

Braelyn Schenk
Arts Award 2017
Outcome Report

Outcome Report: The Bridge Between

I began this semester with high hopes and cemented intentions. My desire, to “equip High School students to deliver and receive personal stories through music, dance and theatre...to investigate and employ art as a bridge between perceived elements of “self” and “other.” Since reflecting on my initial design document for this course, I can find a measure of amusement in its definitive nature and its unattainable ambitions. The final “products” and benchmarks along the way manifested much differently than I had anticipated, however, my time with Monticello High School students this past semester has proved invaluable to my understanding of the power of movement to inspire and inform connection, reflection and personal freedom, for dancers and “non dancers” alike.

This series of workshops began with the query -- “Who am I?” My students and I explored various methods of expressing the idea of “self,” whether it be through individual journaling and reflection, through group discussion or movement generation. I set out with the intention of “address[ing] sensitive topics such as race, sex/gender, identity and history through interactive discussion, movement exercises and specific “case studies” from popular culture.” Since then, have come to recognize that my students and I didn’t require such weighty expectation imposed upon us, especially so early in our time together. Perhaps due to a tight timeframe and the newness of the venture, I entered with a list of requirements for myself and for my students that should have been shed early on.

Because of this semester-long involvement at MHS, I have learned an edge of the understanding that it takes much more time than you might think to gain a group’s trust. Because of my history at the local high school as a 2014 Alumni, I had a tendency to place too much of my reputation into the trust equation, assuming I could move forward more quickly than others towards the sum of progress and product. There is some truth to this assumption, I had a strong foundation and team of support in that space, at both student and administrative levels, but not so much to justify an unbalanced racking up of expectation for

myself and my students. I have learned that square one and simple is where one needs to begin with any new group.

Upon reflection, my enlightened turn towards vaguely understanding the role of teacher and facilitator airs more on the side of a cultivation of process and practice, rather than on the prediction and imposition of charged motives at the outset of an action. I've come to a better understanding that in teaching of this nature, one must maintain a gentle grasp on their desired outcomes. Instead, they must pay close attention to what "catches," to what conversation arises, choosing in those moments to employ exercises and mindful questions that consistently returns to key touching stones of intention. Eventually, this practice will establish itself as a time tested creative process catered specifically to the group you are with and uniquely fit for problem solving and empathetic artistry within that specific context.

As the semester progressed, the students and I eventually turned more towards just such a custom built "practice." Our practice came to more heavily encompass movement-based exercises such as flocking, dynamics, N.E.W.S, tableaus, word to gesture work, and scoring. By introducing these physicalized queries and experiences, the topics I had initially addressed cerebrally came more apparent in their actual embodiment. Thoughts on community, unity, relationships, identity, "self" and "other" materialized more organically as bodies moved through the space and thinking took the form of doing. Through my time at MHS, I have come to realize and remember that young High School students are actively conjuring the most basic elements of their identity. They are questioning constantly, defining and redefining themselves through various methods, some more productive than others. By creating a safe space for movement, expression, joy and grace, we moved toward grasping another tool for healthy definition, redefinition and understanding of "who am I," and "who am I with you." I saw proof of this trend in more ways than one.

