

## The Performance Festival as Undergraduate Research

Ross Louis

Eleven schools participated in the 2014 Patti Pace Performance Festival. Of these, eight schools brought fifty-three undergraduate students, who comprised the majority of festival performers. The performers staged sixteen performances throughout the weekend, seven generated from the workshop assignment authored by Gretchen Stein Rhodes and nine others prepared or adapted specifically for the festival. Undergraduates performed in all but one of these. Numerous festivals rehearse a similar formula: an invited scholar designs and leads a workshop for a largely undergraduate audience that results in group performances typically mentored by graduate students. Given the frequency of this formula and its reliance on undergraduates as participants in both the process and the product of performance, I wish to frame the contemporary performance festival, and Rhodes' 2014 workshop at Patti Pace in particular, as generative sites for embodied, interdisciplinary undergraduate research. By understanding this festival and others as rich opportunities to generate micro instances of undergraduate performance scholarship, we might sustain and strengthen disciplinary and institutional support for future festivals.

Historically, undergraduate research in this country has been affiliated with science, technology, engineering, and mathematics disciplines, especially since the 1978 creation of the Council on Undergraduate Research by chemists, followed by the National Science Foundation's Research Experiences for Undergraduates (REU) program in the 1980s (Corley). Yet in recent years, many universities, from liberal arts colleges to Carnegie Research I institutions have prioritized research opportunities for undergraduates. These are viewed as tools for recruitment and retention and as pedagogical strategies to enhance experiential or inquiry-based learning (Hu et al. as quoted in Corley). All eleven participating schools at the 2014 Patti Pace Performance Festival, for example,

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have undergraduate research initiatives on their campuses, including centers, peer-reviewed journals, conferences, or grant opportunities. As Corley observes, undergraduate research has come to represent a wide range of labels that demarcate any number of scholarly activities by undergraduates, including creative scholarship.

For arts and humanities scholars, including some of us working in performance studies, a significant challenge in mentoring undergraduate research concerns the perception that our discipline privileges an independent scholarly process. Our traditions understand knowledge construction as inherently imaginative and subjective (Corley). Administrators of undergraduate research centers have called for for humanities scholars to adopt a science model of laboratory collaboration, essentially “putting undergraduates to work” in ways that benefit the faculty member’s research program while exposing students to the discipline’s research culture (Levenson 14). Schantz argues that because collaboration is not inherent to the sciences, humanities, or any other particular discipline, humanities scholars may develop meaningful undergraduate research experiences that collaboratively pursue the “task of making meaning,” especially in ways that allow students to link a project to broader, interdisciplinary theory (28).

Of course, the performance studies discipline already has a longstanding tradition of collaborative meaning making with students: the performance festival. Evolving from university-sponsored, non-competitive, oral interpretation festivals in the 1950s, the contemporary performance festival is an ideal site for mentoring undergraduate creative scholarship. In a 1994 *Text and Performance Quarterly* symposium, Linda Park-Fuller and Ronald Shields characterize the value of festivals in ways that offer useful application to performance-based undergraduate research. Shields observes, for example, that the festival serves as a site for theorizing, practicing, and teaching performance, all of which form the basis for scholarly production. Park-Fuller sees in the festival a “capacity to generate scholarly discourse,” provoked by performance workshops that offer methods for studying and presenting answers to research questions (330). The performance festival is grounded in praxis, “a site of reflection-in-action” that demands its mostly undergraduate participants to take up performance as both a method of transmitting knowledge and a body of knowledge itself (Park-Fuller 333). It essentially functions as a collaborative research site, a location in which undergraduates, graduates, and faculty mentors approach a problem, adopt a particular theoretical lens and performance method to study it, and present results via performance. And while the workshop leader has previously researched the festival’s theme, the festival’s characteristic “reflection-in-action” process can lead to the development of performance theory (Schneider qtd. in Dailey).

In a nod to Michel DeCerteau, Blackmer articulates the creative process as a research-based “gesture of thinking,” an “experimentation aimed at the

discovery and interpretation of facts” (9). Rhodes’ facilitation of “My Augusta: A Workshop in Community Engagement” at Patti Pace offers a useful case for exploring the festival as undergraduate performance research. Stein Rhodes began by offering participants a research question: What is a “site-specific and sensuous approach to understanding community” (1)? Drawing on the theoretical work of Mike Pearson (the excursion as an exploration of multiple layers of a place), Yi-Fu Tuan (the affective link between people and places), and David Abram (sensory participation as knowledge of a place), Stein Rhodes designed a performance experiment for student researchers to carry out during their short stay in Augusta, Georgia. Reflecting on this theory and employing materials collected from ethnographic practices (field notes, interviews, photographs, and personal narratives), students worked in teams to construct a five to ten minute performance of “My Augusta” as a contingent, creative research product. Blackmer compares creative scholarly processes such as this one to scientific research: the posing of a research question, the use of methods and materials to test a hypothesis (in Rhodes’ case, texts, space, and bodies), and the presentation of results to an audience. The “My Augusta” performances that emerged from the workshop were both provisional and consequential. They reflected a single “gesture of thinking” about engaging one’s body in relation to place to understand a community. And they also reflected undergraduate performance research as meaning making translated to an audience.

Performance festivals resist the typical view of humanities scholars working independently in silos producing single-authored manuscripts or creative works. Festival performance work is always collaborative. And thus, the recommendation to adopt a “science model” for mentoring undergraduates in this work might be revised to recommend looking differently at what festivals do. Festivals already suggest a model for undergraduate research. It is an embodied, collaborative, experiential scholarly model realized through group performances. It is a model that teaches and celebrates that the “act of creation is just as vital as the creation itself,” a fundamental value of our performance discipline (Blackmer 10). Framing the performance festival as undergraduate research, and demonstrating the scholarly process and product that it habitually produces, is especially important in strengthening on-campus support for performance studies. As our institutions increase their commitment to undergraduate research, the festival provides a recurring, valuable case for how our discipline historically supports student scholarship.

### **Works Cited**

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