

Guidelines and Resources for Developing Collaborative and/or Interdisciplinary Work - Janaea Lyn McAlee

Guiding Principles

These guidelines serve as the basis for making ongoing group decisions and the content and approach to each can easily be adapted to the age and ability of the participants. They are designed to foster competency for any collaborative project, whether discipline specific or multi-disciplinary, in the areas of Creation (Composition), Preparation (Rehearsal) and Presentation (Performance).

Intention provides the focus for the project;

Context provides the “back story” and clarifies relationships between individuals;

Expression provides everyone the opportunity to contribute ideas and material;

Feedback provides a positive and constructive assessment process in which participants give a reflection of what has been presented and ask questions to clarify choices made by creators.

Cooperation versus Collaboration

These words are often used interchangeably, but they represent fundamentally different ways of contributing to a group.

When cooperating, people perform together (co-operate) while working on common yet self-serving goals. E.g. a drum circle is the sound of many people playing together at the same time for their own pleasure while making musical choices by listening and being responsive to the other participants.

When collaborating, people work together (co-labor) on a single shared goal (Intention). E.g. an orchestra follows a score which everyone has agreed upon and each musician plays their part, not for its own sake but to create something larger than themselves.

When composing a collaborative or “devised” work participants cooperatively contribute to and make choices about the creation and performance of the material to best serve an agreed upon intention.

Safe Space

While the professional world of the performing arts is highly competitive, foundational and collaborative learning experiences are best served in a supportive environment. Establishing a Safe Space environment in which students can creatively experiment and fail successfully in front of the class before the pressure of a full performance builds confidence and fosters community.

Accountability - Designing a Class Contract

When the participants take ownership of class behavior, content boundaries and consequences for not adhering to agreed upon policies they learn Accountability. Prior to undertaking the new production process, and in ways that are age-appropriate, faculty can serve as a facilitator to discuss what students determine is acceptable with regard to sensitive themes (e.g. religion, family, sex, swearing, touching, etc.) as well as classroom expectations about behavior and interaction. Have the students determine appropriate boundaries and consequences that are mutually agreeable and then discuss any other educator specific additions (e.g. attire, attendance, preparedness, etc.). Type the Contract up, have everyone sign it and post it. It will serve as a reminder of a mutual commitment to the creative work at hand as well as providing a valuable tool for resolving conflicts or any issues that will inevitably arise.

Promoting Tolerance and Diversity

It is important to help students learn about the experiences and cultures of others. One technique is to have everyone prepare a short written version of personal story on a shared experience or theme (e.g. 9-11, death of a loved one, experience of being pre-judged, etc.). Pair students from different

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backgrounds and have them exchange stories and discuss their experience and relevant contexts with each other. Then have each student present the story of the other person as if it was their own.

Expression vs. Interpretation

Since students may be more either comfortable with one or the other, allow students time for both individual expression and to be an instrument for the ideas of others.

Generating a Theme

Use a video, image, poem, short story, piece of music, Ted Talk, etc. that will be relevant and thought provoking and which is the participants experience at the same time as the starting point. Gather impressions in a discussion by:

- facilitating an open forum and writing all comments and phrases on a white board
- students privately write key words or phrases and put on board
- students discuss with a partner/group and put common themes on board

Review the posted responses and ask students to identify themes and/or connecting ideas. Then work towards establishing an Intention which students can approach from different perspectives. Students can be organized into pairs or small groups of shared interest to work on ideas for any type of project.

Feedback

Feedback is an ongoing and participatory assessment tool for dialogue about content and presentation during development and post-performance. The goals here are to help students find non-subjective language within which to communicate what was experienced as an audience member and ask questions and make compositionally based suggestions in service of helping the creators realize their aims. It is irrelevant if they “liked it” or it “was good.” Learning happens for both those presenting and those observing. The experience for those giving feedback requires they interact with and comment intelligently on the material of other students. Since they are also receiving feedback from each other, students become more aware of how they phrase what they say, and to be kind, clear and constructive. Some techniques are:

- Applications of subjective and objective language within guidelines (e.g. Liz Lerman’s “Critical Response Process”)
- Objective language only, with all comments rooted in craft based suggestions (e.g. Bessie Schoenberg, Master Teacher -Choreography)
- No guidelines, (e.g. post performance audience “talk-back” - generally highly subjective)

Role of Faculty/Directors

Facilitating the arc from the creative process to rehearsal and final production, while factoring the needs of all disciplines involved in a timely manner, is the primary role of the faculty.

Resource Materials

- Liz Lerman- “Critical Response Process” *(Useful for all types of feedback situations)*
<http://www.amazon.com/Liz-Lermans-critical-responseprocess/dp/0972738509>
- Viola Spolin –“Theatre Games and Improvisation” *(Useful for many group learning situations)*
http://www.amazon.com/Viola-Spolin/e/B001KHHI9I/ref=dp_byline_cont_pop_book_1
- Anne Bogart, Tina Landau – “The Viewpoints Book” *(“Devised” techniques of collaboration)*
<http://www.amazon.com/The-Viewpoints-Book-Practical-Composition/dp/1559362413>