



# Performance as a Tool for Inclusive Teaching

UMS believes that experiences with the performing arts can enrich and enliven academic inquiry across all disciplines. We are committed to creating uncommon learning opportunities for students and faculty, both in and outside the classroom. This includes helping faculty to integrate UMS performances into their courses, and mobilizing performance's capacity to promote inclusion in the classroom.

What happens when students attend a performance together? Laura J. Olsen, Andrew F. Thurnau Professor of Molecular, Cellular, and Developmental Biology, took her upper-level students to UMS's presentation of the play *Every Brilliant Thing* (Fall 2017) during the second week of

the semester. She comments, "I think it really built more of a sense of community than my class often has. It takes a while to develop; we usually get there, but it made a big impact on the students, just going and watching the play. I think after that, it was a very interactive class. Maybe that would have been the case anyway—obviously you can't do a control on that—but I think that made a big difference." Not only were her students talking to each other more, they were talking about their own ideas: "[It was a unique opportunity to] discuss something and come up with ideas. *How would you have done this differently for a different audience*, and things like that where there's not a right or wrong answer...It started them thinking a lot more broadly."

The classroom that Professor Olsen describes—here students feel a sense of belonging, and have a structured opportunity to learn from each other—has inclusive characteristics that the University of Michigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT) identifies as important for positive learning outcomes.<sup>1</sup> In fact, whether instructors attend a show with their students or incorporate participatory, performance-based activities into their lesson plans, performance offers many opportunities for inclusivity.

Performance is a shared temporal and physical experience that is set apart from everyday routines, creating a world—and a community—of its own. Because of its communal, embodied nature, audience members engage sensorily and emotionally with it—an empathetic experience through which new entry points to ideas can emerge. Notably, this empathy enables performance to illuminate different cultures and viewpoints, as well as critical issues around difference, in a way that other texts or teaching tools cannot. Then, performance requires a heightened attentiveness; “passionate noticing,” as one instructor describes it, is itself a skill that promotes inclusion. The capacity to attune to nuances of communication from a range of channels serves students in the classroom as well as it does in the theater. Finally, performance traffics in ambiguity; meaning can be constructed according to different logics, and different—even competing—meanings can be legitimately attributed to the same performance. In the theater, and especially in discussions about the theatrical experience, students must hold these multiple truths simultaneously, honoring diverse perspectives. In all these ways, performance is a powerful tool for the inclusive classroom.

## Performance as an alternative classroom modality

The decision to include performance in curriculum is itself an inclusive one. Performance represents an alternative mode of engagement; it affords students with different backgrounds and learning styles ways to connect with content that are distinct from those associated with more traditional classroom modalities. As an in-class activity, performance provides students a different, hands-on way to participate. As an event attended together in the theater, performance constitutes a “text” that requires a different sort of engagement—communal, immediate, embodied, sensory—from that of a reading or slide deck. Performance can refresh and enliven a class; as one instructor notes, “Some students just burn out on note-taking.

---

1. See the CRLT website for explanations and analysis of inclusive teaching, <http://crlt.umich.edu/overview-inclusive-teaching-michigan>

**“When you’re in the concert hall as a class, you’re there together, you’ve turned off your devices hopefully, and we all are starting on the same page: that it’s 2018, we’re sitting in a group, and we’re experiencing the same thing. Or we witness the same thing, but our experiences are really different, and that’s the fascinating thing...I can give them information, and UMS can provide background, so we all have a little set of knowledge about the program. Then we can use that information to describe and explain different things. And sometimes it’s the diversity in our experiences that make it really cool.”**

**Naomi André**, Associate Professor in Afroamerican and African Studies, and Associate Director at the Residential College

## Community and Belonging

A sense of community and belonging sets the tone for an inclusive classroom, and is strongly correlated with the ability to learn.<sup>2</sup> The physical reality of attending performance together enhances that sense of belonging. It requires students to explore beyond the walls of the classroom, often taking them to new places—theaters and areas of campus or town where many have never been. Similarly, many students report that their UMS experience was a “first”—first orchestra concert, first non-musical play, first concert-dance performance. Even for students who participated in the performing arts in high school, UMS’s music, theatre, and dance programming often represents a departure from familiar forms. These shared physical and conceptual adventures afford students opportunities to create personal bonds, distinct from those in the everyday context of the classroom.

