

Learning From Laramie: Urban High School Students Read, Research, and Reenact *The Laramie Project*

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*How Pa. heartland went for gay rights.
The hate-crimes law extends even to the transgendered.
Observers are stunned.*

A remarkable thing has happened in Pennsylvania. The state legislature passed an amendment to the hate-crimes law that made Pennsylvania only the fifth state in the union to protect not only gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, but also those who are transgendered. (Harris & Worden, 2002)

This story appeared on the front page of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* on Sunday December 15, 2002. The article chronicled the road to the passage of this legislation in a state that is commonly thought to be very conservative, not particularly sympathetic to gay issues, and maybe even a little hostile. It included stories of gay activists and parents of gay children working tirelessly to convince legislators of the need for this bill. In the article the writers cited the beating death of Matthew Shepard in 1998 as an important milestone in awakening people's concern for gay rights. As I reprinted the article for my senior drama students at Masterman High School, I thought that the journey taken by the activists and legislators toward passage of the bill was similar to the one I had hoped my 43 senior drama students would take after reading, researching, and reenacting Moises Kaufman's play about the Matthew Shepard murder, *The Laramie Project*.

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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

I have been teaching English at Masterman High School since 1998. Masterman is a small, highly selective magnet school located on the fringes of Center City that draws academically talented students from all neighborhoods of the city. Prior to teaching at Masterman, I taught at Simon Gratz High School, a comprehensive neighborhood high school located in North Philadelphia, in the heart of the African American community. During my 20 years at Gratz, I was involved with Philadelphia Young Playwrights, an arts-in-education organization that pairs classroom teachers with professional playwrights for the purpose of teaching students to write and produce original plays. I was able to integrate this program into my English program at Gratz, and my students there were extremely successful. (Every year at least one of my students won the local playwriting competition and three of my students won the national competition and had their plays produced off-Broadway.)

I spent nearly 10 years as a teacher-researcher studying the meaning and significance of what I learned from my students at Gratz. One of the most important lessons I learned came from the insights of my student Terrance Jenkins about authorial intent. The author of the award-winning play *Taking Control*, Terrance said of his work, “I had a message I wanted to get across. I had a story to tell. I wanted people to see these things and I wanted then to begin to make a change” (Patterson & Strosser, 1993).

Terrance’s words reminded me of Iser’s (1978) ideas about the pragmatic nature of literature as expressed in *The Act of Reading*. “What is important to readers, critics, and authors alike is what literature *does*, not what it *means*,” (p. 53) Iser writes. Literature has a pragmatic meaning and an intersubjective goal: “the imaginary correction of deficient realities” (p. 85). To imagine is to take the first step toward taking action in the world. The process of writing original plays involved a kind of reflective thinking about the world, and it offered the student playwrights the opportunity to (in Terrance’s words) “take control” of the trajectory of their lives. I saw my students’ outlooks on life and education change as their reading and writing powers developed. I also saw many of them go on to college. It is still my greatest source of pride that so many of my former Gratz High School students became social workers and educators.

When I arrived at Masterman, I initially tried to include the playwriting program in my English classes. I soon discovered that it was not a good fit;

the academic requirements and the pressure for students to perform well on standardized tests did not allow for this kind of curricular “deviation.” I became dismayed by the implications of this kind of teaching and I began to feel used and exploited by the system. What I was being asked to do was not consistent with my own sense of mission and purpose. Simply stated, I teach to “*tikkun olam*,” or heal the world. I do not teach to earn a profit for some nameless investors (despite the incursion of for-profit companies into the public school arena); I do not teach to get the most privileged kids into the best schools (despite the assumptions and demands made by some of the parents); I do not teach to pass on unexamined traditions of literature or history; I do not teach to perpetuate racism, sexism, classism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, or any of the other damaging *isms* that threaten to diminish the lives of some and aggrandize the lives of others. I do not teach to maintain the status quo.

