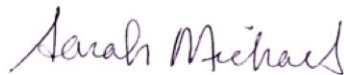


Assembling Ensemble: Why Can't My Classroom be More Like the Theater?

Praxis Project Thesis: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts — as part of the Community, Youth, and Education Studies Major at Clark University

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On Education

I believe... that the process and the goal of education are one and the same thing.

- John Dewey, 1898 (p. 79)

On Theater

Theater is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society.

Theater can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it.

- Augusto Boal, 1993 (p. xxxi)

On Praxis

Problem-posing education bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality, thereby responding to the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation.

- Paulo Freire, 1972 (p. 84)

ABSTRACT

This Praxis Project is the result of my desire to disrupt the rituals of control and individualism that abound in schools, and my encounters with the challenges of realizing a better way of teaching and learning. In seeking theories and practices to aid me in working toward a more humanizing way of teaching and learning, I turned to the performing arts, specifically theater ensembles. In contrast to classrooms marked by “doing school” and asymmetrical power relationships, performing arts ensembles are spaces marked by trust amongst members, a deep dedication to the group’s work and to one another, and a sense that everyone’s role is essential to the functioning of the whole. In my Praxis Project, I theorize and enact what I term “ensemble culture,” through a performance-based pedagogy. My analysis focuses on moments that puzzled me, moments where I struggled, and moments that complexified my notion of what the process of building an ensemble culture consists of. My work digs into several puzzles that I now see as central to the work of building an ensemble culture: power and hierarchy, conflict, critique, chaos and inconsistency, and the individual and the collective.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: THE ENSEMBLE BEHIND THIS WORK

Ensemble theater is based on the integration of many individuals' unique offers into a cohesive whole. When the ensemble's play goes up, the actors' final efforts are on display, but the audience can't see who had which creative idea, or who shared their dinner with a friend at a late rehearsal. Much the same is true of my Praxis Project. This work is the result of hundreds of conversations, rehearsals, and text messages, but the people who supported my work are not necessarily apparent in the final text. Here, I offer recognition to these members of my ensemble ensemble.

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making me laugh, ask questions, and think deeply about what it means to teach, learn, and form connections. More than anyone else, it was your efforts that made me value and enjoy this work.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	3
Acknowledgements: The Ensemble Behind this Work	4
1. Introduction	7
2. Action Site	11
3. What’s This Work Built On?: A Conceptual Framework for Ensemble Culture	16
4. What Are We Even Talking About?: Theorizing Ensemble Culture	19
5. Why Engage in Praxis?: My Research Stance	22
6. Data Collection	24
7. How Did I Reflect?: My Analytical Methodology	26
8. How Will I Assemble Ensemble?: Four Ensemble Culture Interventions	27
8.1. Physical Space	
8.2. Theater Games	
8.3. Reflection Circles	
8.4. Theater Rehearsal and Performance	
9. Rehearsal Realities: Rehearsal and Performance in an Ensemble Culture	33
9.1. My Research Focus: Surprises, Puzzles, and Complications	
9.2. “You’re not the boss of me.”: Power and Hierarchy while Assembling Ensemble	
9.3. “Now I have a headache.”: Disrupted Rituals and Collaborative Conflict	
9.4. “Why are you so specific?”: Negotiating Perfection and Critique	
9.5. “But your class is built on chaos.”: Reconciling Chaos, Inconsistency, and a Good Show	
9.6. “This is my tableau, I run this!”: The Individual and the Collective in Ensemble Culture	
9.7. “I’m proud of us.”: Youth Reflect on Performance and Process	
9.8. How These Reflections Can Help Us: Planning, Noticing, Reflecting	
10. “We Did Decisions... That Will Make Us Work More Fair.”: Ensemble Culture Praxis for Social Transformation	74
11. References	77

1. INTRODUCTION

It was mid-July, 2017, and I was in my 8th grade social studies class at Breakthrough Greater Boston, a summer academic program for low-income youth, where I was a first time teaching fellow. We had been doing an activity on our feet that had turned from academic and kinesthetic to strictly kinesthetic. I called the activity to a halt and asked everyone to sit down. I opened the floor for critique. “I don’t think our class is working for us,” I said. “Give me feedback. What’s not working? What can we do about it?” The feedback was varied. Dani¹ said, “Some people act crazy and need to listen to you.” Others said, “This is boring.” “Are we just gonna talk about workers the whole summer?” Idris, one of my advisees and my most honest critic, was direct, “I don’t mean to be rude. I don’t want you to take it personal. But you’re mad dry.” Another student spoke up, “Do you ever smile?”

That evening, I stared at my notes from the conversation, searching for ideas of what to do. Some days youth seemed engaged, but on other days, a youth would let me know I was boring them by asking to use the bathroom three times during our class period. Some days it was just heads down on desks or pens being tossed across the room during a discussion. Often I was as un-excited as the youth. I wondered what could be done to make our class exciting and nurturing. But the next day, I found myself reverting to the tools of the banking model of education: passing out worksheets and sending students out of the room. In dealing with youth resistance, I knew that punitive measures were next to useless, and I disliked them almost as much as the youth did. Nonetheless, I often found myself resorting to these measures. I’d read Freire. I’d read Dewey and Foucault and Delpit. Despite having developed a complex critique of American schooling, I found myself replicating many of the very injustices I aspired to oppose. I wondered what I could do to get students to really listen to each other, do meaningful work together, and maybe even have some fun. I thought back to my middle and high school years and decided to try some more creative work for our final assignment.

As the last week of the summer began, I introduced our final project. The assignment, handed out in class with a checklist of components to include, was to make a creative representation of one of the topics we had covered in class over the previous five weeks. Everyone would have a few class periods to work on their creations and would then present their work to their peers on the last day of class. The results were underwhelming. I spent the preparation class periods circling the room, telling one student to begin, encouraging another to add, and wondering where a third had disappeared to. In some groups, one person did all the work. Idris’ final rap elicited applause from his peers, but I was left wondering what he could

¹ All youth are referred to by pseudonyms to protect their identity.

have produced if I'd been able to get him to work on it for longer than the final twenty minutes of class. While Idris rose to the occasion, Edgar became frustrated with his rap, and instead of finishing it, filled an entire sheet of filler paper with the word "yes." Leah produced nothing.

The final project, though creative on paper, produced middling work and did little to pull youth and myself together. At moments throughout the summer though, there were glimmers of something better.

During Week Two, my first period class created a skit about the union nurses who were at that time on strike at Tufts University Hospital. For Breakthrough's end of summer Celebration, an annual performance in front of family and peers, the class was asked to perform the skit. Students threw themselves into it. They memorized their lines and reminded each other what to do. As they practiced the skit, Edgar offered, "This isn't funny. It needs to be funny too so people pay attention," and inserted recurring gags. He ran his entrance over and over, agonizing over getting his timing just right. When Miriel's focus drifted, pulling her across the room to a corner she liked to visit, others' called her back, "Miriel come here. We have to get this." Standing backstage before the final performance, the youth were buzzing. Martin and Iris ran their lines one last time, the striking nurses practiced their picket line, and Edgar looked at me wide eyed, "I'm mad scared!"

The summer wound down, I completed my feedback for each student, and I headed back to college. I thought over my summer and the classroom I had spent six weeks in. What hadn't worked? What could I have done differently? My mind wandered back to my most powerful experiences in high school and I began to wonder about the gaps between these experiences as a student and my more recent experience as a teacher. Many of my most powerful learning experiences in high school had come as part of theater productions that had given a sense of purpose and a vibrant social existence to my adolescent life. People participating in these productions had become deeply committed to the show and each other: my peers biked across the county for weekend rehearsals, shared hugs in the hallway, and learned to work with and appreciate peers they'd formerly avoided. My main director and theater teacher backed up his call for us to put in more work with his own ethic; taking calls on the weekend and sacrificing his evenings at home to stay after school with us.

As I reflected on my summer teaching in 2017, I began to wonder about the gaps between my experiences in the classroom and in the theater. I felt like I hadn't truly *known* many of the youth in my classes. I had envisioned a final project where youth were proud of their work and excited to perform it, but had ended up with scattered applause and varied levels of collaboration. I had tried doing some creative work in my classroom; why hadn't it worked? Why couldn't my classroom be more like the theater?

As indicated by the above vignette of my experience teaching during the summer of 2017, this project grows out of my frustrations both with the rituals of schooling in the United

States and out of my faltering steps to imagine and enact something better in my own classroom. There is an abundance of evidence showing classrooms where distrust, disinvestment, individualism, and Freire's "banking model" of education are the norm (Anyon, 1994; DeMeulenaere, 2012; Freire, 1972; Landay & Wootton, 2012). Learning takes place (or, more accurately, doesn't take place) amongst highly asymmetrical power relationships between youth and teachers. Some students learn to "do school" well enough that, though they may not be deeply engaged intellectually, they can go through the motions well enough to get a good grade (Landay & Wotton, 2012; Chisholm & Whitmore, 2018). Other youth openly resist the school system's dehumanizing practices, "acting out" and spending some of each week in the principal's office. The problems are particularly acute in urban schools populated by mostly low income youth of color and a mostly white, middle class teaching force. Scholars, teachers, youth, and activists have shown again and again the ways in which urban schools become grounds for reifying white supremacy, the capitalist class structure, and, with the introduction of more police and metal detectors, extensions of the carceral state (Anyon, 1994; Picower, 2009, "School-to-Prison Pipeline," 2019).

Simple recognition of these issues by teachers and administrators is not enough to transform education. Even when we as teachers recognize that we may be replicating the very injustices we seek to oppose, we often don't know what else to do. It's hard to see a way out of the worksheets and racist disciplinary procedures. When we try to break with the norm and attempt something different in our classroom (as I did with my creative final project in the vignette above) the results can be underwhelming and our attempt often presents a whole new set of problems. This critical practitioner research project is the result of my desire to disrupt the norms of control and individualism that abound in schools, and encounters with the challenges of realizing a better way of teaching and learning.

In seeking theories and practices to aid me in working toward a more humanizing way of teaching and learning, I turned to the performing arts, specifically theater ensembles. In contrast to classrooms marked by "doing school" and asymmetrical power relationships, performing arts ensembles are spaces marked by trust amongst members, a deep dedication to the group's work and to one another, and a sense of belonging to a group cause greater than oneself. Ensembles are spaces of high energy, risk taking, and a continual engagement with the struggle of collaborative creation in the interests of realizing a shared goal (Landay & Wootton, 2012; Mandell & Wolf, 2003). In the theater world, some plays are referred to as "ensemble pieces." These plays tend to lack a standout lead role or main character, meaning that no one person can carry the show, instead the show relies on a compilation of performers and their collective efforts to create a cohesive performance.

In my Praxis Project, I seek to theorize and enact what I term "ensemble culture" in the classroom through a performance-based pedagogy. There is much scholarship which asserts that community is central to powerful learning and that teachers ought to pay explicit attention to building community in the classroom (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999; DeMeulenaere, 2012; Greeley,

2000; Landay & Wootton, 2012) and which advocates using performance-based pedagogical approaches to teaching (Chisholm & Whitmore 2018; Greeley, 2000; Landay & Wootton, 2012; Lobman & Lundquist, 2007; Mandel & Wolf, 2003). Some of these teachers and scholars have explicitly sought to apply the principles, practices, and theory of the theater ensemble to the classroom (Landay & Wootton, 2012; Lobman & Lundquist, 2007; Mandel & Wolf, 2003; Young, Teri, personal communication, 2018). My project grows out of these scholars', teachers', and artists' work, as well as my own experiences in theater ensembles, and introduces the notion of the classroom as an "ensemble culture" rather than the vague but oft used "community." Although other people have used different terms to talk about similar ideas, I choose to use the term ensemble culture because I find that it specifically calls up the qualities and characteristics of performing arts productions so often absent from academic classroom cultures. I follow DeMeulenaere (2012) and Landay (2012) in asserting that while there is substantial scholarship on what powerful learning communities look like once developed and what can be done in these communities once they are established, the actual work of building these cultures has been under examined.

It's important to note the scope of my work -- what it does and does not seek to do. My research focuses primarily on the relational and collaborative aspect of classrooms, not the academic component. There has been significant work demonstrating the efficacy of linking arts-based pedagogies with literacy, academic, and social justice learning goals (see the references section for texts relating to these topics). Arts-based teaching strategies are often assessed on their ability to engage students in critical thinking around disciplinary content. Far less attention has been paid to the complexities of the *relational* and *cultural* work that is a part of enacting arts-based pedagogies. For example, Wilson's (2003) article, *Supporting Young Children's Thinking Through Tableau* addresses the literacy work carried out by her second graders while doing tableau work. In contrast, when I analyze the tableau work that took place in my classroom, I ask, what kinds of relational work are occurring here? What sort of a culture is being enacted through this performance work? I also don't seek to make the point that performance work is valued by youth or that relationships matter to learning. Those are underlying assumptions of my work.

In investigating ensemble culture, my research is guided by the following questions:

- ❖ What does the process of building an ensemble culture in an academic classroom look like?
 - How did I, a teacher, try to support an ensemble culture?
 - How did youth and myself engage in the process of enacting an ensemble culture?

My Praxis Project was conceived of during the spring of 2018, during the Community, Youth, and Education Studies (CYES) Praxis Design course. The action and data collection components of my project took place while I taught two classes of 7th grade social studies over

the summer of 2018 at Breakthrough Greater Boston, a summer academic program for youth from marginalized communities. My data analysis took place during the fall of 2018 and the spring of 2019, during my senior year at Clark University.

2. ACTION SITE

My practitioner research project took place over the summer of 2018 at Breakthrough Greater Boston's (BTGB) Somerville, Massachusetts campus. The Breakthrough Collaborative is a national nonprofit organization that provides academic support and summer academic programming for youth from marginalized communities (all students are from low income families, the majority are youth of color). Breakthrough students and their families commit to a six-year, free, college access program beginning the summer after students' sixth grade year. The core component of Breakthrough is a six week summer program for rising seventh, eighth, and ninth graders. During this portion of the program, students take five academic classes taught by college students and also participate in camp-like experiences such as sports, community performances, and field trips. During the summer of 2017, before beginning my Praxis Project, I taught 8th grade social studies at BTGB's Cambridge campus (where my opening vignette comes from). During the summer of 2018, I returned to teach social studies at BTGB, this time teaching at BTGB's newly opened Somerville site, teaching rising 7th graders (this is where the rest of the stories in this paper come from).

In its first year of operation, Breakthrough Somerville started with a class of 50 rising 7th graders (the site will build progressively, adding a new class of approximately 50 7th graders in 2019 and so on) and a staff of 15 college-age teaching fellows. I taught two periods of social studies, teaching the same content in both classes. Class sizes at Breakthrough are small; I had eight students in one class and nine in the other. Each class period lasted 50 minutes four times a week and 40 minutes on Friday. A number of instructional days were canceled for activities such as a two day camping trip and other community building activities, resulting in each class having 25 class periods over the course of the six week program. I had curricular autonomy and taught a course titled "Workers of the World Unite: Inequality and Resistance" which examined issues of labor and socioeconomic class. I had taught about similar themes the previous summer, but significantly revised my curriculum and pedagogy for the 2018 rendition of the course. In addition to teaching social studies, I had five advisees (who were also in my classes) with whom I spent a 40 minute, loosely structured "advisory period" each day. This advisory group also served as a grouping for various competitions and trips throughout the summer and I paid extra attention to the five boys in my advisory, communicating regularly with them and their families.

The youth population at the Somerville Campus is majority students of color and all were from low income families. The site was racially and nationally diverse, with students representing dozens of different countries of origin and many coming from families that immigrated to the U.S. Youth come to the program from several different Somerville middle

schools, therefore, at the beginning of the program, all youth knew some of their peers but were unfamiliar with most. By traditional measures such as school grades, students in the program represent a range of academic achievement.

My Praxis Project focuses specifically on my efforts to enact ensemble culture within my two classes. However, I will include a few words about the overall culture of Breakthrough Somerville to situate what occurred within my classroom in broader context. My focus on the relational aspect of learning and my commitment to building a positive culture was a stance shared by the rest of the teaching staff and Site Director Jennie McDonald-Brown. The staff as a whole sought to create an exciting, loving, and supportive culture. Teachers at Breakthrough spend all day with students, sitting with them at breakfast, playing Knockout at recess, and running after the bus as it drives away at the end of the day. Though not free of conflict, tension, or the pedagogically regressive five paragraph essay, the positive atmosphere at Breakthrough Somerville stood in stark contrast to the standard middle school experience. After visiting the program, one veteran middle school teacher remarked, “This is not what middle school looks like. There is so much happiness here.” Any given day at Breakthrough Somerville was marked by lunchtime dance parties which saw students and teachers dancing to pop hits. Lunch, breakfast, dismissal, and passing periods were enlivened by raucous cheering of camp-like songs and cheers. Largely, youth loved Breakthrough, crying at the end of the summer and writing thank you notes to teachers whose classes they weren’t even in. One student who had to leave the program two days early for family vacation remarked, “I’m not really excited for vacation. I think I’d actually have more fun here at Breakthrough.” It was a place where you could ride a skateboard down the hall to class and give your teachers nicknames.

I include this information not to paint an overly idealized vision of Breakthrough Somerville, but to illuminate how my efforts to assemble ensemble in my classroom took place in a setting which was conducive to such work, and where such work was happening beyond the 50 minutes of my classes. In fact, some of the rituals I employed in my class, while disruptive of the typical school norms, were not particularly disruptive of the Breakthrough norms. In keeping with my belief in arts-based pedagogies, throughout this paper I will provide photos to evoke what my writing cannot. Below are several photos that visually illustrate the culture of Breakthrough Somerville’s program during its inaugural summer.