Performances even allow for a different type of bond between professor and student, one that counteracts some of the distancing hierarchy that usually characterizes their relationship. Faculty and students share a new experience when they see live performance together—a parity that contrasts the familiar situation in which students read a book the teacher has surely read before. Furthermore, in the theater, the instructor is in some way just another ticket-holder, often more accessible than in the classroom. Ginger Shultz, an Assistant Professor of Chemistry who attended a concert with some members of her class of 350, recounts how one student in particular was so excited to see her there. They lingered together in the lobby, talking about the performance afterwards. Shultz notes that this student had previously told her that “she’s really struggled here in the classes like this one that are so huge, where you begin to feel anonymous and it’s hard to connect with the faculty member. And she felt like this activity really helped her to do that, and it had this personal connection for her.”

---

2. [crlt.umich.edu/overview-inclusive-teaching-michigan](http://crlt.umich.edu/overview-inclusive-teaching-michigan)

When performances feature artists from underrepresented groups, or foreground and celebrate cultures that don't often have the spotlight, they create a highly visible, positive representation of these groups and cultures. Such performances have several impacts on community and a sense of belonging: they open up a space for students from underrepresented groups, they shift the dominant narrative away from whiteness to include a range of cultures, and they extend an invitation for all audience members to experience the richness of those cultures, consequently creating the possibility for broader empathy. For example, when choreographer *Camille A. Brown* visited the Engaging Performance (UMS's signature course) classroom in January, 2019, co-instructor Aric Knuth, Lecturer in English Language and Literature, observed "I think at one point during that Q & A, every black woman in the room asked Camille a question. That was definitely notable. *They had things to ask her*, that was clear." In response to one of those questions, Brown mentioned a critic from the *New York Times* who described a dance of hers as being full of a lot of clapping and stomping. That "clapping and stomping" are actually specific references to African dances but, without that context, that particular aspect of her work was rendered invisible, eclipsed by a dominant cultural narrative. However, Professor Knuth notes, "Brown's presence in the classroom served to re-center the narrative; *she* was the source of knowledge and expertise in the room, not the *Times*. She was able to share with students a story about dance, the history of dance, and criticism that is distinctly different from the dominant one, one in which blackness is central." Such experiences not only serve to de-center whiteness and promote inclusion in the classroom, they also deepen students' experiences of the art forms they see.

"I took students to a [string] quartet performance. They found the experience of going to a classical music concert felt very foreign to them. They didn't feel included because they didn't feel like it was part of their culture. The average age [of audience members there] is a lot older, and they got the sense this is for people who are white and wealthy, not for me. I've done some work to break that. I asked them, "How many of you have ever been to a classical music concert? What do you think about it?" And we talked about it. I had a violinist come in and talk to them. And I chose [a concert with] a piece by a contemporary composer, that gave them a contemporary feel. They start to feel like it's not necessarily outside of their culture and understanding...And I was surprised and delighted to see the students respond [to a concert, after these interventions]. It was kind of magical."

**Carol Tell**, Director of Lloyd Hall Scholars Program and Lecturer in the Sweetland Center for Writing

## Discussions about performance

Performance is more meaningful when it is thoughtfully framed in the classroom. Before the performance, conversations that calibrate expectations help ensure that the experience will be a meaningful one. This might range from a discussion about students' previous experiences with music, theatre, and dance of all kinds, to an inventory of what to expect in a concert hall. Then, discussion after the performance provides an opportunity for students to articulate their personal responses and to share them with the group; multiple perspectives must be honored, and individual meaning-making informs the whole group's understanding.

Discussions about performance are often more generative if students have done a low-stakes writing assignment about it between the performance and the class meeting. A simple prompt such as, "Write down five things that stood out to you about the performance," provides the opportunity to gather thoughts in writing, allowing students to feel more confident in their discussion participation. It also sets up the expectation that students will be attentive to the physical details of the performance; this enables them to construct descriptions of their experiences, which will form the foundation of their further analyses. In addition, the practice of attuning to sight and sound and sensation without the foreknowledge of what source might yield important information contrasts the habit of privileging a single channel of communication. In this way, the heightened attention of the theater models an inclusive way of being with others.

