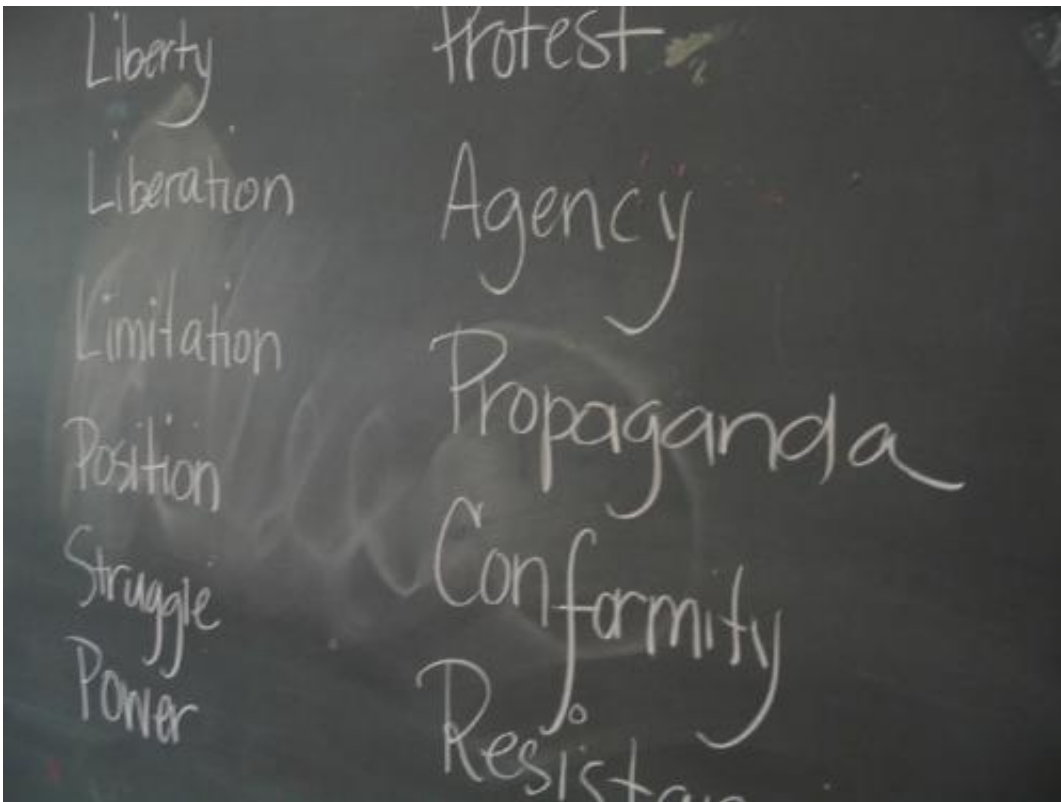


Research explores social justice, democracy through the arts

January 28 2014, by Kevin Sliman



Brainstormed list of concepts defining democracy. Credit: Penn State

Two faculty members in Penn State's College of Education who used the arts in education to begin dialogues with students about social justice and democracy have recently published their pedagogical practices and research.

Kimberly Powell, associate professor of education and art education, and Stephanie Serriere, assistant professor of education, each used inspiration from various theatrical forums and techniques that are intended to empower individuals to actively engage issues.

In Powell's classroom teaching, she has staged public interactive performances on Penn State's University Park campus where her students portrayed different [images](#) of democracy.

As a part of the research, student passers-by were invited to share their thoughts on the performance, its meaning, and if/how they would change it in order to help shape new images of democracy.

Powell said she had no idea at the time that this exercise would prove to be such a profound experience for both the image-makers and the viewers.

"We have encountered a variety of viewpoints on democracy," said Powell. "We learned that by involving passers-by, the concept of democracy was endlessly interpreted, created and contested. Involving others has contributed to rich discussions about images and concepts of democracy in our society."

Powell said that the theater techniques she used are based on a belief that it is important to communicate by using the body rather than speech because it can bypass barriers or filters associated with speech.

"Our experiences are multisensory," said Powell. "The visual field is not just about seeing. It evokes the other senses. To encourage students to embody an image, and to reflect on an image, is to engage them in the recognition that images are symbolic—representations that they can directly question and confront."



Students take part in an an interactive performance on Penn State's University Park campus. Credit: Penn State

Serriere's research used photography in pre-k classrooms where students reviewed pictures of actual, same-day classroom activities. For example, one picture was of a boy who was crying because other students told him that he was not allowed to play with them.

Using the photos as a platform for conversation, students were then prompted to re-imagine different possibilities that might result in different outcomes by using their bodies to re-enact the scenario. This offered Serriere various perspectives on how the students understood what happened and how they envisioned a more ideal or just world.

"With images, we can see and talk through each other's interpretation in a different way," said Serriere, who added that this exercise can give a new platform of expression to marginalized or underrepresented students.

Serriere said this is important because stereotypical concepts were already inescapably and consistently present in the children's work and play, especially enacted conceptions about gender, class, language and power. Her efforts aimed to help students explore dilemmas in such stereotypical concepts and understand alternative viewpoints.

"I have my interpretations about what's fair and just in preschoolers' worlds, but I wanted to hear from them and gain their perceptions of what is right, fair and just," said Serriere. "I wanted to explore through photos what they thought they could do about things they may want to change. Young people are often told what to do but not often asked how they would like something to be."

Powell and Serriere said that social justice is important to educators because social injustice, big and small, is potentially embedded in school subject matter, the ways educators teach, or the ways in which students engage with one another.

"As educators, we believe that the choices and actions that we and our students make in our classrooms contribute to the formation of student selves in relation to larger society," said Powell.

Beyond the research, these exercises have helped educate and engage students in meaningful ways, according to Powell.



A pre-k classroom conflict that would later be reviewed during a class-time conversation. Credit: Penn State

"Through their image making and discussions with us, it is clear that the undergraduate students with whom we've engaged care about having a voice in [democracy](#), in equal opportunity, and in a fair and representative government," said Powell.

According to Serriere, these efforts can help create socially conscious students, even at an early age.

"Encouraging students' sense of agency relates to engaging their imagination," said Serriere. "Such experiences of enacting one's own version of [social justice](#) should not be saved for the freedom of a university campus setting but rather can and should begin in early

schooling."

Powell and Serriere agree that educating students in the way that images carry messages is important.

"Teachers have the opportunity to help students question conventional wisdom regarding images and ways of seeing," said Powell, "so that [students](#) become active agents in both the reading and making of images rather than merely being passive consumers."

The article, "Image-Based Participatory Pedagogies: Reimagining Social Justice," can be found in the October 2013 edition of "International Journal of Education & the Arts."

More information: Powell, K., & Serriere, S. (2013). Image-based participatory pedagogies: Reimagining social justice. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 14(15). October 22, 2013.
www.ijea.org/v14n15/

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