Site Director Jennie McDonald-Brown passes a lunchtime cheer to Camilo, one of my advisees and 4th Period students.



Students and teachers play one of recess' perpetual games of Knockout. My advisee and 4th Period student Xander prepares his shot. I'm in the orange tee-shirt.



Youth and teachers cheer for a performance at the daily Community Meeting. Sitting next to me (in orange) are Randal, Kevin, and Xander.



Students and teachers dance during an impromptu lunchtime dance party. Camilo is on the far left, in gray. Adriana is in the blue shirt and white shorts in the middle.



A teacher introduces a Community Meeting dance competition. Alana is in the center, in all black. Adriana leans behind the girl in yellow, Kevin is in the neon shorts.



My advisory during Breakthrough's field trip to Tufts University. Left, clockwise: Camilo, Jacob, Kevin, Xander, Randal, Me.

At Breakthrough Somerville, I was largely an outsider to the youth's experiences, but was an insider to Breakthrough at large. As a white, middle class, monolingual person who grew up in a rural town in Western Massachusetts, I was very much an outsider to the experiences of the youth in the program. It is important to acknowledge that in my analysis I do not address issues of race, class, gender, nationality, ability, or sexuality. I believe that these identity markers are deeply relevant to all teaching and learning and could be included in an analysis of ensemble culture. My work is centrally concerned with people's relationships in my classroom, and race,

class, gender, and other identity markers certainly shaped these relationships. However, I have not taken up these lenses in approaching my analysis.

In addition to teaching, I was one of three returning teachers on the Advisory Team, which worked to support other teachers and program administrators. I had two supervisors, Site Director Jennie McDonald-Brown and high school history teacher and Breakthrough Instructional Coach Sarah Eustis, both of whom were exceedingly supportive of my work. Within the broader educational community, it's important to note that I'm a beginning teacher and researcher, one whose practice has not caught up with his ideals.

3. WHAT'S THIS WORK BUILT ON?: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR ENSEMBLE CULTURE

My ensemble culture praxis grows out of four main bodies of research: 1) work which asserts that learning takes place best where a strong community exists (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999; DeMeulenaere, 2012; Greeley, 2000; Landay & Wootton, 2012), 2) scholarship that advocates using a performance-based approach to teaching, learning, and building community (Chisholm & Whitmore, 2018; Lobman & Lundquist, 2007; Landay & Wootton, 2012; Mandell & Wolf, 2003), 3) work which suggests that theater ensembles offer a potential model to emulate in classrooms (Landay & Wootton, 2012; Lobman & Lundquist, 2007; Mandell & Wolf, 2003), and 4) work that frames teaching and schooling as a set of oppressive rituals which can be disrupted with rituals that promote trusting relationships (DeMeulenaere, 2019). I follow these researchers in believing that community and relationships are central to learning and that teachers can build a classroom culture modeled off theater ensembles by using practices from the performing arts. These practices serve to disrupt the oppressive rituals of schooling and provide an opening in which to build a more humanizing classroom.

Several scholars have forwarded the idea that community is central to learning and that educators have focused on the progress of individual students at the expense of a focus on the broader learning community (Landay & Wootton, 2012, p. 40). Landay and Wootton (2012) begin their Performance Cycle, a framework for designing performing arts-based literacy teaching, with "Building Community," the goal of which is to "create a constructive environment where students come to know and respect one another so that learning can readily take place" (p. 10). In his piece *Toward a Pedagogy of Trust*, Eric DeMeulenaere (2012) notes the abundance of scholarship demonstrating that youth in urban schools tend to have a deep seated and justified distrust of schooling. DeMeulenaere (2012) names trust as a "requisite" for powerful learning to take place, and fronts the idea that teachers can and should invest energy into building trusting relationships (p. 28-9). This community focused scholarship holds that for powerful learning and growth to take place, youth and teachers need to form meaningful relationships and have a sense of belonging to a group greater than themselves (DeMeulenaere, 2012; Landay, 2012). Landay and Wootton (2012) describe the need for community in the classroom this way, "Learning takes

place most effectively in situations where people feel a sense of belonging to a group whose purposes and activities matter to them and can help them grow in ways they find rewarding. Students benefit from knowing that they are important to the other members of the community” (p. 20). When I was in high school I found this sort of experience in the theater.

While this body of scholarship details the importance of relationships in classrooms and urges teachers to devote energy to building community, the work relies heavily on the term “community.” In a keynote delivered at the Arts Education Partnership Conference, Kurt Wootton (2003) quoted a Ghanaian teacher’s reflections on community, “People in the States say ‘community this’ and ‘community that,’ -- I’ve never heard the word ‘community’ so many times in my life from people who have no idea what it means” (p. 17). In an era where colleges promote their work “in the community” and journalists report on the United States’ role in the “international community,” the term community has become ubiquitous and lacking clear meaning; evoking everything and nothing at the same time.

Similar to the diluted term “community,” teachers and scholars often talk about building classroom culture. In my experience, educators often talk about establishing a classroom culture, but an explicit and cohesive vision for what *kind* of classroom culture should be established, and what pedagogical practices would move a classroom toward the desired culture, is often left unexamined. My work assumes that there is always *a* classroom culture, and proposes that we focus our discussion and action by asking the question, what are the specific characteristics of the culture we desire in our classrooms? I suggest that rather than continuing to deploy vague and overused language such as “classroom community” and “classroom culture,” we frame classroom culture through the lens of *ensemble*.

A handful of educators have framed the classroom as an ensemble. Chapter Two of Landay and Wootton’s book *A Reason to Read: Linking Literacy and the Arts* (2012) is titled “Building Community in Schools and Classrooms: Classroom as Ensemble” (p. 35). In her chapter about classroom community in Chisholm and Whitmore’s (2018) *Reading Challenging Texts*, Landay again makes reference to ensemble saying, “Community building activities take many forms, all with the purpose of creating an ensemble -- the term often used in theater to express the notion of working together as a group in sync with one another” (p. 79). Landay and Wootton, and Chisholm and Whitmore make few other references to what ensemble means in the classroom or the arts. In *Unscripted Learning: Using Improv Activities Across the K-8 Curriculum*, Lobman and Lundquist (2007) focus their work on using the principles and practices of improv as “part of creating the ensemble in the classroom” (p. 30). My term “ensemble culture” follows these scholars in imagining a desired classroom culture as mimicking the culture of a theater ensemble.

By evoking theater productions, “ensemble culture” does different work than the term “community.” The term encourages us, in practice and research, to think about how individual roles and performances fit together into a whole culture and to think about the classroom as a space created by a constellation of malleable performances. By using the term “culture” and not

just “ensemble,” the phrase ensemble culture encourages us to think about the set of practices, norms, rituals, and values that make up our classrooms. If we accept a vision for our classrooms based off of the culture of performing arts ensembles, it follows that we can look to the performing arts for practices to build this culture.

In developing practices for building ensemble culture in the classroom, my work draws on scholarship which illustrates and theorizes what I call “performance-based pedagogies.” In *Reading Challenging Texts*, Chisholm and Whitmore (2018) “offer an arts-based pedagogical approach to promote inquiry and enduring understandings” (p. xv). I use the term “performance-based pedagogy” rather than “arts-based” to emphasize the role that theater performance, rather than other art forms, plays in my work. Landay and Wootton (2012), Lobman and Lundquist (2007), Mandell and Wolf (2003), and DeMeulenaere (2012; 2019) have all illustrated and analyzed their use of the performing arts to build trusting and supportive classroom communities. I follow their lead in assuming that performance is a rich area of pedagogical inquiry and action.

In developing an understanding of building an ensemble culture, I also draw on Eric DeMeulenaere’s (2019) work around disruptive rituals in school. In his piece *Disrupting School Rituals* (2019), DeMeulenaere draws on Goffman and Foucault’s conceptions of rituals in order to explain oppression in school and to offer a framework for a liberatory pedagogy. DeMeulenaere writes:

If we accept Goffman’s argument that the rituals of interaction shape the roles that different actors perform, can we expect to construct a more engaged, vibrant and trust-filled classroom space while redeploying the same rituals embedded in systems of social control and stratification described by Foucault?...[W]hat are the possibilities of changing the space if the superordinate, the teacher in the case of the classroom, breaks the prescribed interaction ritual? If rituals code and solidify behaviors and interactions, then *disruptive* rituals enacted by teachers might be necessary to break students and teacher from entrenched asymmetrical classroom roles. (p. 12-13)

In building an ensemble culture I am looking to break from urban schooling rituals that “are fundamentally scripted to maintain cohesion and conformity,” “construct docile bodies” (DeMeulenaere, 2019, p. 3), and position the teacher as the authoritative voice in the classroom. DeMeulenaere (2019) illustrates the potential of rituals from theater and faith communities to disrupt rituals of control, and I follow his lead in developing performance rituals to create an ensemble culture. I also use the notion of traditional schooling rituals versus ensemble rituals to conceptualize the various ways that ensemble culture was enacted in my classroom.

4. WHAT ARE WE EVEN TALKING ABOUT?: THEORIZING ENSEMBLE CULTURE

In this section of my paper, I sketch out the parameters of what I think ensemble culture means and how I intend to use the the idea in my analysis. The central question here is, what inspired and drove my ensemble culture praxis? Here, I combine what others have said about ensemble with my own experiences and thoughts, to explicate the image of ensemble culture I was working with as I entered Breakthrough’s summer program for the second time. This characterization of ensemble culture is not an airtight definition, instead, it provides insight into the assumptions I was operating under as I carried out my teaching over the summer. Later parts of the paper will address the interventions that I made and the struggles and complexities involved in assembling ensemble culture. This section seeks to provide us with some degree of a common conception of what I mean when I say ensemble culture.

In earlier attempts to theorize ensemble culture, I sought to break down ensemble culture into a set of characteristics (for example, an earlier list of characteristics read: trust, dedication, excitement, collaboration, belonging). I thought that if I could come up with nicely sliced characteristics, I would then have a clear idea of what I was shooting for and could look at my data and see when those characteristics were enacted and when they weren’t. For some time, I thought of my project in terms of looking at “ensemble moments” (moments where ensemble rituals were realized) and “nonensemble moments” (moments where our ensemble culture faltered or wasn’t enacted). I came to feel that this was not a useful or authentic way to approach my ensemble culture praxis. Classifying moments as essentially good or bad and breaking down an evocative term (ensemble) into discrete categories felt simplistic. It matters less to me to have a clearly delineated definition of ensemble culture and more to theorize the conceptual underpinnings of the term. In my analysis, rather than classify moments based on my definition, I use my theory to elucidate what happened in my classroom, and use what happened in my classroom to speak back to my theory. The theory that follows here is not complete and codifiable, but one that is evocative and conceptual. I chose the word *ensemble* as an analogy of sorts, rather than a definition. Ensemble culture is fundamentally concerned with *relationships*, and these relationships are not so easily put into a taxonomy. Ultimately, as a practitioner, ensemble culture was not a rigid definition, but an idea that helped me teach and think about how my classroom was working.

In the theater world, some plays are referred to as “ensemble pieces.” These plays tend to lack a standout lead role or main character, meaning that no one person can carry the show, instead the play relies on a compilation of performers and their collective efforts. In their book *Unscripted Learning: Using Improv Activities Across the K-8 Curriculum* (2007), Carrie Lobman and Michael Lundquist emphasize this as a crucial aspect of ensemble in the theater and classroom; that individuals “make their unique offers as part of a collective endeavor” (p. 29). Writing about play productions in *Working Together in Theatre: Collaboration and Leadership*

(2010), Robert Cohen writes about the combination of interdependence and individual responsibility within the collective that actors and crew experience. In a play, not everyone's role is the same size, but each role is essential to the functioning of the whole play. If the actor playing Bernardo fails to say, "Who's there?" *Hamlet* never starts (Cohen, 2010, p. 29). Regardless of size, each actor's contribution is irreplaceable. Some performers have more lines, but everyone's lines matter. If there is a rehearsal and someone with a small role isn't there, the cast still notices, because the lines have to be read by the stage manager. An acting student of Jan Mandell's (2003) describes it this way, "Our acting class isn't made up of one person who pulled us all together. I would describe our class like a puzzle; we're just not the same without each one of us. Maybe on a day-to-day basis, people don't realize how important each of us is, but if we're all there, everyone does a better job" (p. 35). Like a puzzle, in an ensemble culture, each participant's unique contributions make up a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

In theorizing ensemble, a number of scholars and teachers have emphasized the interplay between the individual and the collective. Lobman and Lundquist (2007) explain how the principles of the improv ensemble encourage participants to think about their responsibility to work as a part of a whole. One of the four specific improv principles they introduce is, "make the ensemble look good," which encourages people to look out for each other, take up one another's ideas, and act with the group in mind. "Ensemble membership is a balancing act," writes Wolf, "a constant weighing of the needs of the self against those of the group" (p. 34). In a theater ensemble, participants must learn to navigate between being in the spotlight and supporting others who are in the spotlight. While ensemble culture focuses on the collective, it acknowledges that the collective is made up of individuals and that these individuals take on different responsibilities and leadership roles. Though ensemble focuses on the whole, ensemble members have independent moments of leadership and ownership. These are moments where the ensemble member is, "the sole master of their particular part of the performance" (Cohen, 2010, p. 29) and where the whole performance hinges on an individual's contribution. This culture of individual responsibility and group accountability stands in contrast to classrooms where students may go weeks without even knowing each other's names, or where everyone looks to the teacher to determine what to do next.

It should be noted that ensemble culture does not simply exist anywhere that group work happens. Jennifer Wolf (2003) elucidates this when she writes about her high school English classroom (where she is the teacher). Wolf (2003) writes that she frequently had her students do group work, but came to realize that youth were forming few trusting or meaningful relationships through the work. She explains that she often assigned work which, though it was done in groups, could be completed individually. She realized that if a student or observer looked at her handouts or assignments, they would not be able to tell that the work necessitated collaboration. I follow Wolf in believing that ensemble culture is not simply sitting together at a table and being graded as a group, but a more complex constellation of accountability, mutual support, and dialogue. Later in *Acting, Learning, and Change*, Wolf (2003) writes that, "Any class where the

students know one another well and routinely work together to accomplish common goals is an ensemble” (p. 40). While I appreciate the effort to boil down ensemble to its core, for me this definition is a bit too simplified as it does not capture the complex interrelations between the individual and the collective that are the foundations of the ensemble concept.

As elucidated in Wolf’s quote above, *work*, not just close relationships, are central to an ensemble culture. For me, ensemble culture would not be a useful framework to apply to analysis of a friend group or family. Though members of a friend group may be close, support each other, and have fun together, they are not necessarily engaging in a shared work project. An ensemble culture in a classroom is concerned not just with becoming friends, but also with producing something or getting something done. This shared product can serve to create connection, by giving participants a reason to relate and see each other’s’ unique strengths and vulnerabilities, but it can also give rise to a tension between quality of product versus energy spent on relationships and equitable participation.

ArtsLiteracy researchers coined the term *minimal monitoring* to describe the dominant classroom mode of youth engagement. When engaging in minimal monitoring, students “devote just enough attention to the progress of the class to save themselves from being embarrassed if called on” (p. 67). In contrast to this mode of engagement, Landay (2012) and DeMeulenaere (2012) both detail how in powerful learning communities participants pour themselves into revision, perfection, and problem solving in collaboration with one another, rather than an individual process of figuring out “what the teacher wants.” In my classroom, I was hoping to create a culture where participants were deeply dedicated to the group’s work and each other. Rather than expending minimal energy by “doing school,” I hoped that youth and teacher alike would give the group’s work our full attention and effort.

The levels of excitement, engagement, and passion in an ensemble culture are fundamentally different from what is commonplace in classrooms conforming to Freire’s banking model of education. Landay (2012) draws on Ornstein and Levine in describing the typical classroom culture where, “‘Enthusiasm and joy and anger are kept under control.’ As a result, the general emotional tone is ‘flat’ or ‘neutral’” (p. 67). In an ensemble culture, excitement is high and participants engage in the work with passion. Intense emotions frequently arise in ensemble cultures: feelings of anger and frustration as well as appreciation and pride. In my first summer of teaching a student remarked to me, “I’ve never seen you smile.” In the ensemble culture I sought to build in my second summer of teaching, I was determined to have smiles and laughter be the norm.

Teachers often balk at using the word “fun” to describe their classes due to its association with “under taught classes or slacking teachers” (Mandell & Wolf, 2003, p. 37). Youth do not seem to feel this hesitation in describing classes as “fun.” Sitting in the cafeteria a few days into the summer, I chatted with Adriana, one of my 4th Period students. “I like your class,” she informed me, “It’s fun, we just play games. Well, we do some work too but it’s just about ourselves.” I glanced around, fearful that a supervisor might be within earshot. That evening, I

thought back to a high school teacher who once explained to me, “When we’re in kindergarten we love going to school. Because it’s fun! Over time though, that fades and we come to dread school. But why shouldn’t high school be fun too?” The notion of ensemble culture follows this, and says, “Why should we be afraid to have fun in school?” I hoped to create a classroom where the lines between “work” and “play” were blurred.

