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Exploring Ideas Onstage: A Creative Connection

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Exploring Ideas Onstage: A Creative Connection

Part of the journal section “Forum: Cornerstone” [Contribution to Cornerstone: An Experiment in Interdisciplinarity and Community]

Richard Glockner and Eric Lange, “Merging Parallels: Libraries in the Classroom”

The Theatre/Cornerstone collaboration began in the spring of 2011. Upon learning that one of Cornerstone’s initiatives was the implementation of an annual common read, Theatre suggested the creation and delivery of a dramatic adaptation of the selection to be followed by a discussion for all students and faculty involved.

The 2011 topic/theme for the Reaching for Higher Ground series and Cornerstone’s common read was, “Community After 9/11.” Cornerstone chose David Egger’s book *Zeitoun* -- the chronicle of a Muslim-American family’s experience during and after Hurricane Katrina. Zeitoun (the Syrian-American husband) stays during the storm to safeguard the family’s properties. He comes under suspicion of being a terrorist and is arrested. The book raises questions about identity, religion, justice, bureaucratic chaos, fear, and stereotyping.

The adaptation (entitled *The Zeitoun Project*) needed to be 20-25 minutes in length to fit into a class period and allow time for a post-performance discussion. A challenge of staging *The Zeitoun Project* was the necessity of Arab actors. There were none in the department, and after a rigorous search across campus, two Arab students from other majors agreed to join the company. The rehearsal period began with research on all events and issues contained in the book. Once these were compiled, the company started to select and arrange key scenes from the book into a dramatic structure. The post-performance discussions most commonly revealed the deeper involvement of the audience with the characters and their problems, when viewing actors portraying them. The discussions also fostered diverse personal reflections on the issues introduced in *Zeitoun*. Another public performance occurred at the University Book & Supply store to an audience of book club members, members of the UNI Saudi Student Association, and members of the local mosque in Waterloo. The discussion afterwards was much more vital as the audience included older members or people who had experienced the events or themes brought out in the presentations. The cast found that the sharing of those personal experiences resonated very strongly with them.

The 2012 common read – tied to the theme “The Search for an American Dream” -- was Isabel Wilkerson’s *The Warmth of Other Suns*, which chronicles the migration of African-Americans

from the South to the North, Midwest, and Western United States from 1915 until 1970. The three main characters represent the millions of African-Americans who fled from the oppressive, often life-threatening American South, to what they hoped was a safer, less racially prejudiced and more hospitable life in other areas of the United States.

Shows were scheduled for evening performances, which allowed local community attendance, as well as attendance by Cornerstone participants. The Theatre Department had only one African-American student at the time. Again, Professor Glockner directed this project and expanded casting to include other African-American students on campus, Waterloo community members, and local high school students. The production was entitled *The Warmth Project*. The mostly African-American cast brought their personal experiences to the process in a manner that provided immediacy, emotional depth and energy to rehearsals and performances.

The theatre was configured in such a way that audience members were forced to enter through a narrow passageway which contained photographs and posters from The Great Migration period. Upon reaching the playing and seating areas, signs indicated seating for “whites only” and “colored.” These were attempts to sensitize the 2012 audience to the degree of racism extant in pre-1950’s America. Responses from racially mixed audiences were moving, compelling, and profound and seemed to reveal consensus that although progress has been made in America toward racial equality, there is much more work to be done.

“Food Matters” was the topic in 2013-14, and Tracie McMillan’s book *The American Way of Eating* was chosen as the common read. The book examines why working Americans eat the way they do. McMillan goes undercover as a field worker, a produce worker, and a line cook to find out what economic, cultural and institutional forces shape the eating habits of average Americans. The book combines statistical analysis with McMillan’s personal experiences, to create a snapshot of how food is harvested, marketed and prepared in America, while also looking at the lives of the people who work in the food industry.

Theatre professor Matthew Weedman was hired to lead a company of theatre students in researching, adapting, and ultimately performing the dramatization. They spoke with people involved in the food industry and even visited a local farm, where they worked in the fields. They found the book’s numerous statistics difficult to pull into the dramatization and chose to meet the challenge by interweaving songs, multi-media elements and comic scenarios into the story arc.

The performances of *The American Way of Eating* were incorporated into the regular 2013-14 Theatre season. The change was made in part because of Cornerstone’s escalating enrollment but also to allow the department to allocate more resources to the production. Reactions to the performance were very positive. Post-show discussions reflected an audience engaged and interested in the topics presented.

In the fall of 2014, the collaboration continued with the presentation of Caryl Churchill's play *Love and Information*. It was not possible to produce an adaptation of the common read, Ernie Cline's *Ready Player One* because the rights to do so were not available. The theme for the year was Media and Social Media, meant to explore how our interactions have been abraded by our media-rich lives. Churchill's play presents a blizzard of fragments snatched from personal relationships as mediated and negotiated by the different ways messages travel through our everyday lives. Reviews for the play say that it "ingeniously and exhaustively mirrors our age of the splintered attention span." - New York Times and "...one of the many points made by this exhilarating theatrical kaleidoscope is that we live in a world where information bombardment is in danger of leading to atrophy of memory, erosion of privacy and decay of feeling." – Samuel French Publishing

For the first time, the play was produced in the larger Strayer-Wood Theatre, and therefore the number of Cornerstone students at each performance (only two performances were designed to incorporate a talkback) was significantly higher than in previous years. The physical environment for the play included multiple projection surfaces that streamed various social media feeds throughout the performance. The post-performance discussions provided reactions that ranged from "confused" to statements that indicated students were increasingly aware of how much time they devote to online activity as well as how little privacy there really is in the online world. The team of actors and designers that workshopped the performance prior to the start of the semester incorporated ideas from Eli Pariser's *The Filter Bubble*, which the Cornerstone classes plan to utilize in the Spring, 2015 semester.

This rich collaboration has provided strong opportunities for exploring difficult issues and for utilizing live performance as a means to facilitate those explorations. If other campuses were to explore similar collaborative frameworks, the following points are worth considering:

- (1) The easiest type of book to adapt is one with strong characters and a strong story line. The more analytic and fact based selections will challenge the adaptor to come up with a vibrant through line.
- (2) The important considerations in approaching an adaptation include knowing who the audience is, their familiarity with the material, and such questions as "Where will this be performed?", "Are there any time constraints?", "What resources are available?", and "How can a theatrical performance vitalize the material?" Minimal performance requirements make the show more portable. From the perspective of Theatre faculty, it seems that smaller and more supervised audience groups help focus and concentration.
- (3) If it is possible to devise a performance by consulting the group who will then perform it and getting their ideas on how it could be performed, there is a sense of "ownership" of the show, which will lead to more ensemble commitment through the length of the run.
- (4) For post-performance discussions, having discussion leaders and issuing pre-show questions to students are seemingly helpful strategies.

This collaboration has improved campus-wide visibility for the Theatre program, and has led to increased funding (for development work), the fostering of working relationships with entities (military science) and groups (Arabs and Muslims) we haven't had contact with before and led to benefits for our majors that they wouldn't have had without the projects.

The most prominent benefit to Cornerstone students is that the dramatizations have provided ways to particularize and deepen the characters in the books and make more visceral for the audience the humanity of those characters. By utilizing a live performance we can, after the students have experienced the book individually, foster the sharing of a communal experience of the same material.

[Go to the narrative [Cornerstone: An Experiment in Interdisciplinarity and Community](#) article.]



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