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Pedagogies of Praxis: Exercises in Embodying Social Justice for Performance Studies Seminars

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Article abstract

This article discusses my pedagogies of praxis in the performance studies classroom focused on identity, inclusion, and social justice. I especially consider methodologies I employ in seminars focused on analyzing and making social justice performances such as Performing Human Rights and Performing Activism. This discussion explores the significance of embodied ways of learning and the materialities of the performance studies classroom. I argue that such praxis—which combines foundational and cutting-edge theories in the field, analysis of sites of performance that exemplify such work, and affective exercises that allow students to embody these theories through their lived experience—creates the most meaningful learning outcomes. I discuss various exercises I developed which offer up a material trace of the embodied, praxis-oriented pedagogy that I centre in my seminars focused on analyzing and making social justice performances.

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CLASSROOM EXPERIMENTS

Pedagogies of Praxis: Exercises in Embodying Social Justice for Performance Studies Seminars

Serap Erincin

In my performance studies courses and seminars, I strive to create an intimate and intellectual atmosphere for a thriving professional and artistic community: these rigorous student-centred classes equip students with critical abilities that allow them to appreciate social and artistic performance as a force for change. Theories introduced in the classroom connect to practical examples out in the world, and students create work that they contextualize with reference to both local issues and global events and networks. I encourage students to approach cultural, critical, or visual analysis of performance and media with the aid of contemporary theoretical texts I introduce them to—ultimately, to analyze their own world. I also use embodied exercises to help students ground such analysis through praxis and connect their own actions to critical theories they learn and their broader concerns.

The following three exercises offer up a material trace of the embodied, praxis-oriented pedagogy that I centre in my seminars focused on analyzing and making social justice performance. In courses such as Performing Human Rights and Performing Activism, I bring together rigorous study of the foundational and cutting-edge theories in the field, analysis of sites of performance that exemplify such work, and affective exercises that allow students to embody these theories through their lived experience. My main goal as a teacher is to guide my students in becoming activist artist-scholars and critical thinkers. In what follows, I discuss exercises I developed to help students create projects that emerge from their personal convictions, desires, and concerns while relating to local, national, and global issues of social justice.

The Beloved Object Exercise: Locating the Political in the Personal

“Beloved Object,” an exercise I developed over the course of a workshop I led with a group of theatre and dance practitioners at the International Istanbul Theatre Festival, provides means for university students to explore the connections between the significant personal stories they wish to share and the sociopolitical concerns they are invested in. At its core, this exercise builds on intuitive ways of doing and knowing. I help students identify, articulate, and generate work on the sociopolitical contexts that already undergird their emerging performance practices.

This connection is often not readily visible to them. Nearly always, they consider their personal stories to be emerging solely from their own struggles, personalities, and specific life experiences rather than stemming from and connected to larger social structures. Through doing the “Beloved Object” exercise they understand and *feel*, in an embodied way, that their personal stories, performance practice, and social justice concerns are intertwined.

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I usually schedule the first part of the exercise a month into the semester. By this point students will have already learned about core concepts in the field such as performatives, speech acts, presence, ephemerality, embodiment, and affect and the significance of various interdisciplinary frameworks, including queer futurity, decolonialism, and Marxism. Additionally, they will have analyzed multimedia performances, such as *Cornered* by Adrian Piper, which places significance equally on the artist's lived experience and identity (as a biracial artist scholar and woman) and broader social structures and issues (discrimination and racism in the US).