From the beginning of my praxis, I didn’t conceptualize ensemble culture as a thing that is achieved and then continues unattended to. Lobman and Lundquist (2007) explain “that improv is a ‘doing’ activity; you are not expecting them [youth] to ‘get it’ or ‘master it.’ Mistakes can always be used to continue to build the ensemble” (p. 17). My Praxis Project is centrally concerned with the *continual process* of assembling ensemble culture. Lobman and Lundquist (2007) use the analogy of riding a bike versus going to the gym to describe the embodiment of ensemble principles. Ensemble culture is not like riding a bike, where once you’ve learned the skill you are always able to execute it. Ensemble culture is more like working out; you have to keep going to the gym and keep pushing yourself to lift heavier weights in order to maintain your strength. If you stop exercising, your health may deteriorate (p. 28-9). In the process of working out, you may pull a muscle and have to take time to heal your body. Mandell and Wolf (2003) also note that an ensemble culture is not a utopian, united space free of conflict and tension. Similar to these teachers, from the beginning my praxis I assumed that ensemble cultures frequently feature conflict, struggles, tension, disagreements, and frustration.

Through the term ensemble culture, I ask us to break from the individualism of American schooling. I encourage us to think about creating classroom cultures where everyone’s individual success is tied to the collective success of the group, and where mutual support and trust replace competition and isolation. I ask us to think about creating a relational reason for youth to come to class other than just because it’s listed on their schedule. I ask us to think about how to move a classroom from being a space where a collection of young people happen to coexist for an hour each day, toward being a home for a group of individuals that feel they belong.

5. WHY ENGAGE IN PRAXIS?: MY RESEARCH STANCE

In the introduction to *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, activist-geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) writes, “In scholarly research, answers are only as good as the further questions they provoke, while for activists, answers are as good as the tactics they make possible. Where scholarship and activism overlap is in the area of how to make decisions about what comes next” (p. 27).

I present this quote at the beginning of my research stance section not because it exactly encapsulates my stance on practitioner research, but because it highlights some of the tensions I have experienced over the last year as a teacher, researcher, and student, operating in both a classroom and the academy. I agree with Gilmore (2007) that the power in merging scholarship and activism is in figuring out how to make better decisions. As a practitioner researcher though,

I find that the value of my work lies precisely in the merging of her “answers” binary. As a practitioner and a teacher in training, I am fundamentally concerned with *how to do things better*, and from the beginning of my Praxis Project I hoped it would help me discover new ways of doing things. As a teacher however, I don’t find resonance in Gilmore’s notion that further questions are for academics only. Further questions are crucial to the process of praxis, in which one theorizes, acts, reflects, and then uses those reflections and questions to develop further action. In line with this thinking, my research does not seek to present clear cut and conclusive *findings* per say, but rather to illuminate puzzles, possible approaches to these puzzles, and raise ponderings about what might come next.

I approach this research project from a criticalist, teacher action research framework. My praxis work is based in the assumption that no knowledge is neutral and no researcher can be objective or discover a universal fact. I embrace the notion that what we find to be “true” is shaped by power relationships and our positionality as researchers and practitioners. I borrow from Patricia Hill Collins (2000) in believing that all knowledge and research is “value laden” and should be guided by a sense of personal accountability to dismantle oppression.

The primary goal of my Praxis Project was to improve my teaching practice and the class experiences of the youth I worked with. Engaging in a Praxis Project gave me the opportunity to be more intentional about planning my teaching practice and allowed me time to reflect on what occurred in my classroom. Engaging in this Praxis Project also made teaching just a slight bit less overwhelming, allowing me the mental power to get a grip on one slice of what occurred in my classroom each day.

Throughout my data analysis process I have struggled to understand what counts as valuable research and what reflective processes must occur to create “truth.” Though I am a self proclaimed criticalist, notes of positivism have sometimes crept into my conceptions of what my work should be. In my reflective process, I often felt caught between two internal poles: one holding that rigorous coding, precise transcripts, and definitions would produce valuable scholarship, and the other holding that my feelings and recollections were valuable in and of themselves. My inner criticalist prevented me from finding value in some systematic approaches to data analysis, but I also feared being another teacher writing through my eyes and memories only. I do not have a Ph.D., nor am I a veteran teacher. What could I, as a beginning teacher and researcher, make useful commentary on? I worried about what would be counted as truthful and useful by others, and about how I could authentically represent the complexity of all that had occurred in my classroom.

I find encouragement and direction in the words of Eleanor Duckworth (2001), writing in the introduction to her book *Tell Me More: Listening to Learners Explain*:

All these authors [in this edited collection] were in a teaching relationship with the learners they write about... The author assumed a responsibility for sustaining the learners’ continued interest in, and developing understanding of, the matters they

explored together. It is *though* helping learners learn that we come to see what is involved in learning. (p. xii)

Remixed into the context of my Praxis Project, the quote might read:

I assumed a responsibility for developing the learners' participation in, and developing understanding of, the ensemble culture we enacted together. It is *through* working with youth to build an ensemble culture that we come to see what is involved in learning, relating, and culture building.

In her concluding chapter to *Tell Me More*, Duckworth (2001) frames the value of teacher research this way:

We believe though systematically following specific learners of specific subject matter in specific learning situations, a collection of stories such as these can serve as the basis of curriculum development... One teacher writes for interested colleagues, far and near: Here is my situation, here is what I used, here is what I did, here is what happened, here is what I notice, here is what I would do again, for these reasons, and here is what I would do differently another time, for these reasons; here is what I did the first time I did it, here is how I changed it the second time. And so on.

We think it possible that such stories themselves would be the most directly interesting, informative, and useful kind of curriculum.

We hope, in any event, that this body of work can contribute both to the most general questions of the the nature of learning, and to teaching and curricular decisions of schools and teachers. (p. 186).

This is the sort of knowledge that I have aimed to generate in my Praxis Project.

6. DATA COLLECTION

While teaching, I collected the following forms of data:

Audio and Video Recordings

Every class period was audio recorded. Most class periods were also video recorded with a camera stationed on a tripod (some classes were not video recorded due to technical issues).

Photos

I took photos of youth created tableaus as well as other events during the summer. I also collected photos taken by a professional photographer who visited Breakthrough and my classroom one day.

Written Student Work

I scanned written and drawn student work before returning it to students. I took photos of notes from whole class reflective discussions that were recorded on poster paper.

Lesson Plans and Class Materials

I collected my lesson plans and other materials that I prepared for class. I collected both the original lesson plan documents and later scanned the paper copies of plans with my notes and adjustments written on them.

Reflection Tool

For the first two weeks of the summer at the end of each day I completed a reflection tool that I created before beginning teaching. I answered five questions regarding ensemble culture and what had occurred in my class that day for each class period. After the first two weeks of teaching I stopped using the reflection tool due to time limitations and a lack of habit.

Logs

During weeks four and five of the summer (out of a total of six) I created quick logs at the end of the day, simply listing the activities that we had done in each class period. Occasionally these logs included short notes on my impressions of what happened beyond the curricular sequence of events.

Notes

I collected four forms of notes over the summer:

- Notes that I jotted down during class, usually in the margins of lesson plans.
- Notes recorded in my teaching notebook, where I worked out curricular and pedagogical ideas and plans.
- Notes taken by fellow teacher and CYES major Pauline Wan on several occasions while observing my class.
- Notes in the form of “Ponderings.” I kept a document on my phone in which I recorded any thoughts that I felt were worth capturing. These notes generally focused on my feelings, wonderings, questions, and frustrations. I did not limit myself to comments about ensemble culture as I did in my reflection tool, nor did I pay particular attention to making my remarks low inference. Sometimes, during weeks when I did not complete

my reflection tool or logs, I recorded recollections of what had happened during the week in this document.

7. HOW DID I REFLECT?: MY ANALYTICAL METHODOLOGY

In this section, I will briefly describe my data analysis process. As a beginning teacher-researcher, my work was filled with twists and turns, false starts, and dead ends. In my description here, I have cut out much of this winding journey, explaining just the parts of my process that most directly produced content that appears in this paper.

When I returned from my summer teaching, I spent a significant amount of time revisiting the events of the summer by creating a medium-inference description of each class period. I based these descriptions of my logs, photos, notes, memories, and occasionally bits of video and audio. My aim here was not to create an account that would replace my video and audio recordings, but to create a descriptive map of my summer which synthesized all that had happened over the summer. I then annotated this account, developing a fluid list of interests and themes as I went.

Early in the data analysis process, I realized that I made four main interventions in regards to building an ensemble culture (physical space, theater games, reflection circles, rehearsal and performance: these will be covered later in my paper). It took me a long time however to limit the scope of my analysis to one class period, and one ensemble building ritual. I eventually focused in on 4th Period's rehearsals and performances. I selected rehearsal and performance because I believe it is the most foundational component of a performance-based pedagogy, and because of the richness of data that rehearsal and performance provides. I selected my 4th Period class rather than 5th Period because I felt that I had learned more about enacting ensemble culture from this group. My work with 4th Period raised more challenges, surprises, and puzzles than 5th Period had, so I elected to dig into these complex and unclear moments further.

Once I focused in on rehearsal and performance in 4th Period, I watched video of the eight-plus class periods where we had worked on our two performances for outside audiences. As I watched, I created rough transcripts of the video, enough to get a sense of what was happening, but not so detailed that I would be slowed down by unnecessary fastidiousness. At the end of watching and transcribing, I made a list titled, "What I've learned is..." and listed several themes that I had been thinking about since the summer, or that had occurred to me while reviewing my video. I then went through my rough transcripts and annotated them by hand. From there, I developed a list of themes that I was interested in, and selected moments that I felt best captured each theme. I returned to these moments and created more detailed accounts of them. It is these moments, and my reflections on them, that comprise the section of this paper titled "Rehearsal Realities: Rehearsal and Performance in an Ensemble Culture."

8. HOW WILL I ASSEMBLE ENSEMBLE?: FOUR ENSEMBLE CULTURE INTERVENTIONS

Entering the summer, I planned to implement four main teacher-enacted ensemble culture rituals in my class: physical space, theater games, reflection circles, and theater rehearsal and performance. These four components of my particular performance-based pedagogy were interconnected and I will address all four briefly, before focusing in on theater rehearsal and performance for the bulk of my analysis. This section outlines my intentions, briefly explaining why I selected each of these interventions. The next section of my paper, “Rehearsal Realities,” will look in depth at what actually happened during rehearsal and performance.

8.1 Physical Space

In the theater, special attention is given to the physical staging of a show. As the audience sits in the auditorium before the show begins and gazes at the exposed set, they begin to consciously and unconsciously construct notions of what kind of world they are about enter through the play. Through the set, the director establishes a literal and figurative structure on which to build the world of the play. The set provides a visual backdrop for the action that will transpire, but also literally enables and inhibits what can happen in the play. Within and upon the set’s levels, nooks, and playspaces, the ensemble and director build a world. Space is not only relevant to the final performance; some rehearsal spaces are outfitted with mirrors for dancers to watch their moves in, while others are painted completely black, to create neutrality. Every play, and the ensemble that creates it, needs a good set. In my classroom, I would need one too.

Schools have recognized that physical space matters, but the traditional school-space norms serve to create Foucault’s docile bodies and situate students as passive recipients of teacher knowledge. The physical organization of classrooms helps to shape the rituals of interaction that occur: desks in rows facing forward signify that officially sanctioned conversation will occur in one direction, from teacher to student, and not from student to student. Some purportedly progressive schools expend a great level of attention on the proper procedure for passing out papers or walking from class to class. What could I do to my classroom space to signal to youth that our class would be different from traditional school? It felt clear to me that expecting the rituals of theater to flourish while the desks remained in rows was contradictory. How could I set up the physical space to replace rituals of domination with the rituals of an ensemble culture? Much in the way that a director uses a set to signal to the audience the rules of the world of a play, I sought to use the physical space of my classroom as a means through which to communicate my values to the Breakthrough youth.

My room was large (especially given the small number of youth in my classes) and longer than it was wide. One wall had several large windows, allowing plentiful natural light to enter the room. Here is a [video of my classroom](#) on the first day of the program. I set up the two

halves of the room with distinctly different intentions for the kind of work that would occur in them. In the Performance Zone we played theater games, rehearsed and performed tableaux, and circled up the chairs for discussions about academic and social/ensemble topics. In the Table Zone we took notes, had a debate, did some content related activities, designed tableaux on paper, and recorded homework. I removed the desks and replaced them with tables, hoping that they would be more conducive to group work and signal collectivity rather than individuality. Which half of the room we were in generally marked the kind of work we were doing.



The Performance Circle in the Performance Zone (sometimes the chairs were circled for reflection and discussion).

8.2 Theater Games

We began many classes, especially at the start of the summer, by playing one of a few theater games aimed at building an ensemble culture. These games encouraged youth and teacher to work together has a whole, listen to one another, work with each others' offerings, generate focused energy, and, of course, have fun. As one youth explained while discussing the purpose of playing theater games, "[we play] to get out of our shyness." For example, on several days early in the summer we played "the counting game." In this game participants sit or stand with their eyes closed. Without pre-planning or communicating verbally or visually during the game, the group attempts to count as high as possible. Only one person is allowed to say a number at a time, and if two people speak at the same time, the group has to re-start at "one." I hoped that exercises like this would build our ensemble muscles for the other work we were doing together.



4th Period plays a name game on day one.

8.3 Reflection Circles

Our reflective conversations took a few different forms. For these conversations we generally gathered in a seated circle in the Performance Zone and addressed process and product oriented questions that I provided. These conversations were not focused on academic content. The questions I provided were often some variation on these three prompts:

- Why are we doing this?
- What are we doing well?
- What could we do better?

Sometimes we would stop in the middle of a theater game and talk about what we were doing well and what we could do better. Sometimes, before doing tableau work, we would talk about what makes great tableaux and what makes great group work. Occasionally, when I felt that class wasn't going well, I would stop our activity, and we would circle up to discuss what wasn't working and what changes we might be able to make. These conversations were aimed at creating meta-cognitive communication around our shared experiences, and providing youth with an opportunity to voice their opinions, feelings, and ideas about our work together. If an ensemble culture is centrally concerned with how people work together, then it seems that all ensemble culture participants should have opportunities to engage in conversation regarding how things are going. Critique and feedback are a cornerstone of theater rehearsals, but the degree to which this feedback occurs dialogically varies widely. Often, directors give notes *to* actors at the end of rehearsal; a monologic model of providing feedback similar to what occurs in many classrooms. I was seeking to make the reflective conversations in my class dialogic rather unidirectional from teacher to student.



5th Period reflects on what we'll remember about each other and our time together when the summer's over.

8.4 Theater Rehearsal and Performance

The ensemble culture ritual that I will focus the rest of this paper on is *rehearsal and performance*. When putting on a play, actors must memorize lines, dissect character motivation, and do warm-ups together. Directors must cast the show, imagine sets, and form a bridge between techies and actors. All these things are peripheral however to the final performance and the hours of preceding rehearsal. Before beginning my teaching, I theorized that ensemble culture is rooted in working toward a shared goal, sharing powerful experiences, and performing for others. These three things, I supposed, could be created by the presence of a culminating performance event that the class works toward. This has been written about by several scholars of classroom culture; Eric DeMeulenaere (2012) refers to “the development of powerful shared experiences” (p. 1), and Eileen Landay and Kurt Wootton (2012) discuss “shared purpose” (p. 41). DeMeulenaere writes that through “shared experiences” participants come to share language and points of reference, creating a sense of group identity and belonging (p. 30).

Performance events tend to include performance for an audience. The presence of an audience raises the stakes and adds an element of external judgment and pressure to the work. It is one thing to turn in a carelessly done paper that only your teacher will read, quite another to be unprepared in front of an audience of your peers, family, and strangers. Landay (2012) and DeMeulenaere (2012) both detail how when youth share the goal of a performance, they find themselves accountable to one another and their audience, rather than accountable to just their teacher or gradebook. DeMeulenaere also theorizes that an audience can serve as a force uniting teacher and youth. The presence of an audience, “shifts the role of the teacher from the judge of the work to the coach who is getting the team ready for the event... the coach/teacher is in the same boat being judged by the external audience” (2018, Personal communication).

The precise moment of the performance event is only one part of an event's significance. The implementation of a performance event in a classroom creates three stages of

interaction/work, 1) the rehearsal, or build up, 2) the performance event itself, and 3) the post-performance reflection (DeMeulenaere, Personal communication, 2018). This theorization of the function of a performance event depicts the set of assumptions I was working under as I began my summer teaching. I will speak back to and speak with this theorization in my later analysis of rehearsal and performance in 4th Period.

As the main modality of performance for my class, I selected *tableau*, a theater idea I first encountered in my high school directing classes, and later read about being used in ArtsLiteracy classrooms (see Landay and Wootton, 2012). Tableaus are embodied, frozen poses, constructed by actors to represent an idea, feeling, or story (tableaus share much in common with Augusto Boal's image theater). Early in the summer, my classes made tableaus about funny and decidedly non-academic topics (i.e. family vacation, a crocodile hunt, a trip to a water park). Then we moved on to tableaus about personal stories, then tableaus about thematic vocabulary words, and then tableaus about stories of economic injustice and resistance.



5th Period's "water park" tableau, directed by Esther (third from left).

These early tableaus were constructed quickly before being performed for the half of the class not in the tableau. For these early tableaus, rehearsal (if it can be called that) lasted from 10 seconds to 3 minutes. Near the end of Week One, I extended the rehearsal process slightly. Youth were given about 15 minutes to turn paragraph-long stories about labor movements into a series of three tableaus. 4th Period students Camilo, Adriana, and Jacob created the following sequence about the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in New York City.



Camilo and Adriana work at the sewing machines while Jacob, the boss, orders them around from his office.



The fire begins and the workers bang on the doors, which are locked from the outside, in an attempt to escape. Their boss laughs from safety.



