Radical Roots

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Radical Roots: Public History and a Tradition of Social Justice Activism.
In his 2014 National Council on Public History (NCPH) presidential address, Robert W. Weyneth looked back at his career as a public historian, teacher, and scholar and identified two key themes shaping his work: “embracing a dark past” and “asking questions from the perspective of place.” In Weyneth’s call for public historians to look for the “pukas” or gaps in historical narrative, “for their presence usually signals there’s a story that is absent,” and to “cast their bucket where [they are]” working in local contexts and settings, one can see the tendrils of public history’s radical past influencing its current practices.¹ As the chapters in this section attest, public historians as early as the Progressive Era sought out untold stories and voices, and worked in deeply local contexts. Yet for teachers of public history, Weyneth’s address and his preceding writings on public history education do little to identify how to teach “chapters of history that are difficult, controversial, or problematic.”² Working in and with community, seeking out untold and contentious stories, and teaching others to do the same creates a classroom that functions less like an objective space where students learn the history of the field and engage in the academic debates about key controversies, and more like what scholar Mary Louise Pratt describes as a “contact zone.” In contact zones, learning becomes an “exercise in storytelling and in identifying with the ideas, interests, histories and attitudes of others.” Contact zones are “experiments in transculturation and collaborative work . . . ways for people to engage with suppressed aspects of history (including their own histories)” in which students develop “ground rules for communications across lines.
of difference and hierarchy that go beyond politeness but maintain mutual respect.”

Teaching public history for social justice is teaching our students the skills of the contact zone. It is fostering the skills—practical, cognitive, and affective—that allow students to work with community members and to uncover the untold stories in the community around them. Teaching public history is also acknowledging the discomfort such work engenders and bringing that discomfort back to the classroom, for only in wrestling with the feelings and emotions inherent in the work can we begin to reimagine a public history education that truly serves social justice ends.

I would argue the skills of the contact zone are essential to public history and historians, yet with a few exceptions, most of the scholarship on the training of public history students focuses on either practical skills—grant writing, National Register of Historic Places nominations, digital history skills—or the cognitive dimensions of learning that take place in a public history classroom. Since its inception as “applied history,” educators have asserted that public history helps students develop critical thinking skills including problem solving, leadership, and team skills. Yet as Weyneth’s address hints, “embracing a dark past” locally requires not only the cognitive and practical skills public history educators call for but affective skills—empathy, awareness of self, mindfulness, and an openness in the face of work that is often uncomfortable, challenging and problematic. The classroom conditions that give rise to the affective dimensions of learning do not arise automatically. They require a pedagogy that nurtures the growth of these qualities, a pedagogy that public history educators might use but few describe in detail.

In what follows, I pull back the curtain on my own public history pedagogy and recount my efforts to address the nature and scope of affective learning in my classroom. As evidenced in their writings, it was not unusual for my undergraduate students to express a range of emotions engendered by their work in a community different from their own, emotions ranging from anger, fear, sadness, and frustration to pride and revelation. If I wanted my students to meet the course’s social justice goal of examining systems of power and oppression and encourage them to create a project in the service of social change, I needed to directly address affective learning in my classroom. The affective domain of learning focuses on nurturing students’ abilities to receive and tolerate new information, to respond to ideas, to be willing to stand up for those ideas, to organize their values and beliefs, and ultimately to practice and act on their values. These skills were essential for my students whose
privilege, for the most part, had shaped their previous values and beliefs. As researchers at the University of Indiana found, “Negative emotions, including sadness or defensive anger, may prevent them [students] from considering the intellectual issues central to a course.” Examining the place of those emotions in the classroom and focusing on how students’ affective learning gains might further a social justice–oriented public history project became this study’s central focus.

Given that current public history scholarship has so little to say about how teachers can address the feelings doing public history fosters in their students—feelings of anger, confusion, guilt, and frustration—I turned to the pedagogy and practices of community arts, a discipline that has long embraced affect as a central element in learning. This chapter theorizes what a public history pedagogy informed by community arts pedagogy should look like, exploring the tenets, beliefs, approaches, and philosophies central to community arts that foster the mission of public history pedagogy. It also describes how these pedagogies play out in a public history classroom, chronicling a four-month art/history collaboration between undergraduates and teens at an after-school club. Finally, it assesses the affective student learning outcomes in the course, examining evidence of students’ emotional growth. In doing so, it articulates how the pedagogies of community arts and public history intersect in generative ways.