## Interpretation, many voices

Beginning the discussion with a question like, "So what stood out to you about the performance?" allows students to claim the moments that were personally salient to them, even as they begin to build a shared description of the event. *Description* here is defined as identifying the physical facts—the "who, what, where, when, and how" that can be perceived with the senses—and is particularly important to discussions about performance. Description is the necessary basis for any interpretation or contextualization, and it constitutes a common starting point, grounded in concrete observation, that promotes inclusion. Furthermore, taking the time to process those physical facts counteracts the common impulse to rush to interpretation and judgment, and consequently affords interpretations and judgments that are more firmly grounded in the performance itself.

Forging a collective description can also promote inclusion; it provides a structured opportunity for classmates to learn from one another, maximizing student awareness and appreciation of diverse points of view. Distinguished University Professor of English Linda Gregerson points out to her students that any performance involves a surfeit of stimuli, and that partiality is not only fine but inevitable; everyone makes choices about where to focus in the theater. With this reality in mind, she and her students debrief and compare individual experiences after a performance.

This not only reassures students that they can't notice it all, but also implies that every voice is needed to build a powerful collective account of the event; the temporality and complexity of performance make it a site where inclusion is urgently needed. This type of discussion about performance asks each student to be a critical source of knowledge, rather than looking to the instructor as the lone authority or prioritizing any individual account.

Building on description, discussion after performance often moves into interpretation—ideas of meaning. All interpretations must be backed up with description, but the inherent poetry and ambiguity of the performance medium invite multiple valid interpretations, informed by identity and experience. As such, discussion about interpretation is an ideal place to model a forum for diverse perspectives and experiences. Likewise, conversations about *contextualization*, wherein the performance is connected to the world outside itself, can be a showcase for individual student perceptions of the event. When the range of identities and experiences are explicitly identified as assets for learning, these discussions support inclusion.

**“[UMS’s presentation of the] Netherlands Dance Theatre stands out as a really memorable experience for us. It was non-verbal, physical theatre, and they were just so technically precise. We were blown away by what they did with just the voice and body, with no language; their bodies were the primary agents. We had conversations about what we felt and all the ways we engaged with it and what we took back to our work. It really leveled the playing field for our whole mixed group [including U-M students, Brazilian faculty and students, teenagers, and formerly incarcerated persons], to come together as a community and witness the same thing at the same time.”**

**Ashley Lucas**, Director of the Prison Creative Arts Project, and Associate Professor in the School of Music, Theatre, and Dance and in the Residential College

## Revealing inequities among students

Tickets to most performances, like other instructional texts or materials, cost money. Through the Classroom Ticket Program, UMS offers \$15 tickets to students and faculty in courses that require a performance as part of the course design. This student ticket price reflects, on average, a two-thirds subsidy and is designed to make student tickets affordable. Nonetheless, this expense can represent a hardship to some students. The cost of a ticket to any required performance should be made explicit as part of the course description, so that students are aware of it before registering

for the course, and then highlighted in the syllabus. If performance attendance is planned far enough in advance, the cost of tickets can be included as a “lab fee” for the course, which is then calculated into students’ total costs for financial aid. Faculty should encourage students to talk to them if the \$15 ticket price represents a hardship. Funds to support experiential learning activities like performance attendance are sometimes available at the departmental or associate dean’s level, and Arts at Michigan offers a limited number of Course Connection grants on a rolling basis each year. In any case, tickets should be procured and distributed so as not to draw attention to income disparity among students; UMS can work with faculty to determine a method that works for them.