Unable to escape through the doors, the workers leap from the tenth story windows to their death. Their boss remains unmoved at their fate.

The way that a tableau performance typically worked was that I would call “lights down,” and the audience would close their eyes. I would begin counting down from 5 or 10 while the actors assembled into their tableau. When I reached 1, I would say “Lights up,” and the audience would open their eyes. Once the audience had a moment to look at the tableau, I would call “lights down” again, and the actors would transition to the next tableau. Sometimes the audience would have a moment to comment on what they saw in the tableau, sometimes youth in the tableau said lines or provided narration.

Twice during the summer we took several days to create a tableau performances for an outside audience. In each instance, we had three-plus days to create and rehearse our tableaux and then one day to perform our tableaux for an audience of Breakthrough teachers and administrators. The focus of the rest of my paper will be these two rehearsal and performance cycles, one cycle spanning four days at the end of Week Two and the start of Week Three, and the other cycle taking place on four days during Week Six (the final week of the program). Both of my classes did these two performance projects, but I have chosen to focus exclusively on my 4th Period class. In the following section, I present vignettes from rehearsals and performances, followed by analysis and commentary. My analysis and commentary is organized thematically, with later thematic sections integrating discussion of the themes introduced earlier.

9. REHEARSAL REALITIES: REHEARSAL AND PERFORMANCE IN AN ENSEMBLE CULTURE

9.1. My Research Focus: Surprises, Puzzles, and Complications

Some of what has been written about using the performing arts in the classroom paints a rosy picture of the process. Authors writing about the performing arts in the academic classroom often include vignettes of moments where youth are dedicated to the work and collaborating smoothly, and include affirming retrospective remarks made by youth late in the performance process. These representations of performance work in the classroom are certainly useful in demonstrating the potential strengths of a performance-based pedagogy, and were part of what drove me to consider using performance in my classroom. Authors such as Landay and Wootton (2012), Lomban and Lundquist (2007), Chisholm and Whitmore (2018), and Mandell and Wolf (2003), provide insightful and inspirational accounts of the successes of performance-based work and concrete techniques for enacting an arts-based pedagogy. These authors’ accounts informed my vision of what an ensemble culture could be, and what sorts of tools could be used to assemble it. However, when I stepped into my classroom and began teaching, I quickly realized that these accounts had not prepared me for the messy, complex, and often conflictual work that occurred in my performance-centered classroom. This posed practical problems for me as a young teacher. Was what was happening in my classroom a “normal” part of performance work?

What was I supposed to do when dedication didn't arise organically? I felt underprepared for recognizing and working with the the reality of rehearsal in my classroom.

In my analysis, I choose to focus not on moments where my pedagogical decisions and assumptions were affirmed, but on moments that puzzled me, moments where I struggled, and moments where I learned something that challenged and complexified my notion of what the process of building an ensemble culture consists of. While teaching, I quickly came to realize that while using a performance-based pedagogy solved some problems, performance work also carried with it its own set of puzzles. In the following pages, I don't offer a set of solutions or pedagogical steps for teachers to take to resolve these puzzles. Rather I seek to illuminate the complexities and questions that arose for me in the process of assembling ensemble, in the hopes that knowledge of these central ensemble puzzles might be useful to others in preparing for, enacting, and reflecting on ensemble work.

While I find some accounts of performance work a bit idealized, I have perhaps tipped the scales too far in the opposite direction, by focusing largely on messy moments. One could read my paper and think that performance work in my class was always a mess, youth were usually annoyed with each other, and I was generally frustrated and at a loss for what to do. It's worth noting that the ideal ensemble moments portrayed in other works also happened in my classroom. There was the rehearsal where Adriana stammered through her lines, messing them up over and over, and Tayah offered, "I can write it down for you." There was the day when Jacob, who usually played alone at recess and had few friends, directed all his peers in a tableau, applauding their efforts at the end. In the last week of the summer, we were rehearsing for our final tableau performance when Xander raised his hand and announced that he wouldn't be in class the next two days because of a family vacation. As I said that I would direct Xander's tableau in his absence, Tayah and Adriana both offered to take responsibility for his tableau. He looked at me and said, "I need someone who *knows* it." "I know it," said Tayah. Xander nodded and pointed to her, satisfied that his tableau would be in good hands in his absence. These moments, in which our ensemble culture played out as I'd hoped it would, and as other literature had led me to expect that it would, were no less common than the challenges I depict in the following pages. I also want to caution readers not to read a deficit view into these accounts of youth navigating collaborative work. Although I focus heavily on moments when youth were in conflict with each other, youth also expressed abundant generosity and tenderness with one another and myself throughout the summer.

In the following sections I elaborate on several puzzles that I see as central to the work of building an ensemble culture: power and hierarchy, conflict, critique, chaos and inconsistency, and the individual and the collective. I have come to believe that grappling with these puzzles are at the heart of what ensemble culture participants do.

9.2. “You’re not the boss of me.”²: Power and Hierarchy while Assembling Ensemble

At the end of Week Two we began to work on our first tableau performance for an audience beyond our class. We had spent the first part of that week learning about the Bread and Roses strike, a strike by textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912. The class was then given a written text summarizing the events of the strike, and split into two groups of four youth each. One group worked to create a sequence of tableaus representing the first half of the story, while a second group worked on the other half of the story. My vision for the final performance was a sequence of tableaus illustrating the strike, with each tableau narrated by one of the actors.

We began our tableau work on Thursday and by the end of class on Friday some tableaus had been created and I was pleased with some of the collaboration I’d seen. However, I also had some concerns and frustrations as well. In line with my thinking about the participatory nature of an ensemble culture, I had not assigned directors; the tableaus were to be created collectively by the groups. However, Tayah and Adriana had emerged as directors-by-default in their respective groups, telling their group mates what to write down on the tableau planning chart and facilitating the rehearsal in their groups. After two days of rehearsal, each group had only created a couple of tableaus, and I felt that much more could have been accomplished. Focus drifted during class and I spent much of my time bouncing between groups, trying to instill a sense of urgency into the process and engage every group member in the tableau creation.

This loose structure with no prescribed hierarchy was based on my vision of how people could work in an ensemble culture. An ensemble culture is participatory and collaborative and creative and I thought that giving people roles or prescribing a group power structure would impede the fluid collaboration I was dreaming of. I imagined tableaus created collectively, with a bit of everyone’s ideas incorporated and no one person acting executively. When we’d done our 15-minute-rehearsal-tableaus (such as the Triangle Factory Fire tableaus pictured above) the previous week, there had been no directors. This had resulted in excellent tableaus and a creation process that, from my teacher perspective, had been reasonably efficient and participatory. After the first couple days of Bread and Roses rehearsal, I began to doubt my assumption that a process with no explicit hierarchy was conducive to building ensemble culture. Tayah and Adriana, two outspoken and assertive youth, had emerged as directors-by-default in their respective groups. If I didn’t make a change, would our final show mostly be the brainchild of Tayah and Adriana? This isn’t to say that no one else was working or contributing ideas, but much of the orchestration was coming from just two youth. I worried that the group ownership of a show that is a hallmark of an ensemble culture wasn’t going to occur.

I was also seeing youth engaging in one of my most dreaded “doing school” moves. I had provided the youth with a chart to plan their tableaus on. It had three columns, one for writing

² Randal to Adriana, August 6.

the action of the tableau in, one for the location, and one for the characters. In Tayah's group, I often saw her or Alana instructing Xander and Jacob on what to write in each box. It looked very much like the going-through-the-motions work typical of so many worksheet-centered classrooms. There was group work happening, but not necessarily ensemble culture work. Further, I felt we were moving slowly. I didn't know why exactly. Were youth not that excited or invested in the project? Was there not enough clarity around how to do the work or not enough pressure and urgency? Was this just a new and hard way to work together?

I began to think that perhaps creating an explicit, rotating hierarchy and explicating a power structure within the groups would actually increase our ability to work together, rather than inhibit it. One day, before we began rehearsal, Xander pointed out as much. We were having a reflective discussion about times that we'd each been in a group or team that worked well together, and what had helped that team work well together:

Xander: Um, so one time what helped, um, our team was in this class. When we were doing that project... The tableaux. And everyone was like, um, I don't know, like everyone was kinda like (slumped) and like not ready, 'til like, we like started to really get in the work and make them and stuff and so- and (we made great tabs).

Micky: And you remember like what- What made us get in the work zone?

Xander: Like one person was like, a leader. And started to direct.

True, I thought, most theater productions are not horizontally organized; there is some delineation of hierarchy and responsibility. The director knows their responsibilities, the actors theirs, and the choreographer theirs. In many ways the kinds of theater that I was asking youth to do, with no explicit hierarchy, was not the kind of theater I'd enjoyed in high school. My favorite productions had been led by directors with strong vision who were at times even authoritarian. Somehow though, in this more centralized and hierarchical environment people had forged significant relationships and become deeply devoted to the production. I had often felt less invested in more egalitarian groups. In line with Xander's thinking, on the third day of rehearsal (the day the vignette below comes from), I added a structure of rotating directors into the tableau creation process.

On Monday, July 16, I assigned each youth a paragraph of the story to design and direct two tableaux about. Everyone had a bit of individual time to design their two tableaux via writing and drawing out their ideas. Part way through class, we split up into the two groups, and began to work on opposite sides of the room.³

³ Transcription note: "(...)" indicates inaudible portions of the audio recording. "(xxx)" indicates my best attempt to recreate what is being said in unclear portions of the audio. "[xxx]" indicates action, background context, clarifications, and description of how phrases were said. "*Italics*" indicate action, context, and my thoughts in the moment. In most places in my paper I have chosen to include full transcriptions, without editing, to capture the

I walk over to where Adriana, Camilo, Randal, and Aseel are working in the Performance Zone. Adriana is beginning to direct her tableaux, starting with the casting process. The tableau will feature the factory boss and some workers.

Adriana: Who wants to be the boss?

Randal: I'm not being boss.

Camilo: Nobody does.

Adriana: Who wants to be the boss?

Randal: Not me.

Camilo: Adriana has to be the boss.

Adriana: [to Camilo] You're the boss.

Micky: So this group. Adriana, as the director, you cast people. You ask them to be what you want them to be.

Camilo: No, she's the boss because she's the director.⁴

Adriana: No. You're the boss.

Randal: Scam.

Camilo: I'm not the boss.

Adriana: Yes you are.

Micky: So everybody- Everybody gets to choose.⁵

Adriana: [indicating individual group members] Boss, worker, worker.

Camilo: [more exasperated now] I'm not the boss!

Adriana: No, I'm the boss. (I get to choose.)

Randal: I'm a worker.

Micky: [to both groups, indicating the time left until switching to the next tableau] Two minutes.

Camilo: She's the director.

Adriana: (...) boss.

Camilo: I'm not the boss.

Adriana: The director has the choice. [indicating a group member] Worker.

Camilo: I'm not gonna be the boss.

Adriana: Yes you are.

Micky: What's wrong- What's wrong with being the boss dude?

complexity of what occurred. I contemplated creating more narratively written accounts of the moments I describe, which might have been easier to read, but opted for transcription because I felt it most fully captured the full complexity of what took place in my classroom. Places where I've made cuts for clarity and efficiency, are indicated by "..." or an italicized description of what occurs in the cut section.

⁴ In listening to the audio and looking at the rest of the conversation, it seems that what Camilo is saying is "Adriana should be cast as the boss in the tableau because she's the director of the tableau." not "Adriana is the boss of our group because she's the director of our group."

⁵ Intended to mean: each director gets to make casting decisions, though it may have been interpreted differently.

Adriana stomps away from the group, her flip flops slapping loudly against the linoleum floor. Randal has also drifted away.

Micky: Adriana, come here. Randal, come here.

Randal: [in a sing-song voice] I'm comiiiiiiiiiiingggg!

Micky: Okay. So, the way that I want this to work is that the director is in charge of their own tableaux. Everybody gets a turn to be the director, so if the director- the director gets to choose who's who, and get's to ask them to do whatever they want to tell that part of the story. Everybody gets a chance to be a director and pick who's gonna be who, so it'll be equitable okay?

Camilo: Well- That makes no sense. What's the point?

Micky: What?

Camilo: What if we don't want to do that part?

Micky: So they're- If you really have a problem with it, you can ask them [the director]. [To Adriana, who's walking around] Adriana.

Adriana: Yeah?

Camilo: The boss basically does nothing.

Micky: I mean it's just a pose so.

Adriana: Exactly.

Micky: If you really have a problem with it, maybe somebody else in your group will step up.

Adriana: Let Aseel be the boss. Aseel's mature.

Camilo: I know it's just a pose, but I like being something other than just the boss.

Adriana: Aseel's the boss.

Camilo: Okay.

Randal: And me and Camilo are workers.

Micky: [to Adriana] So set them- Set them up, set them up.

Camilo: So what's it about? What's the pose about? What's the pose about?

Relieved that the boss controversy has been resolved, I move over to the other group where each person is sharing the tableau they've designed. As I listen in on their conversation I can hear the voices of the other group:

Adriana: Gooooo.

Randal: [annoyed] Guys.

Adriana: Gooooo!

Camilo: Why you so mean?

Adriana: Because! I'm trying to get you guys to do work!

Seconds later, Adriana comes over to me.

Adriana: Micky, I give up with this- this group.

Aseel: [calling over from the Performance Zone] I'm listening.

Adriana: Camilo doesn't want to do anything. He's not even listening to me.

Micky: Alright.

Randal: [calling over from the Performance Zone] I'm listening.

Adriana: Or- Or um- Whatever his name is, Randal. Only Aseel is.

Micky: I'll be there in a second.

Before going over, I talk for a moment with Tayah's group, setting them up to begin creating their tableaux up on their feet. As I talk with Tayah's group, Camilo and Adriana's voices drift across the room:

Camilo: This game doo-doo.

Adriana: Go like this.

Camilo: (...) doo-doo.

Adriana: Do it!

As I cross over to the Performance Zone, Adriana meets me halfway.

Adriana: Okay, I got them to do the first one.

Micky: You did?

Looking past her, I can see Camilo lying flat on his back on the floor, staring at the ceiling, not, to my eye, in the tableau. Adriana and I walk over to the group together.

Adriana: See what I mean? Look what he's doing. He won't do anything.

Randal: Camilo is the only one not listening.

Camilo: I'm waiting. (... tell me) the pose.

Adriana: Yeah, Camilo's the only one-

Micky: Awesome, so are you happy with his pose or do you want it to be different?

Adriana: No I want it to be- I want it to be different.

Micky: So, what do you want it to be like?

Adriana: I want it to be like this instead of (...).

Micky: [to Camilo] Can you do that?

Adriana: No, you go like this. Stand up.

Camilo: [exasperated] You said I'm sitting down.

Adriana: (No I didn't.)

Aseel and I chat for a moment.

Camilo: Why are you so specific?

Micky: That's good, it tells- The more sp-

Adriana: Because I love being specific. Is that a problem?

Randal: [yodelling] Heeeeyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy.

Micky: [to Adriana] Are you gonna be in it or not? You can if you want to. [Camilo's moving] Camilo. Hold it so I can see it.

Adriana: I don't wanna be in it.

Micky: You don't wanna be in it? Okay, lemme look.

Camilo: [regarding Randal] He's not even doing the same pose!

Adriana: Now I have a headache.

Micky: You got a second- You got a second tableau?

Adriana: Yes.

Camilo: [regarding Randal] He's just (...).

Micky: Awesome. Alright.

Adriana: (...)

Micky: [to Adriana] Being in charge- Being in charge is hard, huh?

Adriana: Yes. They're annoying.

Micky: Um, so, work on- Work on the next one. Share what the next idea is.

Adriana: They're gonna be- The workers are- The workers are gonna be exhausted because they're only working 54- They're working 54 hours but they're not getting--

Camilo: 56.⁶

Adriana: 54 now. And- And they're not um- They're exhausted because they're not getting enough pay for their families.

Camilo: They work too much.

Adriana: And they work too much. Okay go.

Micky: Alright, so set up. So--

Adriana: So, Aseel, you're a worker.

I leave the group to check in on Tayah's group, and class continues a while longer. As class ends and youth leave the room, I approach Adriana, who appears upset.

⁶ A central grievance the Lawrence workers had was that the work week was reduced from 56 hours to 54 hours but the production quotas were not reduced. The change meant that workers were expected to produce 56 hours worth of cloth in 54 hours, and were only paid for 54 hours.

Micky: [softly] Adriana. Can I talk to you for one second? [I kneel down to be at her eye-level] How are you doing? [Adriana pushes out a smile, and gives a thumbs up, tears welling in her eyes.] You don't look like this [I chuckle, mimicking her thumbs up]. What's going on?

Adriana: No, it's because Camilo always (...) what I ask. And my head already hurts.

Micky: Yeah. So that was um, very frustrating. Like I was really frustrated. Um, and so like, thank you for trying to work through it and like, you have every right to be so frustrated with him or the assignment or whatever, but- but thank you for trying okay? And I'm gonna have a conversation with him about it. And you were in a really hard position, like being in charge of-

Adriana: [voice cracking] And also like I'm also already tired because I've been up like for two days because I had to do something and then- I'm tired. I'm really tired.

Micky: Mhmm. You haven't been getting enough sleep? How come?

Adriana: Cause like I had um a quinceañera to go to. [other students begin to arrive for 5th Period] But, um, I have to go now.

Micky: You can wait a minute, not everyone's here yet. Um, okay. Yeah. Alright. Well, thank you for working through it. Is there anything else you need? No? Alright, you're a champ. [we high five]

Adriana: Thank you. [she begins to walk away]

Micky: You bring- Adriana. You bring like so much positive energy to our class everyday and I really appreciate it and like you're always- always jumping up there to volunteer and work, so, thank you [She smiles and leaves].