I’ve organized this chapter around four sites where community arts education intersected with public history’s goals in ways that address the affective dimensions of learning: (1) The first intersection examines the ways in which community arts pedagogies focused on personal reflection can inform notions of reflection central to public history. Affective learning stipulates that in order for students to act on their values, they must first explore why they value certain things and not others. (2) The second asks how community arts pedagogies focused on collaboration can help public history educators interrogate notions of collaboration in ways that link it to social justice goals. Affective skills like listening, participating, and debating are central to an authentic collaboration. (3) The third looks at how community artists define knowledge and how those definitions help educators reimagine what public history teaching might look like. Viewed through the lens of affective learning, community-based epistemologies rely on students’ ability to organize and act on a set of values derived from their community work. (4) Finally, I look to community arts to help rethink what success means and how to measure it in
ways that acknowledge the transformative power of the work. At its highest level, affective learning is demonstrated by behavior that is consistent with a value system. To what extent did my students internalize a new set of values informed by their social justice work and how are those values exhibited in their final projects? In bringing these pedagogies into the public history classroom, I hoped to both address and utilize the affective dimensions of learning to serve social justice aims.

The lenses through which I framed my project speak to some of the core tenets that tie this project to the work of my public history educator forbearers. The pedagogies in this collection seek to uncover histories on the margins, stories that have been left out of conventional narratives. This choice of subject matter is a deliberate one, for these “pukas,” as Weyneth terms them, challenge stereotypes, social inequalities, political agendas, and other forms of individual and systematic oppression. Teaching public history for social justice ends not only uncovers such stories but also places issues of power and privilege at the center of historical analysis. In addition, these teachings prioritize the collective construction of historical narratives and recognize that such collaborative endeavors are central to radical work. Finally, social justice public history practice and teaching are grounded in critical reflection. It requires a level of transparency that not only makes visible the process of history-making but asks students, teachers, and community members to acknowledge how systems of privilege and oppression operate both in their own lives and within the scope of the project. Such transparency is only possible through a careful examination of self. In defining radical pedagogy in a particular place at a particular time, my contemporary case study, in its own small way, provides insight into one set of contexts and conditions that foster radical practices.

**Shared Histories**

Collaborations between community artists and public historians are not surprising given public history and community arts’ shared past. While some scholars have traced the roots of the two disciplines as far back as the early 1800s, their paths appear to cross in the early twentieth century and come to fruition at the turn of the century with the work undertaken in settlement houses, the village improvement movement, the city beautiful movement, cooperative extension service, and the outdoor art movement. In these settings, practitioners came together in local community centers, schools,
social clubs, and museums to work with the public in a variety of roles. Many of the individuals undertaking the work were influenced by John Dewey’s writings on teaching and service. In works that echo public historians’ call for “shared authority” and artists’ calls for “collaborative” “participatory” and “dialogic” art, Dewey cautioned that “associations aimed at overcoming social divisions should be distributive, mutual, and reciprocal relationships, or they will by definition perpetuate the barriers they set out to destroy.”

By the 1930s, the federal government supported a number of public art and public history initiatives. Under the New Deal, artists were encouraged to research and depict local history on post office murals and the Federal Writers’ Project recorded hundreds of oral histories for the Slave Narratives collections. Teachers and intellectuals working in a variety of settings, including Harold Thompson and Lucy Maynard Salmon in higher education and Myles Horton at the Highlander Folk School, worked with students and community members to undertake grassroots history and art projects. Public art and history organizations witnessed another renaissance in the 1960s and ’70s. Organizations like the National Council on Public History and the National Endowment for the Arts reflected ideals advanced by civil rights movements, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, and critical pedagogy theories like those of Paulo Freire. In turn, they inspired more local efforts including the San Francisco Neighborhood Arts Program and the American Civilization Institute of Morristown.

I call attention to the shared historical trajectories of public history and community arts because while few of these individuals and organizations deliberately engaged in interdisciplinary projects linking community arts and public history, these disciplines came of age together, influenced by the same radical and progressive impulses that shape much of their work today. Their shared time line speaks to the shared visions that animate their recent forms: civic engagement, a commitment to bringing forward the voices of underrepresented groups, and social justice.