For me teaching is a hopeful act, one of possibility and transformation. And it has been a struggle. The struggle became more difficult for me in a school of relative privilege. It wasn't just that the playwriting program didn't fit; my own philosophies and values appeared to be in conflict with the dominant values of the school at large.

With the support of the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL), I began to explore alternative approaches to what I was doing in my English classes at Masterman. With the assistance of CASTL, I was able to develop an interactive website titled *Playing with the Possible: Teaching, Learning, and Drama on the Second Stage*. On this website, and for my Carnegie project, I was able to (a) outline my process and history as a teacher researcher, (b) present my thinking behind the development of a new elective class called Drama and Inquiry, and (c) explain my burgeoning theory of “second stage” school reform, which I thought might be possible at a school like Masterman.

Many theaters have two performance areas: a main stage upon which works are performed with a wide audience appeal and a second stage (sometimes called a black box) where new plays and experimental works can be developed. The second stage often serves as an incubator for main-stage productions. In rethinking my approach to teaching at Masterman, I developed an elective class called Drama and Inquiry that grew out of my decade-long association with Philadelphia Young Playwrights and was consistent with my critical pedagogy approach to teaching and learning. While my English classes remained “main stage” productions, my elective became the alternative, experimental space—my second stage on which I could enact a different kind of pedagogy, which might eventually have an impact on

the pedagogy of the main stage. In Figure 9.1, I have identified some of the characteristics of teaching and learning on these different stages.

For 3 years of their high school experience, Masterman students have little choice in their course selection. In their senior year, they are able to select from among a small number of electives that take the place of some of the more selective AP (advanced placement) courses. The purpose of the Drama and Inquiry course, as I stated to the students in the syllabus, was to “explore questions about multiple perspectives, shifting identities, and our coexistence in a diverse, complex, and ever-changing world.” It was my hope that we could “become a true intellectual community filled with members who raise heartfelt and complex questions and explore answers together in an engaged ethical dialogue.” In this course, we read plays by contemporary American playwrights that dealt with issues of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and identity. Students wrote their own monologues and dialogues and eventually wrote and acted in their own one-act plays. They participated in alternative types of classroom discourse, including Socratic seminars, collaborative inquiry, reflective conversations, and journal groups. At the end of the year, the students of this class produced a theater performance titled *Split Open*. *Split Open* contained original scenes and was written, acted, and directed by the students and performed for a small audience in an intimate space we created on the stage of the auditorium.

The study I conducted of *The Laramie Project* occurred in the 3rd year of this class. Over the years, the course has continued to create a second-stage space. In this space, alternative discourses and values have been developing in relation to the discourses and values of the main stage that are

Figure 9.1. Characteristics of the main-stage and second-stage teaching and learning

Main Stage	Second Stage
Emphasis on answers	Emphasis on questions
Lecture and debate	Dialogue
Competitive	Collaborative
Knowledge transmission	Knowledge construction
Canonical texts	Non-canonical texts
Individual rewards	Group accomplishments
Individual achievement	Social justice

embodied in the courses, assessments, structures, and rituals of the school. It is helpful for me to think about the ways in which what happens in this class can affect what is happening in classes on the main stage. The course has grown in popularity among the students. The first year it was taught, 16 students were enrolled; the second year found 28 students in the class. This year, I am teaching two sections of the class with a total of 43 students.

THE LARAMIE PROJECT

While I had previously studied the impact that writing original plays had on my high school students, I had not looked closely at the impact that reading and performing the plays of others could have on them. I had been planning to teach *The Laramie Project* to my drama classes. I was familiar with reader-response theory, particularly Rosenblatt's (1995) ideas about the relationship between efferent and aesthetic responses to literature. These ideas intrigued me and raised questions about the ways in which my students would respond to this play. Because the play was about homosexuality, homophobia, murder, and religion, I knew that they would have deep emotional responses to the text. I was less certain how they would relate to the text intellectually and what my role as the teacher in this process should be. In addition, I had planned to have my students perform parts of this play for an audience. I was not certain how that process would affect their responses to the text.