This is the tableau that came out of the "Who wants to be the boss?" episode, being performed for an audience the next day. Aseel (far left) stands with an imaginary wad of cash in her hands, while Camilo and Randal beg for money. Adriana narrates on the right, separate from the tableau.

The “Who wants to be the boss?” story, and my preceding attempts to enact an egalitarian rehearsal process, show that the puzzle of *who has power and how much* is central to ensemble culture work. Throughout the vignette, we see power being contested and negotiated. At the beginning, Adriana has been endowed with directoral powers by me and begins by taking a participatory approach to casting, asking “Who wants to be the boss?” When Randal and Camilo turn down the position of boss, she decides to use her directoral powers to act executively, casting Camilo, despite his objections. At the beginning of the episode, I try to use my teacher power to back up Adriana’s directoral power, asserting that she’s the director, she has the right to make decisions, and that everyone will get a chance to direct. Later in the episode, Adriana seeks out my support and power when she is struggling with her group, and I openly empathize with her struggle, clearly allying with her as her authority is questioned by Camilo.

In using my teacher power to facilitate a performance-based pedagogy, I allied with specific youth when conflict occurred. After the boss tableau is complete, I empathize with Adriana, saying, “Being in charge is hard, huh?” I don’t remark to Camilo or Randal, “It’s hard following directions and being bossed around, huh?” At the end of class, I again ally with Adriana. I call her over and check-in with her, revealing to her that I too was frustrated, and affirming her struggle and effort in rehearsal. I think that supporting a distressed student is a good move, however, it also squarely puts me on Adriana’s side of the group’s conflict. In my conversation with Adriana, I don’t encourage her to understand what’s going on for Camilo or think about what moves she might make to engage him in the creation process. My alliance with Adriana raises the question, what is the effect of a teacher allying with individuals on the process of building the collective?

When engaging in a performance-based pedagogy, we need to pay attention to which youth we are framing as “anti-ensemble.” In the “Who wants to be the boss?” controversy, I was frustrated with Camilo because I felt that he was acting in opposition to the micro-rituals of an ensemble culture. As outlined by Lobman and Lundquist (2007), the four fundamental rules of the improv ensemble are, “1. The giving and receiving of offers, 2. Don’t negate, 3. Make the ensemble look good, 4. ‘Yes, and’” (p. 13). I felt that Camilo was rejecting Adriana’s offer and inhibiting the group’s progress. In reviewing the moment, I now feel it’s more complicated, and that Camilo’s resistance to being cast as the boss can’t be viewed simply as a move that runs counter to the norms of an ensemble culture.

After my long spiel about how I want the director to have complete power in tableau design and casting, Camilo informs me that, “That makes no sense,” and raises an important question, “What if we don’t want to do that part?” Reconstructed into an ensemble framework, Camilo is asking us to consider, “In an ensemble culture, should one person be allowed to make decisions without others’ input? Shouldn’t my desires matter? Don’t I have a right to determine my role in this group and performance?” In the theater after all, once you’re cast, you get to decide whether or not you’ll take the part. As Camilo points out, during performance work, we ought to consider who has agency and power in any given moment, and if this power is coming

at the expense of others' agency. In an ensemble culture, where everyone's voice matters, who has to do what who says? Who has to take up whose offers?

In moments of conflict, I came to see that it was important to be aware of who I was assigning responsibility to (i.e. responsibility for creating and resolving conflict). For much of the boss controversy, I assign Camilo the responsibility of making a move to resolve the conflict. I have decided that I am on Adriana's side and that Camilo's resistance is the obstacle to proceeding. In the moment, I see his actions as an ensemble problem, and push him to take on the boss role in order to resolve the conflict. However, the group is only able to move forward when I stop assigning Camilo all responsibility for the group's progress, and instead open the floor for someone else in the group to step up. In moments of conflict, I think we might ask ourselves, which individuals are we assigning empathetic and understanding responsibility to? For example, is it Adriana's responsibility, as the director, to understand and honor Camilo's desires and needs, or is it Camilo's responsibility to honor his director's desires?

"Who wants to be the boss?" illuminates the struggle of how to use teacher power in the process of assembling ensemble. In the boss conflict, I start by acting essentially as Adriana's enforcer, trying to resolve the boss conflict by making Camilo play the boss role (interestingly, my teacher power does little more than Adriana's director/peer power). I take a pretty blunt and non-dialogic approach, failing to honor Camilo's resistance by asking *why* he doesn't want to play the boss role. Unprompted, he eventually provides the reason for his resistance, saying, "The boss basically does nothing... I know it's just a pose, but I like being something other than just the boss." In my effort to encourage ensemble culture, my approach became, "Just go along with it and listen to your director," rather than, "Okay, let's talk about why you don't want to be the boss and see if we can work something out." As facilitators, we might consider it our responsibility to listen to the resisters, and hear when they are raising important questions about the nature of our ensemble culture. Rather than serving as an enforcer for the director, we might instead start a dialogue around conflict and issues of power more broadly. We might engage youth in reflective conversation around questions such as, who has power in our groups? What kinds of power *should* each individual have within the group? A more dialogic approach to conflict and power could also surface other underlying points of tension. Is Camilo resisting because a girl or a "good student" is bossing him around? As a working class youth, does he not want to play the boss because that is the role of the oppressor?

I offer the questions above not as musings that can be answered definitively, nor as existential fluff. I think that these questions can provide facilitators with an increased awareness of the power dynamics at play in an ensemble culture and serve as reflective guides in thinking through our facilitation. These questions serve to focus teachers' (and potentially youth's) attention on a few of the central puzzles of ensemble culture work. There are not universal ensemble answers to these questions; each ensemble culture might develop different understandings and values around power distribution amongst participants. As Randal indicates in the quote headlining this section, "You're not the boss of me," youth are rightfully concerned

with who has power over who. We as teachers could benefit from paying close attention to how power is distributed in groups, and how we are using our power.

9.3. “Now I have a headache.”⁷: Disrupted Rituals and Collaborative Conflict

As mentioned in the introduction to the Rehearsal Realities section of my paper, many accounts of performance work fail to depict the messy and often conflictual work that occurred in my performance-centered classroom. I concur with DeMeulenaere (2019) in believing that disrupting the traditional rituals of schooling provides an opening for more trusting relationships to be established. I would add to this assertion, that when the rituals of schooling are disrupted, the tension and conflict carefully repressed in most classrooms also springs to the fore. As facilitators of ensemble culture, we ought to be conscious of the range of interaction that can spring up in the liminal space created by doing away with controlling rituals.

One day early in Week Four I planned a lesson that was heavy on sitting and note taking. I worried about how this would go over with my 4th Period class. 4th Period was a squirrely bunch: they had a lot of energy and did not hesitate to express it physically and verbally; dancing during class, popping out of their chairs during discussion, and applauding vigorously for their peers’ performances. Much to my surprise, during this sedentary lesson they sat through the whole 30 minutes of note taking without much else taking place. When I remarked on this to my Instructional Coach Sarah Eustis, she pointed out that note taking is a ritual students know, one that is drilled into them during the school year. It may or may not have been enjoyable, but it was a practiced and familiar ritual. The work of an ensemble culture however, was a whole new set of rituals to learn. As DeMeulenaere (2019) suggests, disruption alone is not enough; once I disrupted the rituals of school with the rituals of the theater, these new rituals would have to be built and rebuilt.

The “Who wants to be the boss?” story shows that while the controlling rituals of school seek to repress tension and conflict, in an ensemble culture, conflict often surfaces. When I put youth in positions where they were asked to make decisions together, established structures that entwined everyone’s success and failure (such as a performance event), and got youth to do work where they needed to negotiate power relationships between each other, conflict arose. In the “Who Wants to be the Boss?” episode, we see a conflict around who’s going to be the boss, and a power struggle around what the director can tell people to do. Later in the episode, we see Adriana trying to get her group to do work and Camilo accusing her of being mean. Conflict like this arose frequently: on July 12th Randal persisted in reading the text about the Bread and Roses Strike in a robot voice, despite his group’s displeasure. The same day, Tayah addressed Xander in a barbed tone, “Since you have so much of a big mouth you should start the conversation first.” These anecdotes show that disrupting the traditional rituals of schooling to build an

⁷ Adriana, July 16, during the “Who wants to be the boss?” episode.

ensemble culture is not a conflict free process, and that navigating the conflict that arises is central to the work that both youth and teacher have to engage in.

I think that both harm and growth can arise from conflict. Part of what performance work offers is the opportunity for youth and teacher to work through struggle in a meaningful context, however, I'm not willing to say that all of this struggle is good or growthful. It pained me to see Adriana holding back tears at the end of class, and I wished that I could have prevented her conflict with Camilo from reaching the point of tears of frustration and exhaustion. There is probably some conflict that is inevitable, some that is productive, and some that should and can be avoided, and I do not know how to differentiate between those types of conflict in the moment. When moments of conflict popped up, I was unsure of what to do and often reverted to traditional teacher rituals of conflict resolution, simply trying to interrupt, ignore, or repress the conflict without dialogue about what was going on. Perhaps part of my struggle here is that the theater does not offer us a template for relational conflict resolution or restorative practices. Regarding conflict, we may have to look beyond the theater for ideas of rituals that would support dialogue and productive conflict negotiation.

9.4. “Why are you so specific?”⁸: Negotiating Perfection and Critique

Others have written about the dedication to perfection and desire to give and receive critique that preparing a performance for an audience can create in a class. In the ensemble culture I was trying to build, I hoped to see youth make a collective effort to “get it just right.” I hoped to create rehearsals in which youth were invested enough in the tableaux that directors and actors alike would strive to perfect every pose. During rehearsal, efforts were made by youth and myself to “get it just right,” but this also became a frequent conflict flashpoint.

In the “Who wants to be the boss?” story, I return to Adriana’s group after the boss issue has been resolved to find Camilo lying on the floor and Adriana complaining that he is not doing what she asks of him. Instead of directly telling Camilo to get up and into the tableau, I try to make the focus the work, asking Adriana if the pose looks good to her, or if she wants it to be different. She starts to make changes and I use my teacher power to back her up, asking Camilo, “Can you do that?” Adriana’s refinements to the tableau are met by resistance from Camilo, who first says that this is a different direction than he’d received before, and then asks, with irritation, “Why are you so specific?” In the moment, I was pleased to see Adriana’s desire to make changes and so I again backed her up, saying that it’s okay for her to have a new idea and that it’s good to be specific. A moment later, as the group performs the tableau for me, Camilo expresses indignation that Randal is “not even doing the same pose.” Perhaps Camilo is irritated that he has been singled out with specific direction while Randal has not, or perhaps he is just

⁸ Camilo to Adriana, July 16, during the “Who wants to be the boss?” episode.

annoyed that he is now doing the pose right and Randal is not. Offering feedback was another way in which power and authority were enacted and contested during tableau creation.

In the “Who wants to be the boss?” episode we see how power and authority were contested when a director made an effort to perfect her tableau. In some moments, such as the boss one, youth openly resisted a peer’s or my attempt to perfect a tableau. As the next vignette shows though, even when all members of a group were trying to “get it right,” giving and enacting feedback was challenging.

The day after the “Who wants to be the boss?” episode, Alana, Tayah, Jacob, and Xander are working on their tableaux. I walk over to see how their work is going. They are working on one of Tayah’s tableaux, which depicts a row of strikers (Tayah, Xander, Alana) preventing the National Guard (Jacob) from entering the factories closed by the strike.

Tayah: We’re not letting them by. So you’re [Jacob] kinda like mad too. That’s not a mad face, you’re supposed to be mad.

Jacob: I am.

Xander models holding a rifle, indicating that Jacob could do this.

Micky: [to Tayah] So suggest- Suggest- Or make the face that you want him to make.

Tayah: I don’t know, make an angry face. The type of face you usually make when you’re angry.

Xander leans toward Jacob and makes a cartoonishly angry face, squinting his eyes closed and barring his teeth.

Jacob: [to Xander] That’s a happy face.

Micky: Let’s see a scowl. Let’s see a- [Jacob makes a face] Nice.

Xander models an angry face and holding a rifle. Jacob puts his hands on his hips and makes a face; one part smile, one part anger.

Micky: Nice.

Alana: That’s a smile.

Tayah: [to Alana] Okay, it ain’t gonna get no better than that.

In this moment, Tayah provides critique and direction to Jacob who at first resists her input, saying that he *is* making a mad face. I then step in to try to encourage Tayah to be more specific with her coaching. Next, I use my power and perspective to add on to her direction, while Xander provides some exaggerated modeling. A few lines in, Jacob is no longer resisting the critique; for a few moments he's been trying to make a mad face. Despite his efforts however, his face is still not very angry looking. Although I see that his face isn't all that mad, I see that he's trying, and I'm worried that if we keep pushing he'll get frustrated. So, I simply remark, "Nice," making a pivot from "let's get it just right" to "good enough." Alana is more honest, expressing that the face still isn't angry, but Tayah leans over to her, remarking that it's not going to get any better. Tayah and I have reached the same conclusion, Jacob is not going to get it, but she voices it in a potentially undercutting way, whereas I mask my lack of confidence in Jacob with a "Nice."

While the "Why are you so specific?" part of the boss episode raises questions about what to do when youth resist receiving critique, this anecdote shows that even when youth are open to taking feedback, facilitating its enactment can be challenging. How good is good enough? Does Tayah's and my decision not to push for a better face indicate a harmful lack of faith in Jacob, or does it demonstrate a sensitivity to the fact that you can't get it all right at once? In the moment I was worried that if I kept pushing for perfection Jacob would perceive my push as being "against him," that he would feel I wasn't on his side. What sort of culture and relationships needed to be in place in order to push for perfection? Building in structures to normalize this kind of critique and work towards perfection was something that I did in our second tableau performance process (which will be detailed in a later section of this paper).

As I learned from Tayah, Jacob, Adriana, and Camilo, critique in an ensemble culture doesn't just happen. Working towards a performance event for public performance didn't always mean that youth had an innate desire to give, receive, or enact feedback. As I came to see was the case with most elements of an ensemble culture, the process of giving and receiving critique was negotiated and contested. As a facilitator of an ensemble culture, I had to think about how to strike a balance between pushing for artistic improvement, and appreciating what youth were bringing to the process.

9.5. "But your class is built on chaos."⁹: Reconciling Chaos, Inconsistency, and a Good Show

As the title of this section indicates, I've selected the following vignette to elucidate how engaging in ensemble culture work involves wrestling with issues of what might commonly be viewed as chaos. As mentioned throughout this paper, many accounts of performance work in classrooms detail moments where youth engage in focused work and execute impressive

⁹ Breakthrough teaching fellow and CYES major Pauline Wan, July, date unknown.

performances. In this section, I relate a more complex picture of the non-linear process through which performances came to be in my classroom.

It's the beginning of class on Tuesday, July 17th, the day of our performance (the day after the "Who wants to be the boss?" episode and the same day as the "Make an angry face" story). Each group has only created a couple tableaux over the previous three days and we'll be performing for an audience in 30 minutes. I spend several minutes modeling how I'd like the youth to rehearse today. I give each group a talking piece (something we've been using during class discussions) and model how 1) everyone will sit around a table, 2) a director will share their vision and casting for a tableau, 3) other group members can contribute ideas using the talking piece, and 4) the group will hop up and put the tableau on its feet. All of this is to take place in the span of 3 minutes. I model this with a few youth and then the groups split up to begin working.

I look toward where Adriana's group is going to begin working. The group is yet to cohere. Randal has drifted over toward the window, gazing at the train tracks. Adriana turns a handspring in the middle of the room. I call to her.

Micky: Beautiful, but save it for CM¹⁰ someday.

Adriana turns another cartwheel, this time dropping into a full split afterward. Aseel goes over to help her up.

Micky: In 20 minutes we've got 8 people coming to watch.

Adriana: [with shock] You're lying! [to her group] First tableau! Seated!

The next several minutes go in many directions. Jacob comes over to get office supplies from the shelf near the printer and I tell him we aren't making props, while his group calls for him. Randal informs me that Camilo has stolen his spot. Tayah can be heard admonishing her group:

Tayah: I already told you guys to go. You weren't listening to me.

As Camilo starts to explain one of his tableaux, I hear Adriana:

Adriana: Wait, no, I want to change my tableaux.

¹⁰ Community Meeting, a daily, site-wide performance and community building ritual.

Several minutes later I'm working with Tayah's group and I look over toward the other side of the room. There is Randal, a piece of masking tape several feet long in his hands. He stands facing the wall, leaping into the air and slapping the wall at the peak of his jump, trying to affix the tape to the wall as high as possible.

A while later, I approach Adriana's group and instead of a tableau in the works, I find Camilo and Randal engaged in a mock karate battle of epic proportion.

After about 20 minutes, I call the class over to the Performance Zone so that we can run through as much of the show as possible, with the directors narrating. Today, the Performance Zone is not set up with its normal half circle of chairs, instead it's configured with a few straight rows of chairs facing the "stage." As the youth gather in the chairs, Adriana begins a Breakthrough cheer which usually goes like this:

Caller: My name is [caller's name] and you know what I got?

Responders: What do you got?

Caller: I got team that's hotter than hot!

Responders: How hot is hot?

Caller: Batman and Superman.

Responders: Uh huh uh huh.

Caller: Nobody does it like [other person's name] can!