Increasingly, public historians have been collaborating with artists especially on projects that address a “dark past.” The projects share a commitment to local history as a site of investigation, a desire to work with and not just for their community partners, and pedagogical practices that highlight the emotions, insights, and experiences of everyday people, including those of the students themselves. They also suggest that the power of public history extends beyond tangible outcomes like museum exhibits, historic
preservation applications, and archives and can result in catalytic as well as conclusive results. My course was inspired by these collaborations and took its form from a series of questions they raised.

**Background**
A small liberal arts institution nestled on the shores of Lake Seneca in the Finger Lakes of central New York, Hobart and William Smith Colleges (HWS) enrolls over 2,600 students, the majority of whom reside at the colleges. As an upper-level course in American studies, Art, Memory and the Power of Place enrolled sophomores, juniors, and seniors from a variety of majors and minors including American studies, history, and social justice studies. Out of the thirteen students enrolled in the course, four were women, and two were students of color. I divided the course into four sections; in the first, the students explored issues of identity and bias. Next they examined how issues of power, privilege, and place and community voice shaped case studies of controversial public art and public history projects. The third unit focused on the history and current demographics of Geneva, where the school’s campus is located. When students come to HWS, most travel to a city with demographics vastly different from their own: students of color make up 53 percent of students in the Geneva City Schools. I believed it was important for students to know something about the community they lived and worked in. Students spent the remainder of the semester collaborating with teens in an after-school art program. The students worked with the teens to design and create a public art/public history exhibit for the city’s monthly art event—Geneva Night Out. The collaboration resulted in two projects: *Behind the Walls*, a piece that explored “narratives of bullying and violence in Geneva,” and *Diversity in Geneva*, a series of portraits and narratives of eight city residents.

**Intervention 1: Reflection and Public History**
Reflection plays a prominent role in public history theory and practice. As the public history profession sought to define itself beyond the notions of applied history, historians like G. Wesley Johnson and Noel J. Stowe theorized that public history practice enabled historians “to work in a situation—to understand its values, construct, context, cultural overtones, and relevant social, economic and political facets.” Drawing from the emerging learning theories of Donald Schon, NCPH president Rebecca Conard encouraged public
historians to adopt a method that encompasses both theory and practice and embark on a shared inquiry and modes of work in collaboration with the public to identify problems, ask questions, and offer interpretations. The reflective practice of public historians, as Conard describes it, is not linear but iterative, as conversations with the public reveal new insights, reframe central questions, uncover new contexts, and ultimately influence the shape and scope of the project created. In turn, with each new engagement, public historians are “rethinking intellectual, practical, and moral issues,” and these techniques, public historians assert, distinguish public history from its counterparts.

Given the field’s focus on the public dimensions of history, it’s not surprising that most conversations about reflective practice in public history have centered on reflection in action—the process of adjusting one’s actions within the context of a collaboration. An expanded notion of reflection, however, might also ask how we train public history students to “know thyself.” Self-reflection, a central element of community arts practice, encourages students to interrogate how their subjectivity and positionality influence their practice. As Michael Rohd, the artistic director for the Sojourn Theater, notes, individuals involved in community collaborations “need to explore their own vision and point of view. They need to be willing to have voice and also to negotiate voice/authority. And they need to utilize that set of skills to affirm what they know, and discard what they no longer know.” Drawing from community arts practice, I asked my students to reflect on how their history shaped their values. The assignment, adapted from a similar one community artist and educator Pepon Osario uses in his classes, asked students to situate themselves within their community of origin—a community they were born into based on ethnic, racial, religious background, or national origin. The paper challenged students to explore how they define their community, how it has been affected by the dynamics of oppression in America.