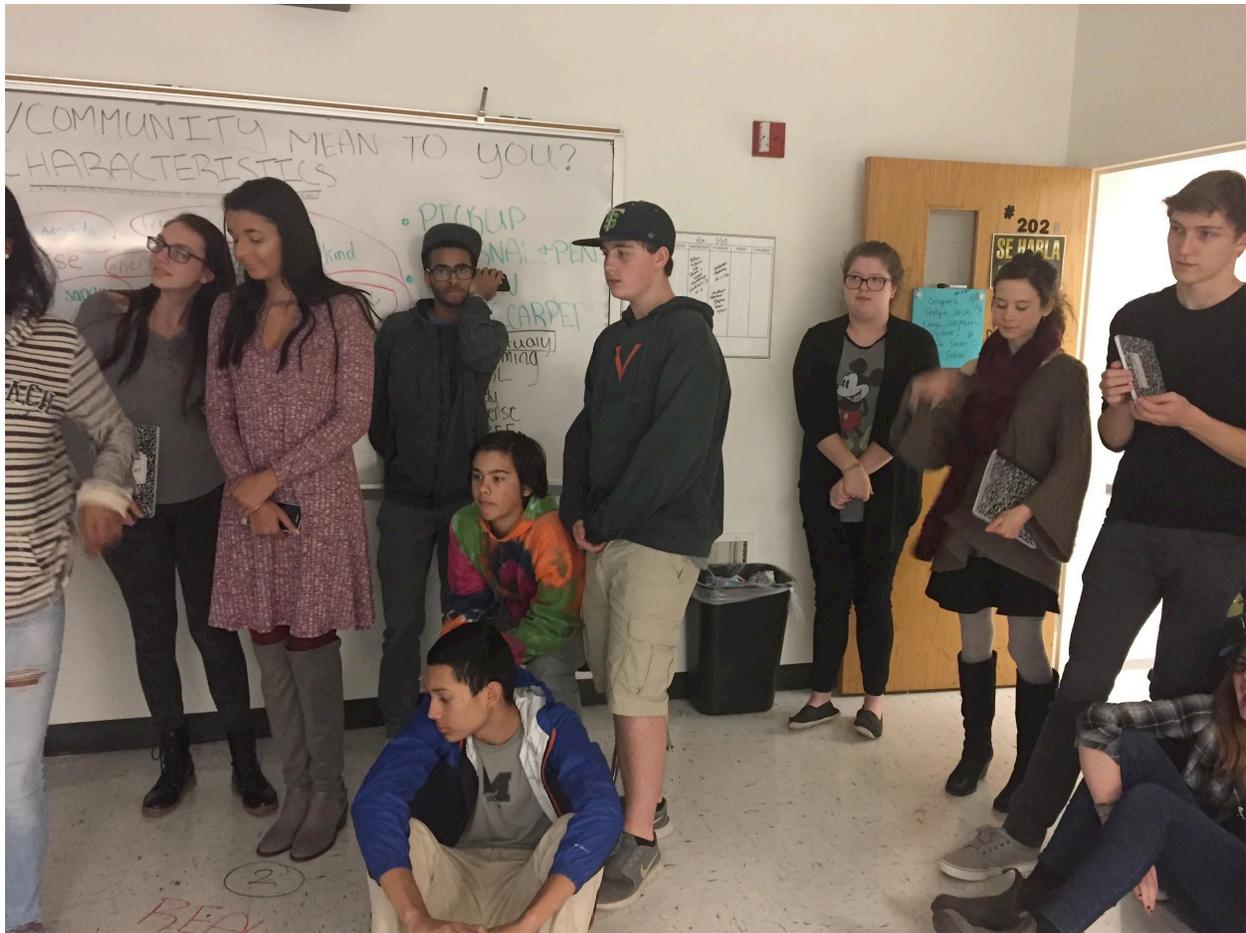
The most obvious and tangible examples could be found in the end of course reflections. The student's written thoughts and impressions indicated a shift toward freedom of expression and a more solid settling of self, even simply within the context of dance. One of my students expressed the following in their reflection -- " I truly love to dance but I do get nervous. But since you've been here I'm not as

scared to [dance] in front of people.” Such sentiments were perhaps the most prevalent and powerful outcomes from my time working at Monticello High School this year. Others shared their appreciation for learning how to “express themselves freely” or for “having the opportunity to move freely”. I had the privilege to witness these striking transformations unfold, and to share in the deepened level of care and community that existed even more vibrantly after its influence set in.

This past semester not only offered a better understanding of self to the students but also to me. Even with the ups and downs of encouragement and discouragement painting my overall experience, I realized my tenacity for growing, learning, listening and improving never wavered. No matter how I was feeling when I walked in the room at the beginning of a workshop, I always left empowered and inspired by my students. This project has left me eager to further tap into the magic that is movement, the priceless practice that is community building and the sheer power of the next generation. My students left me with a confirmed desire to inspire empathy and action through creative truth-telling. As I continue to reflect and learn from this project in the future, I can only hope that my students and I continue to incorporate our classroom practices into our real world journeys, never stopping, but ever seeking to build the bridge between life and art.



The kids being their cool selves.



The students waiting for what's next.



Working with my students on foundational, identity driven questions to help provide a grounding origin for movement and gesture generation.



MHS students working on a movement practice called N.E.W.S.