I devised a study in which I asked the students to write a two- to three-page written response to *The Laramie Project* at three junctures in the process:

1. After reading the play independently with very little background explanation.
2. After reading about Moises Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Group, about their philosophy and process, researching accounts of the actual events that happened in Laramie and surrounding stories, events, websites, and so on.
3. After performing key moments from the play that groups of students blocked, staged, and directed themselves.

I was particularly interested in the level of engagement students experienced at each of these points in the process. I hypothesized that they would become increasingly more engaged as the project intensified. For

this study, I collected 129 responses from all 43 students at the three different moments. An additional piece of the study that I did not systematically record and transcribe is the discussions that took place in class in response to the play and the journals. In addition, there were several group e-mails that I sent to the class Listserv and student responses that make up the data for this study.

MY INTELLECTUAL JOURNEY AS TEACHER-RESEARCHER ON THIS PROJECT

As a teacher-researcher, I am constantly engaged in what Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1993) have called “systematic and intentional” inquiry into my classroom practice. This process of inquiry allows me to raise questions; search for answers both inside and outside of my classroom; make sense of what is happening there; and develop new ideas, strategies, and curricula. In short, I can have an active intellectual life that is linked to my teaching, each feeding the other. Teacher-researchers, unlike outside educational researchers, have a unique responsibility to the students they are teaching *while* conducting their research. Their theory and practice are inextricably linked as they must simultaneously question, observe, read, analyze, make sense, and teach. Thus these teachers’ intellectual journeys are as much a part of the story as are their students.

My original goal in selecting *The Laramie Project* was to teach a play that would challenge my students to think differently about the world and show them the transformative power of drama. Before teaching *The Laramie Project*, I researched the actual events upon which the play was based, the process used by the Tectonic Theater Project in creating the play, and the underlying ideas about theater held by the director of the group, Moises Kauffman. Shortly after the murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay University of Wyoming student, Kauffman (2000a) posed these questions to the members of his theater company: “What can we as theater artists do as a response to this incident? And more concretely: Is theater a medium that can contribute to the national dialogue on current events?” In response to his own questions, Kaufman and his theater company traveled to Laramie, Wyoming, and over the course of 15 months conducted more than 200 interviews with more than 50 people. From the transcripts of those interviews and other public documents relating to the murder and subsequent trials, Kaufman and his company created a play in which the actors played themselves and the dozens of characters they had interviewed. The

play was constructed as juxtaposed and related moments and performed with minimal scenery, props, and costume changes. By presenting these multiple perspectives and contrasting moments, Kaufman was inviting the audience to synthesize the material for themselves, an approach that was pioneered by Bertolt Brecht in his Epic Theatre.

My desire to understand more about Kauffman's theories about theater lead me to the work of Augusto Boal (1985), who in his seminal work, *Theater of the Oppressed*, contrasts Classical Aristotelian Theatre and Epic Theatre. He explains that Aristotelian drama appeals to the spectator's emotion, while epic drama appeals to the spectator's thought. Aristotelian drama creates empathy and provides an emotional catharsis that cleanses the spectator, while epic drama appeals to the spectator's reason and, through knowledge, arouses his or her capacity for action. Boal says that for Brecht, a play is meant to provoke the audience into reforming society not only by thinking about the play, but also by challenging common ideologies. Because there is no denouement or resolution to the conflicts enacted in the play, the spectator can see the fundamental contradictions in society and be moved to make decisions for action.

I found this distinction between feeling and thought as described in these two types of theater very provocative in thinking about students' efferent and aesthetic responses to *The Laramie Project*. I felt assured that given Kaufman's stated objectives in creating this play, it would be appropriate for my students to enter into a complex dialogue about the issues and events the play evoked.