Attending a performance in a theater involves behavioral norms that may not be familiar to all students, especially those for whom theater-going was not a part of their family or school experience. For example, many students are uncertain what to wear, or don’t know that taking pictures during the performance is strictly forbidden. The UMS “What to Expect” page<sup>3</sup> addresses many of the implicit expectations of the theater; instructors can help prepare all students for the performance by briefly covering these potential concerns in class or offering a link to the page. Transparency about expectations and norms supports all students’ learning, and is especially beneficial for first-generation college students and other groups who have been traditionally underserved by higher education.<sup>4</sup>

One instructor notes that even students who are comfortable with traditional theater experiences often need an entry point into innovative programming. While some students are unfamiliar with the cultural norms associated with theater-going, even more lack experience with experimental or highly conceptual performances. Such performances often refute common conventions of story, emotional expression, beauty, and metaphor, but these are the very conventions—found in broadly accessible media like music videos and TV shows—around which many students have built their “codes” for understanding in the theater. Then, although the content of an edgier performance may be relevant, its aesthetics prove to be an obstacle. When students can’t understand the events on stage, confusion, frustration, and disdain often follow.

To help ensure that all students can find entry points into performance, familiarize them ahead of time with the artists and the style of work. This might be done during dedicated class time or as independent research, and the UMS Campus Engagement Specialist can recommend reliable, accessible sources of information on performing artists. Time spent in discussion after class, cataloging the physical facts students observed on stage, can also help illuminate a performance that seemed opaque. By together generating a descriptive list of things that students noticed, and encouraging statements about elements or aspects that may seem obvious, meaning often emerges.

3. <http://ums.org/visit/what-to-expect/>

4. [crlt.umich.edu/overview-inclusive-teaching-michigan](http://crlt.umich.edu/overview-inclusive-teaching-michigan)

## Engaging difference and perceptions of identity

Because the performance experience is shared, physical, and emotional; because each person's experience of it is personal; and because UMS programming often challenges perceptions of identity, performance is a potent site for engaging difference. Critically, the way that instructors frame performance, before and after the fact, sets up the atmosphere of inclusion that allows this engagement to be generative.

Several instructors note the importance of preparing for performances that may challenge some students with, for example, provocative portrayals of race or gender. Professor Tell advises, "Front-load the experience. Talking beforehand about what you're going to see helps students make sense of the performance. It becomes a tool for students as they go out on their own. *We're not going to saccharine-coat it; you could see something that really upsets your thinking.*" For example, a performance like *They, Themselves, and Schmerm* (part of UMS's 2018 No Safety Net series), with its frank treatment of gender and sexuality by trans actor/writer Becca Blackwell, has the potential to disrupt perceptions of identity for some students. However, by preparing for such a performance ahead of time, perhaps surfacing understandings of gender and providing information about Blackwell, faculty lay the conceptual groundwork to rebuild this "upset thinking" into a more inclusive configuration. As Professor Tell implies, this becomes a model for inclusive practice going forward.

Because of performance's capacity to build empathy across the proscenium, many students emerge from the theater with feelings of connection to those on stage who had previously seemed alien or other. Nonetheless, there may also be strong student reactions to a performance that challenges notions of identity, and debriefing together as a class is critical.<sup>5</sup> Professor André views this time as fertile ground for unpacking sensitive issues together, noting, "It's up to the instructor to question, and guide the class through the period of discomfort and conflict to understanding." Kelly Maxwell, LSA Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Education who taught extensively in The Program on Intergroup Relations, agrees: "I can help students make sense of the issues and of what's going on in class. I can help them analyze. *Yeah, it reinforces negative stereotypes. What might the director have been getting at by including that?* I allow it to play out, and add complexity, not agreeing with controversial viewpoints but taking them apart, helping students see them." Conversely, sometimes the role of the instructor is to trouble the waters, for example, drawing attention to provocative content when students seem unaware of it.

5. Both CRLT and LSA offer guidelines for facilitating these sorts of discussions. See, for example, <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/2017/08/24/discussion-guidelines/>.

"We went to see Urban Bush Women (a UMS presentation of *Hair & Other Stories*, January 2018), and it was specifically taking on issues of identity and community and belonging. It forced our thinking about who's included? And who's celebrated? When? Why? It was really food for thought. We processed the experience together; we wrote about it and we discussed it, and we also processed it through movement... You don't just walk away from the experience."

