the opportunity to work with everyone else. This mirrored what happens in the theater world, as all actors work in group situations. The *Teen Spirit* learning community had the necessary elements to work cohesively: commitment, support, and communication, which Benedetti asserts are the "cornerstone of teamwork" (1999, p. 41). Peer reviews and self-assessment reports from the class confirmed this. One student wrote: "We bonded together as a class...like we had a sleepover and all-night pillow talk. We broke all social barriers and put our insecurities behind us." Jordi (2011) characterizes this "bonding" as a relational meaning-making act:

Because learning [and meaning-making] are relational it thrives on *dialogue and listening* as essential elements to its process. Just as an individual's *embodied knowledge* emerges through a sensitive internal listening and a dialogue between different aspects of experience, so the embodied experiential knowledge of a collective emerges through sharing. (p. 194)

This sense of community, what Hagen calls the "communal adventure" that is theater (1973, p. 19), is what we failed to document, capturing "final performances" and posting final projects instead.

Yet it is in these day-to-day classroom exchanges among students and between students and faculty that the embodiment of knowledge takes place, shifting from the "I think" to the "I can" of a body-in-the-world. As one student reported in our end-of-semester conversation about lessons learned: "I saw this as an empowering class because we talked about a lot of problems with society and with that how adolescence is the start of us changing how things happen. It kind of felt like we may actually be able to do something with our futures." Our future investigation into the nature of embodied learning must illuminate the intermediate steps of embodiment and the classroom conditions that facilitate it for both individuals and groups.

Encouraging the kind of student engagement that leads to integrative learning of an embodied kind can be challenging and while acting may seem to be the "royal road" to embodied learning, it does not preclude other disciplines from facilitating embodied learning in the learning community classroom. Besides, "almost everything that actors do can be identified with things we do in less dramatic form in everyday life" (Bates, 1987, p. 7). And, taking it a step further, "scripts even in the hands of unpracticed players, come to life because life itself is a dramatically enacted thing…in short, we all act better than we know" (Goffman, 1959, pp. 71–74). Improvisations and scripts can be used for a better understanding of literature, history, sociology, psychology, and science courses, including laboratories. They are perfect for a creative writing course. In conclusion, set your own stage for embodied learning and enjoy the show.

References

Barsalou, L. W. (2010). Grounded cognition: Past, present, and future. *Topics in Cognitive Science*, *2*, 716–724.

Bass, R. and Eynon, B. (Eds.). (2009). The difference that inquiry makes: A collaborative case study of technology and learning, from the Visible Knowledge Project. *Academic Commons.* Retrieved from http://academiccommons.org/).

Bates, B. (1987). *The way of the actor*. Boston, MA: Shambahla.

Benedetti, R. (2012). *The actor in you: Sixteen simple steps to understanding the art of acting* (5th ed.). Glenview, IL: Allyn & Bacon.

Benedetti, R. (1999). *The actor in you: Sixteen simple steps to understanding the art of acting.* Glenview, IL: Allyn & Bacon.

Berk, R. & Trieber, R. (2009). Whose classroom is it, anyway? Improvisation as a teaching tool. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, *20*(3), 29-60.

Boal, A. (1992). *Games for actors and non-actors.* London: Routledge.

Boix-Mansilla, V. (2007). *Interdisciplinary understanding: What counts as quality work?* Interdisciplinary Studies Project. Harvard University. Retrieved from http://www.evergreen.edu/washingtoncenter/docs/natlproject/interdisciplinaryunderstandingwhatcounts.pdf

Boix-Mansilla, V. & Gardner, H. (2000). On disciplinary lenses and interdisciplinary work. In: S. Wineburg and P. Grossman (Eds.), *Interdisciplinary Curriculum Challenges of Implementation*. New York, NY: TC Press.

Crossan, M. & Sorrenti, M. (1997). Making sense of improvisation. *Advances in Strategic Management*, *14*, 155-180.

Dennett, D. (1991). *Consciousness explained*. New York, NY: Little, Brown & Co.

Elkind, D. (1967). Egocentrism in adolescence. *Child Development, 38,* 1025–1034.

Fenwick, T. J. (2000). Expanding conceptions of experiential learning: A review of the five contemporary perspectives on cognition. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *50*(4), 243–272.

Fiksdal, S. (In press). *A guide to teaching effective seminars: Conversation, identity, power*. London and New York, NY: Routledge.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.* New York, NY: Doubleday.

Gronbeck-Tedesco, J. (1992). *Acting through exercises: A synthesis of classical and contemporary approaches.* Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company.

Hagen, U. (1973). *Respect for acting.* New York, NY: MacMillan.

Harnish, J. (1995). What's in a seminar? In *Seminars: A Collection of Materials on Seminar approaches and Evaluation Strategies.* Olympia, WA: Washington Center, The Evergreen State College.

Jones, B. (1993). *Improve with improv: A guide to improvisation and character development*. Colorado Springs, CO: Meriwether Publishing.

Jordi, R. (2010). Reframing the concept of reflection: Consciousness, experiential learning, and reflective learning practices. *Adult Education Quarterly, 61*, 181–197.

Keleman, S. (1985). *Emotional anatomy*. Berkeley, CA: Center Press.

Kerka, S. (2002). Somatic/Embodied learning and adult education. *Trends and Issues Alert*, *32*, ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education.

Lincoln, Y.S. & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Marcia, J. E. (1980). Identity in adolescence. In J. Adelson (Ed.), *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*. New York, NY: Wiley and Sons.

Matthews, J. C. (1998). Somatic knowing and education. *Educational Forum, 62*(3), 236-242.

Meyer, J. H. F. and Land, R. (2003). *Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: Linkages to ways of thinking and practising within the disciplines.* Occasional Report 4, ETL Project. Edinburgh, Scotland: Universities of Edinburgh, Coventry and Durham.

Mercer, N. (2000). *Words and minds: How we use language to think together.* London: Routledge.

Michelson, E. (1998). Re-membering: The return of the body to experiential learning. *Studies in Continuing Education, 20*(2), 217–233.

Polanyi, M. (1969). *Knowing and Being.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Scherr, R., Close, H., McKagan, S., and Close, E. (2010). "Energy theater": Using the body symbolically to understand energy. Part of the *Physics Education Research Conference Series*, *1289*, 293-296.

Sellers-Young, B. (1998). Somatic processes: Convergence of theory and practice. *Theatre Topics 8*(2), 173–187.

Shurtleff, M. (1978). *Audition.* New York, NY: Bantam Books.

Wegner, G. (2009). The role of improvisation and imagination in accessing body-based ways of knowing. *Practical Matters*, *1*, pp. 1-17.