I also read the work of Brian Edmiston (2000), one of the leading researchers in drama education. I was intrigued by his ideas about drama as a form of ethical education that could provide students with multiple and sometimes conflicting views of events. He writes, "To judge myself ethically, I must be answerable to others' evaluations of my actions at the same time I expect them to be answerable to me and to others" (p. 66). Reflection on action is essential to acting ethically and one must get outside of one's own intentions to view one's actions from the perspective of those affected. He goes on to argue that drama enables young people to imagine life from other people's positions. Such positioning offers them the opportunity to imagine "how the world could be different and what our lives could be like if we acted in different ways" (p. 67).

Thus, I concluded, reading a play such as *The Laramie Project* and providing students with the opportunity to reflect upon and engage in real dialogue about the issues and events it presents can translate into action. This is of no little consequence. Our students are future participants in

our democracy and will one day be called upon to make decisions relating to gay rights and hate crime legislation. There are real-life consequences for real people of Bill Clinton's "don't ask, don't tell" policy or George Bush's failure to include gay people in Texas's hate crime legislation.

My students' responses to this play and the way that I shape their classroom experiences are also of grave consequence. This is a frightening and daunting realization for any teacher to have. However I was encouraged and reassured by these words of John Dewey (as quoted in Rosenblatt, 1995):

More "passions" not fewer is the answer. To check the influence of hate, there must be sympathy, while to rationalize sympathy there are needed emotions of curiosity, caution, respect for the freedom of others—dispositions which evoke objects which balance those called up by sympathy and prevent the degeneration into maudlin sentiment and meddling interference. Rationality once more is not a force to invoke against impulse and habit. It is the attainment of a working harmony among diverse desires. (p. 217)

Literature, Rosenblatt contends, can foster that kind of rationality. "The literary experience may provide emotional tension and conflicting attitudes out of which spring the kind of thinking that can later be assimilated into actual behavior" (p. 217). This process of reflection can lead the student to seek additional information concerning the work, the author, and their social setting as a basis for understanding him- or herself and the literature. "Through the process of self scrutiny, he [the student] may come to understand himself as well as the outside world better. A certain inner readjustment may have started that will modify his response to the next person or next situation encountered" (p. 214).

Throughout all my preliminary research, I couldn't help but think about Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, the two young men who beat and killed Matthew Shepard. If only they had been educated to think rationally about their emotional responses. If only they had been engaged in an empathetic and ethical dialogue about difference. If only they had learned to make a habit of reflection and self-scrutiny. They were not that long ago students in a Laramie High School English classroom. What were they then thinking about their lives and their futures? What might their teachers have done to interrupt the flawed and circular logic that enabled them to justify their brutal beating of a young man because they said he had made a pass at them?

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

This question leads me back into my own classroom and the 129 journal responses I collected from my students during this project. I have read and reread these journals many times, marking them and trying to begin an analysis. For this chapter, I will share some of my initial impressions and make some preliminary connections to theory.

One of my expectations in designing this project was that students' level of engagement would increase and deepen as they moved through the different processes. I thought that their stepping back from the work itself and researching the event as well as Moises Kaufman's theories of theater would offer a kind of efferent detachment and intellectual inquiry. I had also hypothesized that they would return to a more aesthetic or emotional stance when they performed the play, thereby creating an even more intensive "lived through" experience than the one they had had when they initially read the text alone. While this was true for many of the students, it was not universally the case.

Some students had their most intense responses to their initial reading. I was surprised by the number of students who wrote in their first journals about how this play made them feel. Several students used the term "emotional roller coaster" to describe their experience reading the book. Many wrote about having a physical reaction to the text. Some had to stop reading and take a break from the intensity. Here is a sampling of some of their responses:

- "Halfway through act II, I actually started to cry."
- "The content was not easy to swallow. At one point, I put the book down and just took a breath because the book really affected me."
- "*The Laramie Project* is one of the few books I actually had to take a break from not because I was bored but because I was deeply moved by Matthew Shepard's story."
- "I actually found myself becoming physically upset as I read some of the moments."

