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Roadside Theater

User Context Study: Educators Cohort

Contents

Study Overview

This report represents the views and insights given by in interviews with 5 educators. While we cannot argue they are representative of their peer educators, their experiences do provide insight into the various types of contexts Roadside could enter into with its online content. Participants interviewed taught a range of different courses at different levels:

High School: directing, playwriting and devising; senior seminar (production and touring of an original piece); mentoring upcoming theater majors in act ing, musicals and compositions of new work

Undergraduate: script analysis, dramaturgy, Latina/o theater, theater for social change

PhD and MFA: collaborative projects; concentration in management and entrepreneurship

Only one participant has taught *Betsy!* and plans to again in Spring 2015; two others have plans to include the play in spring 2015 semester courses and hope to have opportunity to view the play; the other two participants knew very little about the play but are interested in learning more. All three participants were asked the same 5 basic questions (with some variations based on the flow of conversation).

1. What kinds of courses do you teach?
2. Regarding theater and the performing arts, what are the critical questions you want students to engage?
3. What kinds of resources do you tap into for insight and information in shaping your teaching and research?
4. How do you use the resources of cultural organizations (like Roadside and Pregones) in your teaching and research?
5. What concepts do you teach that students find most difficult?

As the need for more in-process pieces about creative work emerged as a theme in the first round of interviews (with 3 participants), the 2 participants in the second round of interviews were asked to comment directly on that idea; all perspectives regarding that theme are represented in this report.

Critical Questions

Participants were asked (a) what critical questions they hope their students will engage, and (b) any difficulties students have with those engagements.

Critical questions are:

- How do we account for complex cultural histories? And invisible ones?
- How are we accounting for complexity when we check just one identity box?
- How do we engage in intercultural dialogue?
- Where are cultural minorities put in the position of becoming aware of the oppressor and the oppressed? And how does that cycle serve majoritarian culture? How we may, in turn, perpetuate our experiences on another minority groups, so that the oppressed becomes the oppressor?
- How do we define the boundaries around a cultural drama? How do we make that scope? Where do we draw the boundaries around this? How do we account for other cultural minorities in the stories that we tell?
- How do we facilitate students seeing themselves as "creative agents and makers"?
- How do I make strikingly original and creative theatre that changes hearts, minds and the world?
- How do I make a living in the theatre?
- What contributions have Latina/o writers made to print culture over the centuries?
- What constitutes identity?
- That "what people use theater training and theater mindsets for is much larger than the map we carry around in our head."
- Helping students see how artists connect to a "collective genius" in creation.

Regarding difficulties students have, participants mentioned the following:

- Legibility and invisibility of cross-cultural identities
- Playing around with multiple identities
- Structures that train students to receive others' critical ideas and prevents them being creative agents
- Engaging "hard core" academic theory (like Hegel and the French feminists)
- Students often assume that other interests not directly connected to theater are separate interests, not material that can feed directly into their work.
- "Crisis of Meaning" regarding the usefulness of theater beyond itself.

Resources They Use

> **"I will say that Roadside is better than most at archiving things that are useable. Like, Dudley Cocke's essays are accessible there and that's amazing."**

Aside drawing from theoretical academic literature themselves to inform their own knowledge, participants mentioned the resources listed below as informing their pedagogy. Reviewing these kinds of resources may offer Roadside ideas for how to structure and publish content, as well as gaps your content may be uniquely poised to fill.

- **The Community Arts Network's Reading Room:** This resource is now defunct but, according to this participant, included: articles, essays, interviews, community-based interviews, theoretical works, first-hand accounts of people's artistry and what they're doing, etc. As this participant said, "In the community-based theater world, conversations aren't always big enough and they don't always last long enough to be archived in big research library databases . . . if it only has three our four issues, it may not exist in the digital ether."
- **YouTube & Online Video**
- **Interviews with artists**
- **Example class exercises and large projects**
- **In-Person Sharing:** One participant emphasized "Meeting other people who are doing the work, sharing space with them and seeing what they do." Another participant called this a "natural build" of networks over time and cautioned, "when possible, I think there needs to be a balance between what people find on the website and what they experience face-to-face . . . because the whole dialogue face-to-face, there's nothing that takes the place of that."
- **Comparative Materials/Texts:** Helping students draw wider contextual connections by providing texts that can lead to meaningful comparisons. One participant said, ". . . I don't think we have a lot of historical information. My difficulty right now is to find older literary texts or theater—or it could be poetry, a personal essay, a reflection—something that connects very directly to Betsy! so that it's easy for students to make comparisons. . . "
- **Liz Lerman Dance Exchange Toolbox:** this resource came up several times and can be found at http://danceexchange.org/toolbox/home.html

> **"I would also see the education cohort as helping to create materials . . . in better exploring how artists and scholars work together . . . Sometimes scholars can put what others are doing in a context of ideas, and the artists are really able to ground what the scholars are thinking about and what it really takes to make the work. That's one specific thought, that the materials developed will be developed *with* scholars not just *for* scholars."**

What They Need

Overwhelmingly, what these educators want to teach is how to make creative decisions in the midst of composing, designing, directing and touring. The major gaps identified in these interviews are the lack of rich in-process materials and the lack of high-quality multimedia content, such as substantive video content.

Rich Multimedia Content

Participants crave good multimedia resources to use with their students. Interestingly, though they all value and mention drawing from textual literature themselves, participants describe their desires for teaching resources in *visual*, *aural* and *action-oriented* terms. Descriptions often even explicitly imagine teaching resources as video (ex: "I mean, I want Ron Short sitting there on video explaining particular rhythms, chords or progressions in Appalachian music . . ."). One participant in particular bemoaned the proliferation of poorly-made material, indicating this is a potential niche where Roadside could be a strong contributor.