The called on person then dances while everyone cheers: Go [name] go [name] go! Go [name] go [name] go! Go [name] go [name] go! Ahhhhhhh!

And the called on dancing person begins the cheer again.

Adriana calls out:

Adriana: My name is Adriana and you know what I got?

Micky: No no no no. Save it for lunch.

As I try to shut the cheer down though, Tayah responds to Adriana:

Tayah: What do you got?

Adriana: [remixing to the cheer's rhythm] Micky's class is amazing!

Tayah: Uh huh uh huh.

Adriana: No one can do it like Micky's class!

Youth and Micky: Go Micky's class go Micky's class go! Go Micky's class go Micky's class go!

As we cheer, we dance, and Randal hops out of his seat, dancing wildly on stage. After the cheer, we begin to run through our tableaux, starting with Adriana's group. I watch each tableau, nervous. We've come a long way in 20 minutes, but is it enough? We won't even have time to run through the whole show. Adriana's group strikes its first tableau. Although tableaux are supposed to be frozen, the youth shift their poses while Adriana narrates. As I count down to the next tableau, Camilo confers with his group mates loudly and goes to look at his paper. As I near the end of my countdown Adriana calls out to me:

Adriana: Wait, wait, wait!

The group makes a last minute adjustment. In the tableau, Randal is a police officer arresting Camilo, a striker. Camilo pulls away from Randal, perhaps irritated by Randal's physical contact with him.

Camilo: Stoooppp.

Micky: Keep the tableau still.

During the next tableau transition, Adriana turns a cartwheel. As Aseel narrates the tableau, Camilo and Randal engage in a game of handsie. The tableaux have traveled light years since yesterday, but the youth are still moving, chatting, and not sure of the order the tableaux go in. Plus, cartwheels?

Our audience arrives, takes their seats, and the show begins. When I call "Lights down," Adriana's group hops out of their seats as she urges them on quietly, "Go go go!" As she narrates, the tableau is perfectly still. I call "Lights down," for the next tableau and the group transitions swiftly and silently, striking a frozen pose as I reach the end of my countdown. Randal, a student whose understanding and focus I often struggle to get a read on, narrates his tableaux at length. The show continues like this, closing with applause from our small audience. As the youth head to their next class, Alana approaches me:

Alana: Can we perform our tableaux at CM [Community Meeting]?



Adriana breaks out a handstand during an August rehearsal.

Our rehearsal right before the performance on the 17th was a productive one. Each group cranked out around 6 tableaux with narration, having created just 2 tableaux over the previous three days. However, this rehearsal had little in common with the rigidly ordered and focused rehearsal regime common during theater tech weeks. Adriana turned handsprings, Randal engaged in some sort of jumping-taping contest that only he knew the object of, and our partial “dress rehearsal” was far from tight. Then the audience arrived and the performance was locked in, vastly exceeding my expectations based on what I’d seen in rehearsal.

What stood out in this rehearsal to performance class period was not just that moments that felt chaotic to me and moments that felt focused to me occurred, but that the two occurred in such close proximity to each other. One moment Adriana is far from her group, turning a cartwheel, and a few moments later she is remarking that she wants to adjust her tableau. During the “dress rehearsal” Camilo goes to check his paper to make sure that he’s getting the tableau right, but also engages in a mini slapping fight with Randal during a tableau. This is a significant observation because it allows me to challenge and unpack the assumptions that I had about chaos, focus, and linearity in an ensemble culture.

When enacting a performance-based pedagogy, we have to think carefully about what we (or observers) might typically term *chaos*. Collaborative performance work is loud, energized, fast-paced, and includes a lot of room for extracurricular shenanigans. In this sort of environment, it is easy for a teacher to feel that chaos has overtaken the room. In this atmosphere it can be hard to truly see everything that is taking place. In a classroom with desks in rows and multiple choice worksheets, it is easy to see what is happening (at least on the surface), but with two groups of youth rehearsing tableaux and making props on the fly, there is so much movement, movement of bodies, ideas, and language, that a single teacher can quickly feel overwhelmed by the amount of activity and communication taking place. This richness of motion

can feel beyond the teacher's power to control, a disconcerting experience for an individual who is used to being "in charge." When I disrupted the rituals that maintain docile bodies, what felt like chaos to me often emerged.

As facilitators of an ensemble culture and its joined performance work, we have to develop a new way of seeing and working with what we might initially feel is chaos. When I spoke with Instructional Coach Sarah Eustis about my chaos related concerns, she remarked that, "We often mistake silence for learning," suggesting that noise was not in fact the antithesis of learning. One day, when I talked about the chaos of my classroom with teaching fellow and CYES major Pauline Wan, she pointed out that my class was in fact, "...built on chaos." This gave me pause. What I was trying to discern, Ellen Doris pointed out to me, was, "If it looks like a mess in a particular moment, are we in trouble or not?" Were there times when the room felt chaotic to me, but the chaos was actually serving a learning purpose? How was I to tell the difference between productive chaos and just plain old wild chaos? When should I shrug off my discomfort with chaos, realizing that it mostly came from the unsettling experience of not being the most powerful figure in the room, and when should I in fact assert my power over a process that was beginning to spiral. When I directed plays, I never tolerated the levels of chaos and diffuse focus that occurred in my classroom. While theater ensembles are energized, they also tend to be quite disciplined. But somehow, as shown in the above vignette, out of a process that looked very different from my theater experiences, came an excellent show. Following this, and in keeping with Pauline's suggestion that perhaps my class was actually "built on chaos," it's worth considering if the handspings, karate fights, and spontaneous cheers actually *added* something to the ensemble culture in my classroom.

Five minutes before our final tableau performance in August, Aseel suggests that we create a last tableau of everyone bowing. The idea arises during what some people might consider a chaotic moment. Aseel suggests the idea while other youth are talking, and as soon as she says the idea, other youth start making other suggestions; Jacob suggests that he be the doorman to greet the audience, Aseel suggests that everyone disappear at the end of the show, and Camilo takes up the idea, saying that they should all sit down in the audience. I don't respond to any of the ideas, instead directing us into running through a couple tableaus that need touching up. After we've run through the tableaus, Aseel brings up the disappearance idea again, and the youth eagerly start planning how to enact it. In this moment, the youth take on co-ownership of the tableau and start creating ideas faster than I can follow. This is an example of creation and collaboration that was perhaps enabled by some degree of "chaos." If only one youth had been allowed to talk at a time, or if I had been the mediator of all talk and idea generation through calling on people to speak, perhaps Aseel's idea wouldn't have been shared, or wouldn't have been built upon by others.

In the vignette of the rehearsal leading up to our Bread and Roses performance, my teacher discomfort with chaos surfaces when Adriana starts the "You know what I got" cheer. When she starts the cheer, I try to shut it down. I'm worried things will get out of hand, that

chaos will surge, that I will no longer have the power to direct the class. But I am overridden by the youth, and the cheer develops into a lively shared experience. This moment shows that even as a teacher aiming to disrupt the rituals of traditional schooling with the rituals of the theater, I was at times resistant to disruption started by youth. In the cheering moment, Adriana is disrupting the rituals of school and I seek to reassert the rituals of teacher centered control and a quiet classroom, literally telling her to, "Save it for lunch." In building an ensemble culture, I came to see that it was important to take up youth's disruptive offers and be aware of when I was reverting to rituals of teacher control, driven by a discomfort with what I perceived as chaos. I was ready to disrupt rituals myself, but I came to see that it was also my responsibility to take up the disruptions that youth initiated, rather than extinguish these offers. If I repressed youth offerings, I risked inhibiting idea creation (the bow tableau moment) and obstructing energizing and connection rich activities created by youth (Adriana's cheer).

At the beginning of the performance day vignette I note that at the beginning of class I introduced a very structured procedure through which I wanted youth to create their tableaux. They were to use a talking piece, sit at a table while the director explained their tableau, and then create the tableau all within the span of three minutes. Though youth engaged in modeling this method of tableau creation with me, neither group enacted it and I didn't make an attempt to impose the model. I was constantly trying to figure out what level of structure enabled connection and creation versus inhibited it. Youth and I often engaged in a fluid process of setting on an amount of structure together. In the first couple days of rehearsal I came to feel that there wasn't enough structure and added the director role, which youth took up. On the performance day I tried to increase the level of structure further, by prescribing a direction process, but youth didn't take to it. In 4th Period's ensemble culture, power structures were not simply planned, enacted, and enforced, but co-created by teacher and youth.

Another point that bears noticing here is the variability, inconsistency and nonlinearity of the performance work. Focus and conflict often turned on a dime. Back in the "Who wants to be the boss?" story, this can be seen clearly. Even when Camilo is irritated by Adriana's specificity and Adriana has remarked that her group is "annoying," Camilo adds on to Adriana's tableau idea and she is receptive to it. In the vignette of our performance day, youth go from a choppy "dress rehearsal" to a tight final performance in a matter of minutes. When I began my project, I imagined the consistency of the theater taking place in my classroom, but came to see that this perhaps was not a necessary quality of an ensemble culture.

In the previous few thematic sections, I've detailed conflict, power negotiation, concerns around chaos, struggles around giving, receiving, and enacting critique, and the realities of rehearsal when traditional schooling rituals are disrupted. In the vignette headlining this section, I've shown how out of all this, came a great show. Despite arguments over roles, minutes spent laying on the floor and doing karate, and my snappiness when focus lapsed, once the audience was in their seats and the show began, the performance was airtight. The day that we performed our tableaux was also the day of parent-student-teacher conferences. In their conferences, Randal

and Xander eagerly told their families about our tableaux. Randal even hopped up out of his chair to demonstrate during his conference. This rehearsal and performance process raises a number of broad questions. If the final performance is received well and youth are proud of it, in what ways does the preceding rehearsal process matter? If a performance that youth are proud of and audiences are impressed by can come out of a process with abundant conflict, what kind of a performance could happen if there was less conflict? Would it be any different? Should I take measures to limit conflict or to minimize moments that I felt were chaotic and unproductive? What is the role of discipline and focus in the rehearsal process? Youth had waited until the last possible moment to fully theatrically *commit* to the tableaux, what could I do to get this commitment throughout more of the process?

The reason I find this noticing around chaos, inconsistency, and a good show compelling is that it messes with my prior conception of ensemble culture. Based on my experience in the theater, I assumed that in order to have a quality final performance and a process that participants remembered fondly, there would have to be a high degree of order and focus. My 5th Period class had a rehearsal process with less outward frustration, and fewer handsprings and less karate, and yet the show that each class produced was remarkably similar. 4th Period's first tableau performance caused me to reconsider my assumption that tight and consistent focus was necessary in a performance-based pedagogy, and think about how inconsistency and abundant movement were not necessarily detrimental, but perhaps enabled certain parts of our ensemble culture.



4th Period rehearses their co-created bowing tableau, minutes before our final August performance (Xander is absent).

9.6. “This is my tableau, I run this!”¹¹: The Individual and the Collective in Ensemble Culture

One of the foundational reasons that the notion of ensemble appeals to me as a framework for thinking about classrooms is because the concept speaks to the complex interrelations between the individual and the collective. The model of ensemble theater urges us to make our classrooms into collective spaces, but also highlights how the collective is a composite of individual actors, each of whom must navigate giving and receiving offerings. In this section, I present a few vignettes from 4th Period to illuminate what the puzzle of individual-collective interplay looked like in practice. In looking at the individual and the collective, I will also tie together the overlapping issues of power, critique, conflict, and inconsistency. The puzzles discussed in earlier sections of this paper were in some way surprising to me. In contrast, from the beginning of my praxis, I knew that individual-collective interplay would be important. In this section, I take this foundational piece of ensemble theory and use it to reflect on what occurred in my classroom. I begin with a vignette from 4th Period’s second tableau rehearsal and performance process, which took place about three weeks after the first performance.

I devoted the last week (Week Six) of the summer to creating our final tableau performance. We would have three days to design our tableaux and rehearse, and then perform on Thursday (there would be no class on Friday). On Friday of Week Five I solicited youth’s ideas about three things: What makes great tableaux? What makes great group work? What have we learned in our class that we want to make tableaux about? From the list of learnings I selected a few topics to make tableaux about for our final performance. I considered facilitating a discussion with the whole class in which we would narrow down the list of potential topics collaboratively but opted to choose on my own because of time constraints. These are the topics that the tableaux would be about:

- Argentinian factory takeovers. We had watched sections of the documentary *The Take* by Avi Lewis and Naomi Klein (2004) which details the widespread factory expropriations by industrial workers in Argentina in the early 2000s. In the midst of an economic crisis, many factories closed and factory owners literally emptied the banks and left Argentina, without paying the laid off workers. In response, a movement by factory workers to takeover the factories and re-open them under worker control emerged. The workers’ strategy, encapsulated in their motto, was: Occupy. Resist. Produce. (Occupy the abandoned factories. Resist eviction. Produce products under worker direction.)
- Capitalism and communism as social and economic systems.

¹¹ Camilo during rehearsal, August 7.

- 5th Period suggested that we make tableaux about our class. Beginning at the start of Week Six I implemented this idea in 5th Period, assigning a few youth to make these tableaux. In 4th Period, I introduced the idea near the end of class on Wednesday when we had a few extra minutes. Adriana created one tableau about our class.

Coming out of our first tableau performance, I had a number of new goals and structures in mind for our second performance. I wanted to make the process move more smoothly, with greater efficiency and less conflict. I also wanted to give directors a chance to give more critique and perfect their tableaux.

This time, each youth would have one part of the factory takeover story to create a tableau about (they got to select which part of the story they wanted to make a tableau about). We had taken notes on *The Take* using a cartoon format: each important part of the story got a drawing, title, and caption. Each youth picked a cartoon frame/part of the story to recreate. In order to make the process move more rapidly, with less conflict, and with more intentional adjustments being made, I gave myself significantly more power in the rehearsal process than I had in the previous tableau performance. Rather than splitting the class into two groups, I kept the class as a whole, with everyone cast in every tableau. With the class as one group I would be able to play a larger role in facilitating the flow of the rehearsal process.

On Monday, August 6th (Week Six), youth took some time to select and then design their tableaux. Rather than having them fill out the tableau planning chart I'd used previously (and become disenchanted with because of its worksheet-like format and youth's resistance to using it), I had each director draw a picture of their tableau, and write down what their narration was going to be. After drawing their tableaux, we began staging them. The structure that developed looked something like this: 1. a director would explain their tableau, 2. the director would call people up to be in the tableau and explain to each person the individual poses, 3. to instill a sense of urgency I would begin to count down from 10 and end with "Lights up." The tableau would more or less freeze. I would then invite the director to step out of the tableau, look at it, and make any changes they wanted to. On Tuesday, August 7th we continued to construct our tableaux.

Everyone is in the Performance Zone. We've got two more tableaux to create. Randal, Xander, Adriana, Aseel and Jacob sit in the half circle of chairs. Tayah stands on two of the chairs. Alana is off to the the side of the stage sitting on a large desk. Camilo is off on the other side, leaning over a waist-high bookshelf like a retail clerk at a counter. I stand off to the side, slightly behind the Performance Circle.

Micky: Camilo's up. [to direct his tableau]

Camilo walks on from the bookshelf and spins across the stage, waving for everyone to join him.

Camilo: Everybody come up.

No one moves.

Jacob: What are we doing?

Micky: [to Camilo] Tell us what it is first. Tell us what it's about first.

Camilo: [looking at his cartoon frame] I just wrote (workers) have money. (...)

Micky: Everybody. Who knows what- [I stop, Adriana has been letting out a slow, high pitched shriek for several moments] Adriana.

Adriana: [she stops shrieking] Yeah?

Tayah, who is standing on two chairs in the circle is kicking at Xander, who's sitting next to her.

Micky: Tayah.

Tayah: [she stops kicking] What?

Micky: Who knows what Camilo's tableau is about?

Camilo stands behind me, back to the circle, tossing a marker against the wall, Alana's hand is raised.

Aseel: Money.

Student: Tableau.

Alana: [hand raised] Me. [Meaning: "Call on me." Not: "The tableau is about me."]

Micky: Alright, so listen while he explains it, you're all about to be in it. Camilo, explain it one more time.

Camilo: The tableau is about money. And it shows that- how the workers shared the money (...) that they made, from working at the factory.

Micky: Call people up and have them- and set them up the way you want them to be.

Camilo: Everybody.

I gesture for everyone to go up on stage. Tayah gets up while the others remain seated.

Jacob: Well what do we do?

Alana: Go one by one so that we're not in one big cluster.

Micky: [to Alana] Nice idea.

Camilo: Wait the picture I made.

He goes and gets his drawing of the tableau. Randal and Adriana get up and move to the stage.

Randal: [while walking] That's a good idea Alana.

Adriana: Ready? I'm gonna fall.

She does a sort of forward falling trust fall, catching herself before she hits the floor.¹²

Camilo: [Returning with his picture] It's just people. They gather around as a crowd in front of like the person who has all the money.

Jacob: Who's the person who has all the money?

I nod, affirming Jacob's question. Adriana and then Randal fall to the floor.

Camilo: Ummm, Xander.

Jacob: (...)

Adriana: Nah, I'll be rich.

Jacob: I can be rich.

By now everyone except Alana has made it to the stage. Adriana is kneeling, post fall, and Randal is laying face down on the floor.

Camilo: [To Xander, pointing.] You go there. And everybody else comes over here. [People begin to move] Jacob, no, you come here. Aseel here. Randal here. Adriana. [Xander is holding something up in the air in his hand and Adriana is leaping up, trying to snatch it. Camilo says her name with irritation.] Adriiannnaaaa. [She moves into place]

Micky: Yo, Camilo's directing this, everybody listen to Camilo.