Some were able to pinpoint the exact moment and where they had their most intense aesthetic response. Steve explains his in this excerpt from his first journal:

At the end, Dennis Shepard's statement may have single-handedly made me like this play. It was so heartfelt and sincere and as he was

talking, I could picture all the things he was talking about like the way he used to watch the stars with his son. . . . When he said not only his son but his hero he lost on that dreadful day, I felt so bad for him. It was just an amazing speech that was so powerful and so heartfelt that I had to stop and just read it again. I don't like a large majority of the books I have read in my years at this school and I don't think anything I have read had made me feel as bad as this speech but it is probably the only thing I ever stopped to read over and over again. A book has never really touched me as much as this one. (Journal 1)

One of the areas of response that has intrigued me is how the work we did after reading the play aroused students' thinking about social action. Adam addresses this question in this excerpt from his final journal:

I have been inclined to believe that little good has come from Matthew's death, but another thought has come to mind. While sudden newsworthy stories of any cause may dominate our thoughts as a public in an ever changing barrage of new victims and new villains, it is the slow progress fueled by activists and regular people that produces change. A story and the martyrs and heroes it produces serve as a symbol for the fight. However, the fight is not won by the symbols, but by the fighters. Civil Rights for minorities were not won by the deaths of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X but by the years of steady and unspectacular pushing for equality in policy and public opinion. (Journal 3)

He goes on to say that that the play keeps us "at a safe distance, where our intellects are at work as much as our emotions." This echoes Rosenblatt's and Dewey's ideas about the relationship of rational reflection upon emotion and the kind of ethical action it can engender.

This change is evident in what Derek writes in his final journal:

I know it made me more conscious of what of what I say and do. I have to admit that I have called things "gay" before. It was not meant to belittle gay people. It just seemed like a word to describe something you didn't like. When we started talking about *The Laramie Project* and gay people, I realized how wrong I was to say these things. I have never felt any form of hate towards gay people but I can see how I was using a form of discrimination and I felt bad about it. Whenever I hear someone say, "that's gay" or something like

that I think about what we learned in class and most of the time I'll say something to that person. (Journal 3)

Derek is able to step outside his own benign intentions and see the ways in which his act could be hurtful to others. This is what Edmiston means when he discusses drama as ethical education. Bakhtinian answerability is at work in Derek's reassessment of his past behavior. His decision to "say something to that person" is a difficult one for many high school students.

One of the reasons for this difficulty is the very popular notion among high school students that "everyone is entitled to his or her opinion." I call this "raging relativism" and I have found it to be very hard to combat in the classroom when controversial issues are being addressed. This idea has as its corollary among some that "all opinions are equal." This makes it difficult for teachers to engage those students who articulate hateful, racist, or other harmful opinions in class discussions. I have often been accused by some students of being close-minded and too didactic when I have challenged those students. Seeing the hateful rhetoric on the website of Reverend Phelps (www.godhatesfags.com) changed the way many thought about people's "rights" to their opinions.

Ariel struggled with this throughout the process. In her second journal, written after several days of online research and heated class discussions, she notes:

At Masterman the majority likes to think that we're so open-minded. But we're close-minded to people who we think are close-minded. . . . I am judgmental to the judgmental. And I'm not sure that isn't okay either, because I think that if the people who insist on controlling other people's lives go undisputed, then they might succeed. (Journal 2)

It's as if she needs to convince herself that it is OK to judge the ideas of others. She sees the prevailing ethos of Masterman as one of "open-mindedness." However, she is beginning to question the usefulness, even the rightness, of that approach. She seems to reach a decision about this in her final journal as she contemplates the consequences of the "haters'" views:

This reminds me of what Angus said about being close-minded to the close-minded. And I'm still not sure if that's okay. I mean, I'm that way, but that's kind of bringing myself down to the haters' level,

right? But also, they deserve it. I mean why should they expect good treatment if they dish out the opposite? But I learned a lot from thinking about this. People have opinions that you can't change. But you should try to change them anyway. If people had spoken out in Laramie when they heard homophobic slurs, maybe McKinney and Henderson wouldn't have become what they are. Zubaida was right. Laramie had to own this. And I realized that at Masterman there are a whole lot more anti-gay people than I thought. . . . All in all I am grateful for this play. I found a new courage in myself to do the right thing. I lost a bit of innocence. Seeing this kind of tragedy jades you (and I know about the Holocaust so that is saying a lot). Matthew did make a difference. I wish that he was still alive, but he did make a difference. (Journal 3)

In his final journal, Angus addresses the impact the process has had on him. While he acknowledges that the project has come to an end, the thoughts, feelings, and discussions live on:

This whole process has been one long emotional journey. I thought that after a while I might become numb to the subject matter and every period wouldn't evoke some sort of emotional distress within me. This was definitely not the case. I'm relieved that this inquiry into *The Laramie Project* has come to a close. However I know that this is by no means the end to the inquiry itself, especially as it exists outside the classroom. This is an issue that will have relevance and importance to my generation probably for the rest of our lives.

He goes on to explain why this learning experience has been different from others he has experienced in school:

Our inquiry into *The Laramie Project* will go down in my memory as the most powerful educational experience of my life. Usually, classroom discussions and subject matter tend to avoid the really controversial issues, especially those that have relevance in people's lives. Too often in education, it seems that educators and students alike avoid topics that make people uncomfortable and really change their thought processes. Usually, when we discuss upsetting events, it's in a subject like history and you can easily write it off as "oh, that's history, that's in the past." The reality of *The Laramie Project* is that you absolutely cannot do that. It's real, it's present and it's scary.

Perhaps that is why I had such a strong personal reaction. I read it and I have to realize, “This is how we are.” I can’t just say, “This is how we were.” And write it off as a mistake of the past that we have since learned from. Obviously, we have yet to learn. (Journal 3)

This lack of closure is appropriate and one of Epic Theatre’s desired results. Moises Kaufman intended for audience members to find their own meanings in this play, search their own conscience, and be moved to take their own action. In his initial reading of the play, Ahmed wrote:

I would be interested in reading similar plays about Columbine and such tragedies. It’s not so much I want to relive the horror but I want closure. Is it fair for an outsider to want closure on a tragedy that didn’t directly affect him? Is it fair to the insider who probably will never find such closure? (Journal 1)

Later, after conducting the research and preparing for the performance, he comes to understand that the closure he sought will not be provided for him.

I have learned that major events do not have the ability to have defined beginnings and endings. The story began before the actual murder and continues even as I type. It has been carried on through discussions, hate crime legislation, straight-gay relations nationwide among other things. It is impossible to ever have the complete story and I have learned that in research that the goal is not always to have the complete story. I can only hope to find better understanding for myself. (Journal 3)

Bianca’s journal entries present a dramatic example of the process by which one finds a better understanding for oneself. A passionate and outspoken African American young woman, Bianca wrote in her first journal that she thought that “it is the best play that I have ever read, (yes even better than *Fences*). I have never read anything like it and it allowed me to reflect on my views not only on homosexuals but on people whom [*sic*] are different from me.”

She goes on to write:

I personally think homosexuality is wrong, but that doesn’t mean that I would ever hurt or think about hurting someone whom [*sic*] is

gay. People need to learn that “to each his own.” It is not our place to judge anyone, because we all have skeletons in our closets. I would never treat anyone differently because they are gay, my views are simply my views and I have no right to impose them on others. (Journal 1)

Bianca expresses her initial reaction to hearing of the Matthew Shepard murder in 1998 in self-centered terms.