Of course, since theater is inherently multisensory, participants feel that multimedia and video are especially useful in the kinds of classes they teach and these conversations certainly show that Roadside could emerge as a major contributor in that area if you can offer those resources.

> "Good video is crucial! There's a lot of bad theater on video out there and it hurts more than it helps. . . It's especially true for introductory students. They're only eighteen, nineteen or twenty. They've only seen so much theater. They have limited imaginations."

Also, crafting spaces online where groupings of multiple kinds of media exist side by side (for instance, textual reflections on the music immediately next to audio recordings of the music) in ways that give richer insights into the material might help partially fulfill this need.

> I actually kind of loved that little 30 minute "Open Windows" video [on roadside. org]. . . because it shows different modes of artists relating to people—their performances with different audiences, they're workshops. So I think that's good, showing that artists' work takes different forms; it's not all about the final product . . . I think that's one thing that shows something of an artist's process."

Process—Creative Deliberation

Perhaps the most resounding desire from two of these educators is for more content that helps their students see into creative processes. They feel the field is characterized by emphasizing more finalized deliverables and post-production reflections on processes and does not offer enough examples of artists in the process of creative deliberation and making decisions. As their students are often activley engaged in original compositions, these participants expressed the desire for (1) content that would provide examples of artists in these *in-process creative spaces* making decisions, and (2) *opportunities to interact with artists and groups in-process*.

As one participant put it, it's the difference in what the artist is saying through the work and "what the artists are considering, asking, investigating" through the work and how they make decisions about that. These participants want more content and interactions that can help them model and engage students in these deliberative moments where outcomes have not been pre-determined.

> **"I think that having some of those resources as they're going through the grappling phases of creating a piece of theater would be really useful for that, to be able to look at the work in progress of other organizations or places or companies or schools or whatever or have an opportunity to connect with them and ask questions."**

> **"I feel like there is a lot of work we could be doing in the field at large to make our process more visible and transparent. I feel like there is a lot of stuff that exists that's a record of what happened *after* it happened. There's not a lot of stuff that exists *as it's happening*. And I think those things would look really differently. I think what you say about your work as it is happening is very different from what you will say about it after it is done. I wish there was more in-process stuff available."**

Process--Guidance for Emerging Professionals

One participant who works with PhD and MFA students is interested in the managerial practices involved in this kind of work and deriving useful guides from Roadside's experiences to people hoping to make a living in theater. Another participant guides senior high schools students in creating and touring an original piece and would appreciate interacting with other organizations that are also in the middle of similar work.

> "I am also super interested in the ways in which *Betsy!* and the partners have created an online presence. That kind of expansion opens the black box of theatre so that people can see the studio relationships, the multiple iterations of script/performance, and help folk think outside the box with regard to show/performance guides (used quite a bit in TFY). We also have an MFA concentration in mgmt. and entrepreneurship, so I believe Betsy! could be an interesting case study for them."
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Musical Insight

The one participant with experience teaching *Betsy!* expressed a desire for more educational content about the music in particular. Since most students do not get to see the play performed live, they are limited to the actual text of the play. Also, since many students do not have the cultural backgrounds represented in the play, they have difficulty accessing the musical traditions and their importance. This participant felt content that explicitly comments

> "I know nothing about music. I can explain that we're bridging two cultures, two musical traditions, and that they meld together but I cannot speak about that in specific terms at all . . . .For plays like this, I'm often looking for interviews with the artist . . . to hear from the artists about what they're trying to do."

Musical Insight continued . . .

from Roadside's expertise and insider knowledge would allow better access into the play, as well as help decentralize her as the sole dispenser of knowledge in the classroom.

> "I know about the oral history in Appalachian culture but I think there's an interesting question about the oral history in Appalachian culture meeting the oral history and traditions of Latino culture that I don't tend to have time to explain . . . In the context of the class room, if there was a reading or a short interview where people were talking about that, and it's going to get at it so much faster than me trying to give them this background. I don't like being the delivery vehicle for everything in my classroom. I should be clarifying and helping them read and assess but not the delivery vehicle . . ."

Other Concerns

Confusion about the Cohort around *Betsy!*

Some participants expressed a lack of clarity about what the cohort is and will do; what a timeline, process or expectations will look like; and who they should contact with questions or ideas. Though they all appear excited about the possibilities with Betsy! and the prospect of useful content via roadside.org, participants in general do not seem to have a clear conception of how they can contribute to the cohort or what the interaction will involve.

> "As far as making content accessible so that it's available next semester . . . Not all of the content needs to be available, but the kind of content that we can count on in order to teach in step with Betsy!, we would need to know before we begin pacing our syllabi, which is now—December and January. So my concern is I haven't heard a time or a specific process to do this . . ."

Expanding Audience

One participants felt Roadside should expand their conception of audience: "I think there's a real tendency for them to think that their niche is community-based theater and I'm actually teaching this play in different realms and from different perspectives. My guiding questions, the take-aways, are the same, but I do encourage them to think about a wide range of audiences, especially for teaching." Given that participants teach a range of classes (Latina/o studies, theater production, literature, etc.), keeping that variety in mind may help Roadside reach a wider group.

Also, I would note that the cohort is primarily composed of those with expertise in Latina/o studies, which offers a unique opportunity for Roadside to reflect on communicating the Appalachian roots of your work to other cultural communities. I would also suggest that bringing educators from within Appalachian studies into the cohort (or facilitating those connections) could lead to collaborations that are useful for these scholars.