Randal: Why so serious?

The group is now clumped up, backs to the audience, facing Xander. Xander sits down.

Camilo: [To Xander] You have lots of money, you're supposed to stand up. [Camilo steps forward and hands Xander something] Alright hold this (...).

Xander: [Still sitting] Alright then you guys sit down. And I stand up.

Camilo: No, we all stand up. We're all standing up.

Alana: [To the whole group] No kneel on your- Go on your knees like this.

She kneels down and Xander stands up. There's chatter in the group.

¹² I include seemingly "random" moments like this to show that even in this more structured and teacher orchestrated process, rehearsal was still flexible and a bit chaotic (and fun!).

Micky: Alright, I'm counting down from 10. 10. [Randal begins to yodel. Tayah steps forward and swats at Xander]

Camilo: This is my tableau! This is my tableau, I run this!

Micky: 9. 8. 7.

Xander: [to Camilo, promoting the kneeling idea] (...) it looks better- it looks more like- [Camilo kneels down] Alright everybody.

Xander gestures urgently for everyone to kneel. I'm at 3 and everyone except Randal and Jacob are kneeling. Xander gestures for them to kneel down and they do so. Tayah flops from kneeling to lying on the floor.

Micky: 2. 1. Lights up. Is this how you want it Camilo?

Camilo: Yeah. [He looks left, then right at his tableau.]

Micky: Beautiful.



Camilo's co-constructed tableau during rehearsal on August 7th. Xander stands in the middle, distributing money evenly to his co-workers.

The moment of the above vignette that begins with Xander sitting down (right after Randal says, "Why so serious?"), is particularly illustrative of the interplay between the individual and the collective in an ensemble culture and ties together issues of power, critique, conflict, and co-ownership. Until this point in the construction of his tableau, Camilo has issued all the direction and others have largely followed his directions. Then, Xander takes a seat on the ground, physically making an offering to the tableau design (that he thinks the worker distributing the money should be sitting down). Camilo says no, everyone should be standing,

exercising his directorial power in the interest of his vision. Xander makes a counter suggestion that everyone else sit and he'll stand, and then Alana jumps in to suggest that everyone kneel except Xander. The group is beginning to take collective ownership of the tableau, but it appears that Camilo is a bit unsettled by this, as he declares, "This is my tableau! This is my tableau, I run this!" In the director-centered rehearsal process I've created, Camilo has been endowed with individual power and ownership over his tableau, and now other youth are making changes and offering critique. When Xander explains to Camilo that with people kneeling down "it looks better," Camilo accepts the suggestion and kneels down. As I continue counting down, Xander becomes the de-facto director, gesturing for everybody to kneel. When I ask Camilo if he likes the tableau, he immediately approves.

This, in many ways, is the kind of collaboration that I hoped to see emerge in our ensemble culture work. I hoped that endowing one person with ownership and power over part of the performance would help them feel that "they run this," but that during the creation process others would also come to have ownership of the piece, working collaboratively to build on one another's ideas. Moments like this happened often, where youth essentially co-directed tableaus, moving from individual direction to collective creation. Sometimes it was the collaborative building of a pose, as in the "I run this!" vignette, or sometimes one youth would flex their power on behalf of the director much as I did as a teacher. If people were moving slowly or not listening to the director, Tayah would often act as the director's second (and usually louder) voice, telling people to pay attention and get in the tableau. In the "I run this!" episode we see Jacob and Alana co-facilitate the process of tableau creation, not just contribute artistically to the tableau. Near the beginning of Camilo's explanation of the tableau Jacob asks for clarification about the roles in the tableau pose, and Alana suggests that people move to the stage one at a time to avoid everyone being in "one big cluster." This shows that in a rehearsal process with a delineated hierarchy and individualized power, the "actors" were not simply following a director's orders, but were active participants in the creation process with the director.

It's worth noting that not only did youth co-construct aspects of the performance with each other, but youth and I also co-constructed aspects of our performances together. For example, earlier in the summer, one group finished up their tableaus earlier than the other group, so I suggested that they add some lines to the tableaus. I had imagined lines said by each person in the voice of their character. When I returned to the group, they had created narration of sorts, with the director explaining what was happening in the tableau. This became the norm for our tableau performances; the director would develop narration explaining their tableau. As the July cheering moment with Adriana shows though, I was not always open to co-constructing our class with youth and I had to work to be aware of when I was blocking youth offerings. My high school theater director, Mike Arquilla, often emphasized this as central to how directors should work with actors in the creation of a play. It is the director's job not simply to tell the actors how to play a character, but to work *with* the actors to find *their version* of the character and performance together. I came to realize this was also a job of the ensemble culture facilitator, not

to impose a vision of ensemble culture, but to work with youth to build *our unique version* of ensemble culture.

We can also use the notion of the interplay between the individual and the collective to think about how I used my teacher power in the interests of assembling ensemble. In the “I run this!” episode we see how I played a consistently larger role in the August rehearsals than I did in the July rehearsals. In July, half the class was always working without me, in August, I was always involved in and often orchestrating the process (for example, telling Camilo how to direct and then asking the group to repeat his vision, because I feel the group was not listening). Throughout the vignette, I can be seen throwing my power on the side of the director and providing next steps, much as I did during the July rehearsals.

Throughout our performance work, I wondered about how to use my individual teacher power to create listening and investment, and when perhaps traditional schooling rituals were necessary for creating a collective experience. Early in the above vignette, I feel that Tayah and Adriana aren’t paying attention to Camilo, or at least are making it hard for others to pay attention. Therefore, I seek to control Adriana’s noise making and Tayah’s movement. I restrict their individual freedom and their disruption of schooling rituals in the interest of the collective. This was a tension I often felt in trying to build an ensemble culture. I wanted youth to be invested and dedicated to our work and believed that good pedagogy rather than rigid control was the answer to creating youth engagement. Sometimes this dedication came organically, as many accounts of performance work depict. Sometimes however, I felt I needed to tell youth to be quiet, to listen, or, as I told Adriana and Camilo one day in a moment of truthful frustration, “Yo. Stop moving.” Harkening back to my earlier discussion of “chaos,” it was not always clear to me when the focus and energy of individuals needed to be controlled using blunt teacher power in the interest of developing dedication to a collective project.

In the “I run this!” vignette, co-construction of Camilo’s tableau goes fairly smoothly. Co-construction of tableaus and integration of the individual with the collective did not always go uncontested in our August rehearsals, as shown by the following vignette from Wednesday, August 8th (the day after the “I run this!” episode).



Tayah's workers versus police tableau during rehearsal, prior to her adjustments. The workers are on the left, the cops on the right, and Tayah stands in the middle as the factory. (Xander is absent.)

We're over in the Performance Zone working through our full tableau sequence for the second or third time. We are about to stage Tayah's tableau, which depicts Argentinian workers defending their occupied factory with slingshots as police try to evict them.

Micky: And Tayah's [tableau] with the slingshots. In 10. 9...

People move into position as I count down. Camilo does an army roll across the stage to his position as a cop, stage left. He kneels this time, rather than standing as he had been previously.

Micky: Lights up.

There's a momentary pause, then Tayah, standing in the middle of the tableau as the factory building speaks.

Tayah: Can I make a change?

Micky: You can make a change.

Tayah: [gesturing to the cops] You guys need to be closer.

Alana walks forward, toward the workers armed with slingshots, but Camilo remains kneeling.

Camilo: We're close enough.

Micky: She's the director. She gets to choose.

Tayah: [to Camilo] They [the cops] are barging into them [the workers], like they are like trying to chase them out. And they're trying--

Camilo: Last time you told us to stand apart.

Micky: She's making an adjustment.

Tayah: I said you guys should start up front (...) way back over there. (...) Close to the building.

Randal now runs forward toward the workers, where he and Adriana enter a standoff, pointing their pantomimed weapons at each other. After Tayah's explanation, Camilo gets up and stands in line with Alana, closer to the workers and building.

Micky: Great, so I'm gonna do lights out and let's see what it looks like. Lights down. 5. 4. 3...

Tayah: Randal back up. Right there.

Camilo kneels down. Jacob has moved away from the workers, behind a bookshelf, but is still posed with a slingshot. Tayah addresses him.

Tayah: You're not behind there.

Jacob comes over and rejoins the other workers.

Micky: Lights up.

I look at Camilo, kneeling, hunched over, looking at the floor.

Micky: Camilo you do not look like a cop, you look like a floppy turtle.¹³ [laughter]

Camilo: (...) floppy turtle.

Micky: One more time. Lights down. 3. 2...

During my countdown, Tayah directs.

Tayah: You guys are all standing up, no one's laying down, no one's climbing up (...).

Camilo: [he stands] (...) anything.

Micky: Lights up.

¹³ Origin of "floppy turtle." Camilo was often energetically on the move during class, but one day he arrived and was sluggishly on the move, dragging himself across the floor and throwing himself over his bookshelf. When I approached him and encouraged him to be more focused and lively, he said, "But I feel like a floppy turtle today." This became a running joke between us, shared language to describe his floppy behavior.

In this vignette, we see Tayah eager to make an adjustment to her tableau in order to make it “just right.” When she suggests her change, Alana immediately enacts it but Camilo resists the change. The situation is almost identical to the “Who wants to be the boss?” moment with Adriana, where Camilo resists a pose change, saying that Adriana had previously told him to do something different. I also respond almost exactly the same, allying with the director and informing him that the director gets to choose and make changes. As we re-stage the tableau, Tayah continues to make tweaks. When the lights come up again, I make a move that I never made in our July tableaux. I offer direct critique to a student, telling Camilo that he doesn’t in fact look like a cop, but like a floppy turtle, and call for us to do the tableau again.

I include this story because it shows that even in a process which centered directors’ voices and provided repetitive structures through which critique could be offered, the process was not always smooth. As shown by the photo below, directors became frustrated and youth goofed around. My greater involvement in the rehearsal process allowed me to push for perfection, but having this power also meant that I had to make decisions about how and when to exercise it. Often, I wondered about how much I should provide critique and push for perfection myself. What should I leave to the youth to figure out and negotiate, and what should I sculpt? As a teacher, I too was a member of the ensemble with a unique voice, set of eyes, and theatrical experience. I thought that by providing critique I could add importance and quality to our performance, but I also worried that if I played too large of a role youth might come to view the show as being owned by me rather than them. Using the analogy of a play to explain the August rehearsal process, I wrote a larger role for myself into our class script. How large and how powerful should this role I was writing for myself be?



Tayah (center, in all blue), walks away from her tableau and tilts her head to the ceiling in frustration, irritated that her peers aren’t getting her tableau right. Adriana dodges imaginary bullets from Randal or Camilo’s finger-gun, Matrix style.

On July 27th an episode took place that raised many questions for me in regards to the interaction between the individual and the collective, specifically in regards to conflict. On the 27th we were playing a theater game in which the group collectively creates an embodied machine. The machine begins with one person making a repetitive noise and motion over and over. Then another person adds on with a connected motion and noise. The exercise continues like this until the machine is complete. We were playing the game for the first time, and I was becoming frustrated; our focus was scattered, our machine motions were constantly shifting, and we weren't incorporating the ideas we'd discussed to make our machines better.¹⁴

The machine is partially constructed, but Adriana has paused her motion, which is to tap Camilo's hand with her left hand while she taps Randal's hand with her right. She's stopped doing her gesture and is instead doing a little dance move. I call out to her to get her back in the machine.

Micky: Adriana!

She hops back into the machine, but instead of resuming her tapping gesture, she winds up and smacks first Camilo's hand and then Randal's. It's decidedly a slap, not a tap. Camilo appears unperturbed, continuing his machine motion. Randal however, yowls and holds his hand. Jacob points and laughs.

Randal: Owwww!

Micky: Adriana.

Adriana: I didn't mean to do that.

Randal winds up as though to smack Adriana back, swings, and appears to miss. Adriana squirms away. I decide it's time for a reflective conversation.

Micky: Come have a seat, come have a seat, come have a seat.

As we gather in the chairs, Randal announces:

¹⁴ In this vignette I switch which ensemble intervention I'm focusing on, moving away from what I would categorize as "rehearsal and performance" and onto a combination of "theater games" and "reflection circles." In a longer rendition of this work, perhaps this vignette would move to a section on reflection circles, but for now it fits within the discussion of the individual and the collective.

Randal: I got smacked.

...¹⁵
...

Micky: Talk to me, individually for a moment, um, about what is going on today. We're trying to do a game, an exercise, but it's not really working.

Camilo: What? It is.

Adriana: It is but (...)

Xander: I don't think people (...)

...

I pass the mic to Xander.

Xander: So I think people are touching each other and it's kind of causing like, some people to get grossed out, cause some people don't wanna touch each other and sometimes, um, people like slap too hard or something or hit too hard (...).

Jacob points at Adriana.

Adriana: [To Tayah, who's sitting next to her] I didn't mean to.

Tayah: Shhh. It doesn't matter, you still did it.

...

Tayah: Um, you know what Xander said about like it's causing commotion because people go only next to certain people, then they act so they'll- and they do something, and it just causes the other people that were just doing the work that they're supposed to, to just like get mad and stuff. Because they just ruined the whole game.

Micky: I have a question, I'm just curious for people, like is this game-

Adriana: No, I think it's okay.

Micky: -interesting and fun or is it just like not a good thing to do?

Adriana: No, it's because I didn't know what to do, that's why.

Tayah: You coulda asked someone instead of just slapping them (...).

Adriana: I didn't mean to.

Micky: Okay, so you weren't sure what to do, that's alright.

Randal: She slapped me.

Adriana: I didn't mean to, I didn't even see your arm there.

¹⁵ In contrast to my other transcripts, in this one I have removed some of the chatter for sake of clarity.



4th Period's July 27th reflection circle, in which we discussed "the slap."

This episode is particularly illustrative of the individual-collective interplay in an ensemble culture. When I ask the group what isn't working, I don't intend to focus on the slap. In my mind, the slap is just a culmination of what has been many minutes of struggle so far in class; an individual manifestation of a broader collective issue. I don't explicate this to the youth though, and when I ask what isn't working, Xander cites the slap and physical contact as something that isn't working. He's clearly talking about an individual's actions (Adriana's) and how these actions affected the collective, and Adriana jumps in to defend herself.

This conversation raises questions about individual accountability to the collective and to other individuals in an ensemble culture. Xander, Tayah, and Randal all criticize Adriana for having a negative effect on other individuals and on the collective (Tayah makes an explicit connection to the "whole game," while Xander and Randal focus on individual effect). Xander "calls out" Adriana, but shields her identity, by not mentioning her name. Tayah also speaks about the disruption of the game without citing anyone specific. In this way, youth are trying to address an individual issue, but doing so with a degree of indirectness (though Jacob points directly at Adriana during the conversation). Adriana understands however that she is under discussion and tries to explain her action, first saying that she didn't mean to, and later explaining the reason for her action (not knowing what to do). When Adriana defends herself, Tayah pushes her to stop making excuses and take personal accountability, saying, "It doesn't matter, you still did it," and later pointing out that even if Adriana was confused about what to do, she could have asked for an idea rather than slapping someone. This whole interaction points to the difficulty of taking responsibility for one's actions in a large group and to the challenge of how to hold people accountable to their actions in a group.

On my part, I am uncomfortable in this conversation and don't know how to constructively take up the personal critique and the confrontation of conflict that is arising. Mid-way through the episode (after Xander and Tayah have shared, when I say "I have a question...") I try to direct the conversation toward the game at large, rather than taking up

Xander's comment, Tayah's comment, or Adriana's explanations of her action. I'm nervous about making an individual the focus of the conversation. In tandem with my interest in developing a sense of *a whole*, I generally framed our reflective discussions in collective terms. I tended to ask: "What are *we* doing well?" "What can *we* get better at?" rather than asking, "What are *you* doing well?" "What can *you* or *someone else* get better at?" Youth took up this collective framing, often speaking in group-focused terms, making remarks like, "We need to listen better," or, "It's the communication [that's the problem]." I appreciated that youth were speaking in the *we*, but, through "the slap" conversation, I also realized that we weren't thinking specifically enough about how "*I*'s make up a "*we*." Does everyone need to listen better, or do three specific people need to listen better? Our group collectively might need to communicate better, but what will *I* do to make that happen? In "the slap" reflection circle, youth are pushing the group towards a discussion of how individual actions are affecting the collective, but I pivot to a more macro discussion of whether the game itself is the problem. I think that at times my facilitation didn't appreciate and work with the reality that individuals and their actions were creating our collective, and that perhaps collective accountability and individual accountability needed to be built and reflected on simultaneously.

I often wondered what conflict I should acknowledge and try to process, and what conflict I should encourage people to move on from or just ignore. If I hadn't called the group together to have a reflective discussion at the moment of the slap, what would have happened? By using my teacher power to focus everyone's attention on the slap, did I make the conflict a bigger deal than it initially was? While Randal yowled and held his hand after being slapped, Camilo completely ignored being slapped, not reacting in any obvious way or bringing his slap up in the discussion. When should I use my teacher power to promote dialogue, and when should I urge everyone to just move on? When I did create room to discuss conflict, I wondered about *how* to discuss it, particularly in regards to how to discuss specific individuals' actions in a caring, understanding, but also accountable way. As mentioned earlier, the theater did not provide me with model rituals to adapt for conflict negotiation in the classroom.