When I first heard about the tragedy, I was shocked, but I really didn’t dwell on it. I was like, oh that’s a shame what happened to that boy,” and I just sort of forgot about it. Maybe if it had been a black boy or girl beaten and bound to a fence and left to die, I might have reacted differently. . . . I’m not gay, so I didn’t have to worry about being tied to a fence in the middle of nowhere and left to die. (Journal 1)

In her second journal, she writes about an article she has come across during her research into *The Laramie Project*. The article frightens her.

The article was about a white supremacist who had killed a homosexual couple. It scared me to death because the killer felt that he was completely justified in his actions, claiming that he carried out the will of God. He even went as far as to criticize others for not taking similar actions against homosexuals and Jews. The killer was very alert and sure of himself, which was the scariest part. He felt that his murder was not a crime because it was the will of God that these two men burn in hell. (Journal 2)

Here she is beginning to make the connections between thought and deed. While she doesn’t make the direct connection to her first journal in which she has written that she personally thinks homosexuality is wrong, she is appalled that other people have used Christianity to justify their heinous acts.

The idea that people are murdering innocent people in the name of God is just sad. Why would God want someone to die because they are gay? Not my God. The world is a scary place and crazy things happen all of the time. I can’t control someone dragging me on the back of a pick-up truck for miles because they feel that all African Americans should die. (Journal 2)

In the performance, Bianca played Reggie Fluty, the police officer who was the first official to arrive on the scene of the crime. Bianca writes:

Playing Reggie Fluty, who was the first police officer to report to the scene of the crime, I learned exactly how he was murdered. He was beaten, tied to a fence with a rope and left there overnight to die. This is a crime that would make me cringe if it was done to an animal, nevertheless a real person. Reading it for the first time, I could not believe that people could have such hatred in their hearts towards gays. . . . Sometimes my world is so black and white. I just do not consider homosexuals like me and when I think of discrimination or hatred, I think of it as being done against people who look like me. Honestly, before I started reading the play, I was like, why is this guy so special? He is no different than any black man that got killed in the struggle. For instance, the case in Texas where the black man was dragged only a couple of years ago; where's his play? Doing this project helped me move a little past that however. Once I began looking at *The Laramie Project* as a true story, not just a play, I began to care and feel like I had a duty to change things. (Journal 3)

This change becomes evident in her closing comments and final epiphany.

In all of our discussions, Giana always says that she does think that homosexuality is wrong but she would never publicly judge someone gay or disrespect their space. That is sort of my feelings about homosexuality. [See comments in Journal 1.] But I was thinking today. Our feelings are hurtful too. As long as we think that homosexuality is wrong, as long as the majority sees it as an abnormality, hate crimes such as this will be sort of okay. The way that whites justified racism against blacks is by training themselves to believe that we were animals [reference to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and the character known as schoolteacher]. They forced themselves to believe that we were not normal, and therefore inferior, making slavery acceptable. In *The Laramie Project*, Rob's character has the line that always sticks in my head: "I would sit them down and I would tell them, this is what gay people do, okay? This is what animals do." If we all believe that homosexuality is abnormal and animalistic, then the crime becomes almost justified. This scares me because no crime like this should be accepted. But

then I know deep down, I do think that the man who was dragged from the truck in Texas suffered more than Matthew did, even after reading the play. I relate that to me, because shit like that has been happening to us for years. Like I said, sometimes I see things in black and white, I think a lot of us do. We're so busy with our own prejudices we're dealing with, it's sort of hard to think about gays. (Journal 3)

While Bianca still sees things in "black and white," through her involvement in the reenactment of the play, she has reached a deeper understanding about the process of dehumanization and the ways in which it can lead to violence against people who are different and vulnerable. And she has come to question her own complicity in that process.

NEXT STEPS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

I have been surprised and overwhelmed by the depth and variety of my students' responses to *The Laramie Project*. I have been intrigued by some of the connections I have been able to make between their responses and reader-response theory. I believe that my preliminary findings indicate that there is a powerful and important role that drama education can play in the ethical development of young people.

