

Performance Festivals as Sites for Mentoring and Undergraduate Research

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In 1985, Sheron Dailey edited a Forum published in *Literature and Performance* in response to a question posed by then Assistant editor Jay Allison: “What is the future of the festival” (93)? In that Forum, festival organizers and participants from across the country persuasively argued for the festival as a site where undergraduate students are introduced to, and gain extensive experience with, practices and concepts central to Performance Studies scholarship and pedagogy. Contributors also nearly unanimously dedicated space to describing festivals as locations where undergraduates receive valuable mentorship from faculty and graduate students representing a diversity of institutions.

In 1994, Ronald Shields edited a Symposium in *Text and Performance Quarterly* called “A Century of Festivals.” In his introduction, Shields notes the (at least) century-long historical trail documenting the central role performance festivals play for performance education and training. In her essay for the Symposium, Linda Park-Fuller describes a then developing trend for festivals to more overtly feature undergraduate research. According to Park-Fuller, “participants of these festivals can more carefully explore the research questions that they set for themselves, as well as set agenda to be explored at future festivals or conventions. Furthermore, these “research” festivals often give rise to interdisciplinary performances thereby prompting consideration of the relationships among disciplines as well as genres” (332).

As these 1985 and 1994 forums have already clearly demonstrated, performance festivals are key sites for research and pedagogy. Performance festivals emphasize experiential learning and act as an incubator for the best practices faculty can bring back to their institutions. Performance festivals are arenas where undergraduate students can work together using performance methods to investigate specific problems and questions in the field. Festivals provide a venue for undergraduates to present the findings of their inquiry through performances presented at the festival. During performance festivals, students

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from institutions that may not have strong performance programs have access to new knowledge and mentorship.

In my remarks about the 2014 Patti Pace Performance Festival, I want to rehearse, through a description of this particular festival, some of the primary attributes of performance festivals as sites of undergraduate research and mentoring. In the following, I suggest the structure of the festival provides students with, at least, two different modalities of experience in this area: observation and participation.

Research and Observation

Listening to and observing faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate peers present their research and creative work is essential to undergraduate education. Performance festivals excel at providing these opportunities. During Patti Pace, students have, for example, at least three different categories of opportunities in this regard.

Initially, the festival planner, Melanie Kitchens O'Meara, solicits a keynote presenter. The keynote speaker is a scholar whose expertise is relevant to the festival theme. The keynote presentation establishes the conceptual frame for the festival and features the speaker's scholarship. In 2014, the keynote speaker was Jason Del Gandio. Del Gandio's scholarship lies at the intersection of rhetoric and social advocacy. His keynote, published ([link](#)) in this forum, provided a brief history of the rhetorical force of performance for social movements, as well as a theoretical apparatus for understanding that importance, and practical suggestions for how to apply this information as a method of cultural analysis as well as social advocacy. Del Gandio asked the students to think rhetorically about performance, both generally and specifically in terms of the performances they would create and watch throughout the weekend. Moreover, his address set the stage for the research and performance assignment the students would be given.

Students, secondly, also observe several performances throughout the weekend. Undergraduate and Graduate programs submit applications to bring performances to the festival. These performances represent a variety of forms and styles of performance practice. In 2014, for example, a student performance group from Kennesaw State University, under the direction of Charles Parrot, brought a performance exploring the process and outcomes of a community outreach project designed to teach English literacy through storytelling. As another example, Georgia College and State University brought a group of individual performances that emerged out of a class taught by Scott Dillard. In the first example, undergraduate audience members saw an example of performance as service learning (community outreach), research method (storytelling as literacy training), as well as mode of publication/publicizing results (the performance itself). In the second case, students were exposed to how performance

pedagogy operates at an institution that is not their own, thus expanding their understanding of the field and its possibilities. Graduate student performances were also represented at the festival. Performances ensembles from, for example, Southern Illinois University and Northwestern University presented their work. This venue provided the platform for graduate students to showcase themselves, for undergraduates to learn from that work, and for faculty from outside of the graduate student's home institution to provide feedback. This year's festival also featured a faculty performance from John LeBret (Louisiana State University), guaranteeing the participants access to the full spectrum of performance from undergraduate classroom to professional faculty production.

Finally, students observe each other's performances that emerge out of the assignment they are tasked with completing during the weekend. The students are divided into groups, each with a graduate student who functions as guide and mentor, and at the end of the festival each group presents a performance that emerges out of the assignment. During these performances, students are constantly surprised by, and thus learn from, the different techniques utilized by other groups and their relative successes and failures.

Research and Participation

In addition to observation, festival participants actively engage research through performance. As I mentioned in the prior paragraph, the students are given an assignment at the festival. The assignment addresses the conference theme and requires the students to investigate that theme through a series of activities. Throughout the weekend, the primary mission of the students is to work on this project. Gretchen Stein Rhodes crafted the 2014 project. I won't go into the specific details here as the full assignment is included in this same issue. Instead, I will point out how the form and content of the assignment engages the students in research. First, the assignment provides a theoretical framework. This year, students were introduced to key concepts and central questions in the field at the intersection of community engagement, place, space, memory and embodiment. From this literature review, the assignment secondly proposes a method. From the initial framework, for instance, Rhodes set out a specific series of tasks (excursions) for the students. Rhodes listed examples of the types of research questions they should be considering and provided the students with methodological prompts for how to perform a fully embodied mode of participant observation. The assignment gave the students experience in several types of methods: they visited local tourists sites (participant observation), analyzed historical photographs (archival research and rhetorical visual analysis), and discussed their observations (coding, inter-coder reliability). Finally, the assignment asks that the students put their findings together into a performance. In Rhodes' assignment, the students were given very specific compositional rules for putting their performances together. This last element

(both the mere fact of the performance as well as the compositional guide) teaches the students about performance as a mode of scholarly reporting as well as how to effectively compose in that mode.

Because the students are working in groups on the assignment, moreover, the festival site promotes inter-institutional collaboration constructing diverse cohorts. Undergraduates from private and state institutions, with and without graduate programs, from (and this list is more representative than exhaustive) Illinois, Louisiana, Georgia, and New York set out together to accomplish the assignment. Each cohort also receives strong mentorship throughout the process. Undergraduates worked under the supervision of graduate students in Performance Studies from Louisiana State University, Northwestern University, and Southern Illinois University.

Conclusion

Performance festivals are vital locations for undergraduate research and mentorship, as well as for the professionalization of graduate students who gain experience in presenting their work and in mentoring undergraduates. The Patti Pace Performance Festival exemplifies these characteristics through its theme, form and structure, and exceptional management.

As a final note and aside, I would also like to express the value that festivals have for faculty. As a result of watching performances, listening to the assignment and then observing the students work through it, and having quality conversations with colleagues about their, and my, research and teaching, I returned to my campus with new ideas and energy that spurred a burst of intellectual and pedagogical productivity. One cannot overstate the importance of providing faculty with the time and space of exploration, and festivals do just that.

Works Cited

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