Step I: Choosing a Beloved Object

The prompt is brief and simple. At the end of the seminar session, unrelated to any other reading or activity, I ask students to write down what their most beloved object is. I then ask students to share what they wrote. Very rarely, a student will have trouble identifying an item. Almost always within a few minutes, they respond to the prompt. Descriptions of objects sometimes imply their value—for example, “the last letter my grandmother wrote to me,” “the necklace my dad made and gave me,” “my wedding ring,” and so forth. In almost every group, a student suggests an object of high economic value—for example, my car, my phone. I ask that students reconsider such objects or articulate why they should be their most beloved object. For instance, in one situation, a student referred to the significance of connecting with her mother through her phone and continued the exercise with her object. In another situation a student wished to continue with their car. This worked when in the next steps of the exercise, they used their car keys. Several times, students' most beloved objects were their companion dogs. For the most part though, at this point, students share descriptions of an inanimate, tangible item that they can easily pick up and carry as their most beloved object. Once everyone in the group identifies their most beloved object, I then ask them to write down why this is their most beloved object. The sentence needs to be formatted as such: “I love the bracelet my mom gave me because. . . .” Then they share these sentences one by one. At the end of the session, I ask that each student bring their object in for the next class.



Beloved Object. A graduate student with their companion dog and an undergraduate student with their plush toy dog practicing the "Beloved Object" exercise as part of Performing Protest. Photo: Serap Erincin.

Step 2: Thinking Big about Social Change

While the first part of the exercise asks students to tap into very personal connections, thoughts, and experiences, and connects to their past, this next step asks them to identify a connection to larger issues and encourages empowering imagination. This articulation is to be made independently of their choice of “beloved object.” The following week, I ask them to think of something they would really want to do and to think big, as if there are absolutely no limits. I suggest they think about this as one of the wishes they would ask a genie if they could. I provide guidance that this should also be something broader and bigger socially or culturally in some way. I ask them to perhaps think what they would do if they had a superpower. The proposals need to be within the realm of possibility even if entirely improbable—for example, “ending hunger.” I ask them to write down these wishes and help with the phrasing so they form clear goals. They then share and speak these wishes with one another.

Step 3: Embodying Impassioned Activism

I ask students to move around the space (ideally a black box or studio space but the exercise will work in any setting), choose a location, a position, and a way to share why they love their beloved object with the world. I encourage them to make their bodies and voices big, animated, and out of everyday movements and sounds as they do this if they wish. Students stay in their positions, and I ask them to swap the words that refer to or name their object with their wish. For instance, “my grandmother’s necklace” and “ending hunger.” The results are frequently awkward in some way, yet they always make sense. While practicing this exercise, students transfer their affective states to their broader wishes when they juxtapose the commitment and emotions they have for their beloved objects with the activist goals they have separately identified. The connection between the personal and the political in terms of activist performance happens through the embodiment. We certainly also discuss the ramifications of social policies on individual lives—for example, when we cover activism around AIDS, the work of ACT UP, and the writing of Douglas Crimp. Students intellectually and theoretically know and observe these are related; yet in doing the exercise, they also gain an embodied way of knowing this connection. I do not need to ask them to identify why they care about the goal of their performance—or papers they may choose to write as their final project. The connection is in their body.

The Obstacle Exercise

I developed the Obstacle Exercise by building on a prompt offered by a fellow actor while I worked with Kumpanya, one of the most renowned experimental theatre companies in Istanbul, Turkey. The company existed between 1991 and 2006 in Istanbul Sanat Merkezi (Istanbul Center for Art) until it lost its space. As a lab/research theatre with a long rehearsal process, training was a continuous part of the performance season, and actors would create and lead exercises as a part of the training. The theatre space we worked in was in an old building that had long wooden floorboards. These planks would often creak as we walked on them. The proposed exercise required one to walk from one side of the space to the other while imagining that there was a cat sleeping on the floor. Our goal was to not make any sound while crossing the space, creaky floorboards and all. This requirement introduced a minor conflict and tension to the simple situation of walking across the room, making it a theatrical event.

My seminars *Performing Activism*, *Performing Protest*, and *Performing Human Rights* focus heavily on minoritarian performances and also theories of civil/silent/still/peaceful resistance performances

of disobedience. One of the goals in these classes, then, is to establish why civil disobedience is effective in creating progress and fomenting change as opposed to more common and popular forms of protest—for example, protests centred around a march or a gathering and involving slogans and signs rather than silence or stillness. I developed “The Obstacle Exercise” to achieve an embodied way of learning why and how peaceful resistance works and how it operates differently than other methods of resistance.