Some of the issues and questions I would like to pursue include

1. *The ways in which students connected this text to their own lives.* During the 3 weeks in which we read this play, two students were severely beaten at a party. Another lost her father after he was felled by a sudden heart infection. These events affected their responses and the responses of the other members of the class.
2. *The ways in which students' ethnic, racial, sexual, and religious identities played into their responses to the play.* Many students wrote about their own experiences as minorities. Others struggled with their religious beliefs as they related to homosexuality. It is also interesting that at this particular time at Masterman, in the entire high school, there are no students who are "out." This has not been the case in the other years I have taught there and I have questions about the implications of that.

3. *The ways in which students connected to individual characters in the play.* Because the interviews were done over a period of 15 months, the Tectonic Theatre Company was able to chronicle the change in attitude of several characters, particularly Jedidiah Shultz, a young Mormon acting student who changed his thinking about homosexuality, and Romaine Patterson, a lesbian and friend of Matthew Shepard's who became a human rights activist. Several students cited these characters or described emotional and intellectual journeys similar to theirs.
4. *The nature of the intertextual connections made by the students.* As was illustrated by Bianca's story, students turned to other texts as well as historical and current events such as Columbine, September 11, and the brutal dragging death of the Black man in Jasper, Texas (James Byrd).
5. *The way students responded as actors.* Some students' responses addressed their concern with acting in this play. One student, who had been in the annual school play for 3 years, addressed all his journal responses to the daunting and very unpleasant task of having to play a hateful character such as Reverend Phelps or one of the murderers.
6. *The ways in which individual students moved along a continuum of engagement and detachment.* I would like to look closely at the responses of several individual students and chart their responses in terms of their own expressed engagement and detachment looking at the activities, issues, or moments in the text that triggered their involvement or detachment.
7. *The ways in which individual students expressed their emotional and intellectual responses.* While I understand Rosenblatt's theory of a continuum of response, some of my students seemed to express simultaneous emotional and rational responses. I would like to look at this more closely.
8. *The ways in which students responded to one another's responses.* Many times in their journals, students cited the ideas, comments, or performances of other students. In addition, students engaged in some group e-mails on the class Listserv in response to class discussions. I would like to take a closer look at these intersections and interactions in light of Edmiston's ideas about dialogism and answerability in the drama classroom.
9. *Students' responses to the structure, goals, and impact of Epic Theatre.* The students read *The Laramie Project* with little

introduction from me. Most of them responded to the unexpected structure of the play and their own feelings about it. I would like to look more closely at the ways in which their thoughts and feelings changed as they learned more about Kaufman's intentions and the tradition from which he was working. I am also interested in knowing whether acting in and seeing the play performed affected the students' responses to the work.

These are just some of the ideas that I would like to pursue, and they all have at their root questions about implications for practice. While my work in analyzing and making sense of this project has only just begun, the daily responsibilities to my two drama (and three English) classes march on. The insights and ideas that I have gained while writing this chapter will no doubt continue to inform my teaching.

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Meanwhile, the impact of this project continues to ripple out from my classroom. The director of the school play, a social studies teacher (and a friend) came to my Drama and Inquiry classes' performances of *The Laramie Project* after deciding that he would like to do it as the school play. When the call came for auditions, nearly 50 students tried out. (There are only 400 students in the entire high school.) And this number does not include the 20 students who will work on the stage crew designing sets and props for the performance. On the day before opening night, the cast members performed their dress rehearsal for the entire eighth grade. Student leadership groups planned and led workshops relating to homophobia for the middle school students following the performance. The work of the "second stage" had literally become a main-stage production and the students' thoughts, feelings, and reflections were translated into actions that brought about positive change in the school and the community. Such a result is what we hope for from our citizens and what we sometimes get from our legislators.

NOTE

To learn more about Marsha Pincus's teaching, see *Playing with the Possible: Teaching, Learning, and Drama on the Second Stage*, at her website, <http://www.goingpublicwithteaching.org/mpincus/>

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