Another important facet of the interplay between individuals and the collective in my ensemble culture work was the individual relationships that I did and didn't develop with specific youth. When I began to sift through my data after the summer, I sat down to write short portraits of each youth while memories of them were still fresh in my mind. I made a randomly ordered list of the youth in my classes and began writing about each one, starting at the top of my list. I cranked out 317 words about Randal. I produced 468 words about Camilo. Then I came to Aseel, and wrote just 189 words. Part of what drove me to use a performance-based pedagogy in my classroom was that I felt that it would provide opportunities for many different youth to be seen and to connect, both by/with me and by/with their peers. I do believe that this connection and visibility occurred. Aseel, who often would decline to share during class discussions

informed me toward the end of the summer that she really liked doing our performance work. Jacob, who told me about being bullied in school and whose mom informed me has few friends, got the opportunity to be part of a social group that created his tableau visions. On day one of class, I felt like I gained valuable insight into who each of my students were based off their participation in the theater games we played. However, as indicated by the wide ranging word count of my youth portraits, I had closer relationships and more insight into who some youth were than others.

Due to data analysis time constraints, I have not been able to dig deeply into how *individual* youth engaged with the process of building an ensemble culture and how I as a teacher engaged with different youth in different ways. These individual differences however, I think, are central to youth and teachers' experience of ensemble culture and are an area for further inquiry. For instance, in reviewing my videos, I have noticed that Aseel actually made more comments and was chattier than I realized while teaching, it's just that many of her comments were occurring outside of formal class discussions. As I taught, did I overlook and undervalue certain individuals who had smaller presences in the classroom? It would have been near impossible to ignore Adriana and Camilo, but Aseel had a lower profile and I did not make enough of an effort to think about what an ensemble culture means and looks like for an Aseel versus an Adriana. For example, back in the "Who wants to be the boss?" anecdote, Aseel is a part of the group but doesn't speak, nor do I move to involve her, until Adriana appoints her as the boss. What insight might Aseel have had into how her group was working or could work that I didn't help to surface?

It's also worth thinking about how the collective culture affects how I viewed and related to different individual youth. Generally speaking, my 4th Period class was louder and more rambunctious than my 5th Period class. In my 5th Period, I felt that I had deeper relationships with youth who were initially on the quieter end of the verbal participation spectrum than I did with Aseel. Did Aseel's presence in a more rambunctious group mean that I overlooked her more than I would have in a calmer group of peers? This is to say that while the individual shapes the collective, the collective also shapes the individual. While individual relationships made up our specific ensemble culture, our ensemble culture also shaped our individual relationships. On the one hand, this is the whole point of the ensemble analogy: everyone has a different role of a different size, but everyone's role is still crucial to the whole. As facilitators however, it's worth being cognizant of which roles we are attending to the most, and if any roles are growing at the expense of other people's roles.

9.7. “I’m proud of us.”¹⁶: Youth Reflect on Performance and Process

When I began my Praxis Project, I planned on interviewing the youth in my classes about their experiences and ideas. If an ensemble culture is centrally concerned with the voices, ideas, and feelings of its participants, how could I write a paper about ensemble culture without youth’s opinions included? Unfortunately, that’s exactly what I’ve ended up doing. While teaching, I quickly realized that conducting interviews would be beyond my capacity; turning on and off the video recorder was about all that I could keep up with. After the summer, I considered going back to Somerville to interview youth, but never did. Lacking interviews with youth, I have turned the focus of my analysis toward what I saw happen and how I felt, making reasonable inferences about what youth felt and thought in specific moments. But the question lingers; in engaging with this ensemble work, what did youth think of it? This work was new to them, disruptive, filled with conflict and power negotiations; it was hard and high stakes. What did they think? While I do not have interview data addressing this question, I do have remarks made during our closing reflection circle on Thursday, August 9th, the last day of class. The following discussion took place after our final performance, reflecting on our summer together.

Our final tableau performance has concluded and the audience has left the room. The youth and I gather in a circle of chairs in the Performance Zone.

Alana: I’m proud of us.

Jacob: Imagine if the other class came to watch it.

Aseel: Can we do a performance at lunch?¹⁷

Micky: Um, I don’t think so today, I’m sorry.

Randal: We should. But today is the last Community Meeting.

Micky: Okay I wanna have a real quick closing circle because this is our last 10 minutes together as a class... I wanted to ask people first, um... to share anything you feel like you’ll remember from our class. Anything that we did or anything that somebody else did that you’re gonna remember...

Camilo: That we all played games and we will remember each other from playing games together and like, getting to know each other from playing the games.

Adriana: ...I’ll remember the tableaus and like the fun time that we had with the tableaus, and like the audience because it was really fun doing this and representing it and I actually want to remember this class, like everything about it. It was really fun...

Aseel: Um, I think I’ll remember, when we, like, our presentations and stuff like that when we presented (...) people our tableaus.

¹⁶ Alana after our final performance, August 9.

¹⁷ Occasionally, acts that didn’t fit into Community Meeting were performed during lunch.

Tayah: What I remember is all--

Aseel: Of you. [Jacob has started to plaster his face with masking tape, and I gesture for him to stop.]

Tayah: When it started out we didn't like wanna like be here. Like not be here but (...) but then later on we started (...).

...

Alana: One thing I'll remember is um these performances that we've done because I'm actually very proud of them.

Jacob: [Now with a full masking tape beard.] I'm gonna remember tableaux...

...

Randal: I'll remember planes...¹⁸

When Randal finishes, Camilo reaches for the mic.

Camilo: Floppy turtle.

Everyone having spoken, I take the mic.

Micky: Alright, what I have, I wanna share with everyone... I wanna share with you one thing that I'm gonna remember about everyone.

I make a prepared remark about each youth. Xander had to leave class two days early for family vacation and is not with us today, so I haven't prepared anything to say about him. When I conclude my comments, Alana stops me.

Alana: Wait, read Xander's out loud.

Micky: Yeah, we can do it in honor of Xander... Any last things in the last two minutes?

Tayah and Adriana's hands shoot up.

Tayah: I want to give a Big Ups¹⁹ to everybody, because even though like we didn't like start off on a great track, like, nobody like wanted to talk to each other and be in groups, you all um, persisted. Persistence. We all pushed forward and kind of like started to be in groups with people and like listen to their ideas and hang out.

Micky: Adriana, did you want to go next?

¹⁸ This is connected to a simulation we did and was mentioned by several youth.

¹⁹ Big Ups was an affirmation ritual incorporated into Community Meeting, in which written affirmations from youth and teachers were read aloud to the whole Breakthrough community.

Adriana: Um, I wanted to say that I- Like, I wanted to give a Big Ups too that everybody in this class, even though like some people had a hard time, but like, after the last weeks, like the two weeks, like everything started to go like- everyone started to get along more, we were (...) each others' ideas and it was really fun.

...

Alana: This is for all of us also, I've never been this interested in social studies until this class, just the way that you taught us and the way that everyone like worked together like nicely, that made it really interesting to me.

Micky: I'll miss 4th Period everybody.

...

The youth begin to leave.

Aseel: If we did like the whole thing again, at CM [Community Meeting].

Alana: We can do it again on Sunday.²⁰ Can we ask Jennie if we can do them again on Sunday?

Micky: We can't, it's too long, I'm sorry.

Though they do not use language like “ensemble culture” (I didn't introduce this language to them), in the above discussion the youth home in on a number of aspects of our classroom culture that mattered to them. Five of the seven youth mention tableaus and our performances as one of the things that they'll remember (note: I did cut out some of their non-performance rememberings because of a lack of space to provide context and explanation). As soon as the performance is over, and again at the end of the class, Aseel, Randal, and Alana ask if we can do the performance again, in front of a bigger audience at Community Meeting, lunch, or Celebration, indicating their pride in the work and enjoyment of the performance. Kicking off the go-around, Camilo brings up the relational aspect of our work as what he'll remember, noting that he'll remember his peers because we played games together.

Interestingly, some of the youth talk about remembering the collective, not individuals. My initial framing questions opened the floor for remembrances about the collective or individuals, prompting the youth to share about, “Anything that we did or anything that somebody else did that you're gonna remember.” All of the youth name collective experiences that we shared, and several of them elaborate on how they will remember the ways in which we worked together. Tayah and Adriana's comments emphasize this. Both youth recognize that our process has not been seamless, noting that we had earlier struggles and that change in the way that we worked together occurred. Despite the difficulties, Tayah and Adriana compliment the whole group for persisting and getting along. This raises questions about how a final

²⁰ The upcoming Saturday was going to be Breakthrough Somerville's Celebration event; a performance of student academic and artistic work for Breakthrough families and community members.

performance that youth are proud of can color previous conflict or struggle. I don't know whether Adriana's comment that the last two weeks have gone really well rings true for everyone in the room, but the point that I want to draw attention to is not her positive view of the recent rehearsal process. What rings the most true to ensemble culture about Tayah and Ariana's comments are that they do not erase struggle, rather, they acknowledge it and recognize the group's effort to work through challenges in the process of creating a performance. Alana's closing comment eloquently summarizes the conceptual underpinnings of my Praxis Project. She explains that it was not simply the content of our class that was interesting, she's never been very interested in social studies before. What made the class interesting was the *way* I taught and, "the *way* that everyone like worked together, like, nicely..." Here, Alana espouses the central tenet driving ensemble culture work: a belief that it is not just *what* we learn that matters, but the *way* we learn it and *the way everyone works together*.

9.8. How These Reflections Can Help Us: Planning, Noticing, Reflecting

One of the main interventions I made in an effort to build an ensemble culture in my classroom was having youth work on creating tableau performances for an external audience. I hoped that this rehearsal and performance process would create opportunities for youth to feel like they had individual ownership, responsibility, power, but also foster a culture of collective contribution and co-ownership. I thought that these performances would create a space where everyone's role in our class was important and where youth would connect with one another and myself. Many other authors have proposed that through performance work, classroom cultures can emerge where people are dedicated to one another, offer and receive critique, and contribute selflessly to a collective project. I saw things like this happen in my classroom during our rehearsal and performance process. However, I also saw other things happen. Dedication did not always come fluidly. Conflict frequently arose. Critique was often contested. I sometimes reasserted rituals of teacher control.

By sharing "Rehearsal Realities" I have tried to add complexity to notions of what using a theory of ensemble culture to guide classroom work looks like in practice. It is easy to theorize that in an ensemble culture it is each participant's responsibility to take up one another's offers. As Camilo showed me in the "Who wants to be the boss?" episode though, the way that this principle plays out in reality is not so clear cut. Camilo complexifies my notion of ensemble culture by making me ask, "Whose responsibility is it to take up whose offers?" I would encourage ensemble culture facilitators to embrace the complexity of the continual process of building ensemble culture, and to question our own assumptions about what the process should look like (as my noticing around what I perceived as "chaos" indicates). I would also encourage facilitators to consider ourselves as a part of the ensemble culture of our classrooms and think reflectively and intentionally about what our role is in the ensemble. Are we taking up youth's offerings and disruptive rituals? Are we working to co-construct a unique ensemble culture with

our class, or imposing our ensemble vision? When might rituals of control be useful in developing the collective?

Rather than focus my analysis on the specifics of how I enacted my performance-based interventions (physical space, theater games, reflection circles, rehearsal and performance), I have focused on a set of puzzles that arose within the rehearsal and performance process. I would suggest that in addition to thinking through which theater game to play and what story to make tableaux about, teachers might think about these overlapping puzzles of ensemble culture work: power, conflict, critique, chaos and inconsistency, and the interplay between the individual and the collective. By naming these themes and providing accounts of what they looked like in practice, I hope that we as practitioners can plan, recognize, and reflect on what's happening in our classrooms a little more clearly. As Eleanor Duckworth (1986) explains at the end of *Inventing Density*, an account of her teaching, "In giving this account... I hope to make such situations, charged with learning potential, easier to recognize and create." (p. 43).

10. "WE DID DECISIONS... THAT WILL MAKE US WORK MORE FAIR."²¹: ENSEMBLE CULTURE PRAXIS FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

This paper began by laying out in brief review of the macro-level oppressions that are embedded in U.S. schools and detailed my dismay at feeling that I was doing no better than the banking model of education in my own classroom. Next, I presented a theorization of ensemble culture, as a potential pedagogical approach for breaking with the traditional rituals of schooling. The bulk of the paper was spent unpacking the nuances of building an ensemble culture with youth through a performance-based pedagogy. In this final section, I want to return to the macro for a moment, making two brief points about the broader value of my ensemble culture praxis.

Sometimes, when I read about education I feel what I am reading offers one of two things: critique and solution. Both genres hold immense value. As a beginning teacher, critique of teaching and educational systems help me to understand what I don't want to do, and what oppressions I am in danger of perpetrating if I don't make intentional anti-oppressive moves. Solution-driven writing provides me with ideas about how to break with these oppressive forms of education. Both of these styles have limitations in their utility to me as a young teacher though. Critique often leaves me without ideas of what to do, and frequently fails to recognize the complexity of classrooms and of being a young teacher. Solution driven pieces provide me with tangible ideas about how to improve my teaching, but often paint an idealized and incomplete picture of enacting the solutions that the author proposes. When enacting a stance or technique that I've read about, I often find that my experience doesn't match what was depicted in the text I read. In my Praxis Project Thesis I have tried to emulate a third kind of writing and analysis, one that embraces the messiness and complexity of relational work in classrooms. My

²¹ Ramona, a 5th Period student, July 27.

intention in this paper has been to write an account that is authentic to my experience as a young teacher in a middle school classroom; a position where teaching often feels like an endless set of unanswered questions. I believe that this sort of scholarship, driven by a teacher-student's (to borrow Freire's term) authentic reflections on the puzzles of being a teacher-student and by a desire to transform my own and my student-teachers' realities, is urgently needed.

The second big picture point I want to conclude with frames the value of ensemble culture work in the classroom as a part of a much larger societal project. Ensemble culture is centrally concerned with *the way people work together*, and, as I learned early in the summer from Camilo and Adriana, *who has power and how much*. Towards the end of the summer, my classes each had a debate about the Argentinian factory expropriations. The youth were split into two groups, workers and bosses, and debated who should run the factories and how the factory workers should be paid. (Some worker-run factories in Argentina had opted to pay everyone the same wage, others had a tiered system, some rotated jobs.) After the debate, we discussed our personal views on who we thought should run the factories and how they should be compensated. Youth expressed a wide range of views on how power should be distributed in the factories and how the factories would work best. Some youth stood for equal pay and worker control, others feared one worker taking over, and some thought that the bosses deserved to get to keep their factory. At the end, one youth asked me, "Who do *you* think should run the factory?" "You know me," I replied, "Who do you think I'll pick?" "He'll pick the workers," one youth predicted. "Yes," I affirmed, "I believe that workers should own and run their factories."

I believe that workers can and should run their own factories, that teachers and youth can run their own schools, that "ordinary people," not certified experts, can and should run their own countries and communities *together*. As the Argentinian factory workers encountered, this prospect is not without its complexities and problems. Gaining expropriation rights to the factories was only a part of the battle, just as disrupting the rituals of school in my classroom was just the first step to create an opening for something more. Next, the factory workers had to decide how much different workers would be paid, what they would do about slacking workers, and how they would sustain their factories economically. Who would get to make decisions in the factory? How would these decisions be made? How would new workers become invested in the cooperative? These were very similar to the questions that I faced, and that youth faced, when engaging in ensemble culture work. I hoped that the youth I worked with would come to see that workers are capable of running their own factories. Part of creating that belief was enacting ensemble culture work. How could I teach about cooperative economics, and how could youth see that as a possibility, if they did not share cooperative experiences? The connection between ensemble culture and an anti-capitalist project was not lost on Ramona, a youth in my 5th Period class. On July 27th, we had just played the machine game described in an earlier anecdote. The group had started by selecting a product to make (socks), brainstorming the different parts of the sock making process, and then created a remarkably cohesive sock manufacturing machine. After completing the machine we reflected on the process.

Ramona: Okay, so... before, when we were in your job doing the paper airplanes,²² um, you [Micky] told us what to do and it was kind of this triangle,²³ because you were the one making the decisions alone, because you told us... the jobs that we had, and we weren't that happy with it and that's why we didn't, like, work so much... And then the second one... which is a triangle too,²⁴ and it had all these three points where like um, the workers made their decisions, like to make it fair, and that's what we did, like for the sock [machine]... because we did decisions and we chose our own job that will make us work more fair.

Here, Ramona juxtaposes the way we've been working together in our collaborative performance work and the ways that we worked together (or against each other) in our capitalist factory simulation. She speaks to the better experience that the group had when they had decision making power as opposed to when I was making decisions for them in the paper airplane factory. How can we expect a more collaborative and just society to emerge if we continue to emulate capitalist competition in our classrooms and extracurriculars? An ensemble culture provides one notion of how we might go about co-creating experiences within which youth and teachers can strive to enact and experience collective struggle and achievement. As Theater of the Oppressed pioneer Augusto Boal (1985) states, "the theater is not revolutionary in itself, but it is surely rehearsal for the revolution" (p. 122).

²² This references a simulation that we did earlier in the summer in which the youth were all workers in my paper airplane factory. They worked in an assembly line, were paid poorly, and treated unfairly by me as I strived to make a greater profit.

²³ Here, Ramona references two infographics I developed to synthesize capitalism. One infographic lists three "rules" of capitalism; one corner of the triangle reads, "Individual decision making process." The other triangle, which Ramona gestures to here, depicts the class structure of capitalist society, with a section labeled ruling class, middle class, and working class.

²⁴ Here, Ramona references another triangular infographic which I adapted from LeftRoot's *Out to Win!: Notes on the Road to 21st Century Socialism* (2019), to illustrate the "rules" of communism. One corner read, "Workers make decisions together."

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