Naomi Silver, Associate Director of the Sweetland Center for Writing

## Content warnings and student agency

Discomfort provoked by a challenging performance can lead to student growth, especially when facilitated by the instructor. However, there is a difference between productive discomfort and intense physiological or psychological symptoms, such as that which a student with an anxiety disorder might experience. Content warnings can alert such students to potentially sensitive material, so that they can prepare to safely engage or, if necessary, disengage for their own well-being.<sup>6</sup>

While content warnings fulfill the function of flagging sensitive material, such as scenes of sexual violence, it is impossible to know what content may trigger a traumatic reaction in a student. Likewise, it's crucial to note that even with advance knowledge and preparation, there's no way to predict all the events on stage in a given performance. Performance is inherently risky in that even with a familiar "classic" work, the way that events will unfold on stage is always an unknown. "We don't know what we're going to see; that's what's wonderful," remarks Professor Tell. By communicating this message about all performances, as a general statement about the medium, instructors normalize content warnings; *any* performance could include provocative material. This transparency, that establishes a common ground of expectation and trust, characterizes the inclusive classroom. It also encourages student responsibility and agency; students are empowered to find out about and prepare for the performances they will attend.

Just as the immediacy and shared physicality of the theater promote empathy, enabling audience members to forge connections across difference, these same qualities also imply that students may experience stronger, more emotional reactions to a performance than they would to a reading assignment. Dean Maxwell anticipates that sensitive material that may have been okay at the disembodied remove of a printed page has a different impact in the theater. She considers it

6. See <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/2017/12/12/an-introduction-to-content-warnings-and-trigger-warnings/> for more information on content warnings.

important to make room for students' emotional responses to performance, asking, "What are some of the things that came up?" By providing a space for their emotional reactions, she allows students not only an outlet for their feelings but also the power to name their experience: "It's not about the instructor dictating it."

## Performance-based activities as a vehicle for embodied understanding

Just as the medium of performance provides students with an embodied, communal connection to content in the theater, so can it mobilize embodiment and community as means to help students make sense of content in the classroom. Several instructors describe how performance-based activities—e.g., making music together, theatre games and exercises, movement explorations<sup>1</sup>—in the classroom create a shared experience. This in turn leads to a sense of belonging, or to a heightened sympathy with different identities in the room.

- Professor Silver observes in her writing classes that working in two different modalities—writing and music, writing and video, writing and movement—really changes students' approach, that the work they do in one modality influences what they are doing in the other. She says, "Embodied work especially helps students bring their whole selves to the room. They access aspects of experience they wouldn't have otherwise. When you move with others, there's more empathy. It opens up the possibility to act as an ally...When you move with others there's a different relationship to community."
- When students voice controversial opinions in class and tension rises, Dean Maxwell asks students to physicalize the experience. She puts students in groups of four, and prompts them to "make a group sculpture with your bodies that communicates what's going on in the room today." She finds that the variation from sculpture to sculpture reveals to students the range of their classmates' experiences, in a way that is sometimes more accessible or meaningful than further discussion would.
- Professor Lucas regularly incorporates theatre exercises into her course Theatre and Incarceration, and emphasizes that you don't need formalized arts training to make art. Her class attracts a broad cross-section of students—from

BFA Theatre students to sociology, pre-med, and pre-law students who have very little experience with the arts. She observes, "When we get up and engage with each other, we know each other's names and something about each other. Even in a discussion, it's easy to interact with the instructor, not each other. That doesn't happen here...It opens up people to speak to each other, and to listen, differently."

All of these experiences speak to performance's unique capacity to promote inclusion in the classroom. Engaging with music, theatre, and dance, as a participant or a spectator, affords students an array of opportunities to feel a sense of belonging, to cultivate openness to many sources of information, to constructively encounter difference, to empathize broadly, and to articulate and own their experience even as they honor the experiences of others. Instructors who may think that performance is not for them—that it doesn't relate to their courses or is too unfamiliar to be successfully integrated into their teaching—should note that it welcomes them as well. Performance is already happening in the roles we play in the theater of the classroom; including it more formally in curriculum can be an illuminating and productive next step.

---

<sup>1</sup> The instructors interviewed for this paper referred to both Augusto Boal and Liz Lerman as sources for in-class performance activities. See, for example, Augusto Boal and Adrian Jackson, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*. (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2005), <http://qut.eblib.com.au/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=241887>, and The Liz Lerman Dance Exchange Toolbox, <http://danceexchange.org/toolbox/home.html>.