Step 1

I start by asking for two volunteers to stand at opposite sides of a section of the room, with about twenty feet of space between them, facing each other. Then I give each student a different prompt, without the other hearing the prompt. I tell Student A that their goal is to reach the wall behind Student B. I tell Student B to not let Student A reach the wall behind them. We go through pairs of students and something similar usually takes place in this first step. Student A tries to force or trick their way past Student B either by pushing against or passing “through” Student B, who, in turn, tries to block Student A with their body or distract them with quick and nimble movements. The struggle is one of power which is achieved through superiority of either physical strength or speed. We repeat the exercise with the roles swapped. Student B tries to reach the wall behind as Student A tries to prevent this from happening.

Step 2

I ask the same pairs to perform the exercise. Except this time, I give an additional prompt to Student B. I ask them to, for instance, drop or lay down on the floor in front of Student A as they approach them trying to cross, rather than trying to stop them through a hold or blocking. In the nearly twenty years that I have had students perform this exercise, I have almost always witnessed the student who is trying to reach the back wall stop when the other student, without any force, simply lies down in front of them. Once in a while, a student will just walk past or walk over their peer who is on the floor in front of them. Even when that is the case, this seemingly indifferent action shows how peaceful resistance operates through revealing the actions of the oppressor. To a similar end, I asked some students to give a hug to the student trying to cross to the wall or turning their back. After a couple of pairs redo the exercise with these prompts, the following pairs come up with their own methods of civil resistance. In experiencing the difference between forcible resistance and “passive” affective resistance, students learn the significant differences between traditional and often cathartic means of protest and those that employ peaceful means—often the only way in which minoritized groups can protest and enact change.



The Obstacle Exercise, Step 1. Students performing the first part of the "Obstacle Exercise" as part of Performing Protest. Photo: Serap Erincin.

The Photo Exercise

Borrowing and building on an exercise in an Introduction to Performance Studies seminar taught by José Esteban Muñoz that I took during my graduate studies at New York University, I developed what I call "The Photo Exercise" to help students engage with materiality in their projects. I ask students to read Roland Barthes's book *Camera Lucida* and focus on his distinction between the *punctum* (an aspect of a photograph that affects one individually) and the *studium* (that aspect that is visible to everyone) through photography. I ask them to think of a photograph that "pricks" them in the way Barthes describes, and ask that they bring a physical copy of the photograph to the next class session. The following week, each student introduces the photo they have chosen. I then ask them to expand on the *studium* and the *punctum* in these photographs.

In the following round, we hear what everyone considers to be the *punctum* in each photo. Just by hearing how each of their peers is affected by something different in their own photo, through one simple exercise, students gain an embodied understanding of subjectivity, poststructuralist theory, and intentionality. I suggest that they consider if they wish for the spectators of their projects to make the performances their own or if they want to communicate a very clear message that will be understood similarly by all. I ask them whether they want their performances to become an experience or to tell a message to the audience. The photo exercise intrinsically teaches students how to create spaces of imagination in any multimedia medium to allow spectators to make the material their own, have an affective experience, and become personally invested. Students who mainly wish to create awareness about social justice issues through their performances can choose to allow less spaces of imagination and be intentional in choreographing specific messages in their works. Others who desire their performances to result in action and involvement may choose to create more spaces

of imagination in their performances. The exercise helps students become aware of their own agency in ways of enacting change.



The Obstacle Exercise, Step 2. Students performing the second part of the "Obstacle Exercise" as part of Performing Protest. Photo: Serap Erincin.

I consider this same question while preparing my assignments and course materials. Certain exercises and assignments exist to provide students with valuable context and to introduce them to genealogies of ideas within the fields of performance studies and social justice. Other exercises, such as the three examples I offer above, aim to create spaces for imagination and allow ways of doing so that the students can make the material their own, metabolizing the learning material through their lived experience and approach embodiment as a tool for worldmaking.

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