Requiring students to connect with their own pasts helped them become more attuned to dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression in their own lives. One student shared their newfound awareness when describing growing up one of the few middle-class children in an urban setting: “Reflecting back on my childhood, I realize that I would go from a very diverse education setting to then being picked up and taxied fifteen minutes south to hockey practice with kids who seemed to look and be much more like me.
To a fifteen-year-old kid, it is sometimes hard to comprehend why you are going to school at a place so different than many of your athletic friends, friends who you find comforting and similar to you.” Another student noted, “It is hard to be uncomfortable in my community because our town is mostly White and upper class. As a kid I saw the resemblances of my family in other families and how their households are run. So to me, what I saw growing up made me think that my town and my family were ‘normal.” Self-reflection served as a way for students to make connections between personal history and viewpoints/biases that might shape their interactions with the community and their public work. Articulating when and why they felt comfortable in some settings and uncomfortable in others forced them to interrogate the deeply held but seldom named assumptions about whose family experience was “normal” and why some types of people and places were “comforting” while others caused anxiety.

For some students, the assignment also allowed them to express their feelings of guilt, anger, and resentment that accompanied critical reflection into the values, experiences, and beliefs they had experienced as “normal.” “My boarding school” one student recalled “was the single most exclusive environment I have ever encountered—it is the school where every single girl aspires to own brand name leggings the second she steps onto campus. Everything is a competition between you and other students over things like who knows the most gossip, who has the most money, who is the most popular . . . It was a culture that didn’t make me feel good about being on campus.” Another student confessed that she now seldom reveals where she grew up to her friends: “For the last few years I have been embarrassed about where I came from. I have struggled to speak out against the narrow-minded views of my peers and fit into social groups that disregard problems of social inequality at home.” Still another student articulated, “If there is anything about my community that I resent, it is that it does not prepare its youth to integrate anywhere else.” The assignment asked students to connect these personal histories to feelings of belonging and alienation through critical self-reflection.

The community of origin papers were not public, so while they encouraged self-reflection, they did so within an individual learner setting. In contrast, a second key activity I undertook, a “privilege walk” and reflection, fostered critical questioning of fixed ideas and identities and challenged stereotypical images within a group setting. The privilege walk activity made visible students’ assumptions about classmates and revealed how categories of difference intersect with social power. In order to ground the activity within the
framework of power and privilege, I also had students read Peggy McIntosh’s seminal work “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” For many students, the combined reading and activity made them consider their own social location(s) in powerful ways. “When I read Peggy McIntosh’s ‘White Privilege,’” confessed one student, “I was shocked. . . . It forced me to be self-reflective and gain a better understanding of my place in society and others around me.” Another student noted, “Before this week, I would try and avoid questions based on race.” Many of my White students expressed shock and wonder at the different experiences their classmates of color had with the structures and institutions of US society. “Doing the privilege walk made me realize how one-sided my thinking was. . . . Growing up in a middle-class, mostly White suburb, lead me to think that everyone was just like me,” wrote one student. For my students of color, the readings, activity, and discussion after affirmed their experiences of structural racism: “Most students here [HWS] seem to have the same idea of racism I had when I was younger. They understand racism as meaning an individual had their mind set on someone before knowing them because of the color of their skin. Racism isn’t just personal. Why was the closest neighborhood to the ‘bad’ elementary school, the neighborhood with subsidized housing, made up of more people of color than the neighborhoods around the ‘good’ elementary school?” In order to illuminate the role privilege plays in history-making, I also asked a number of questions centered on students’ experience of public history: step forward if you were taught history by a teacher who shared your ethnic/racial background; step forward if the stories of your ethnic/racial ancestors have been visible in history museums. These questions were also eye-opening to my students. “The privilege walk,” one student commented, “made me wonder—what stories go untold in our museums and history markers?” Others acknowledged the lack of diversity among history teachers: “Despite my school being diverse, I cannot recall a time in which I had an African American teacher, not in elementary, middle, and high school.” Perhaps equally telling was the same student’s observation that the realization of the lack of diversity in history education was “deeply discomforting.” These activities and reflections were not easy for my students, but in challenging students’ deeply held assumptions about themselves and others, they formed the foundation for our collaboration with community members.

Community arts pedagogy contributes to public history education through a more fully realized notion of what learning looks like in a classroom where “dialogue” begins with self-reflection. Students’ learning gains are centered
on the affective domain, particularly in self-knowledge. Educational psychologist Stephan Brookfield links these self-insights into a tradition of critical thinking that includes “uncovering and challenging assumptions that frame behavior and seeing familiar actions and ideas from a radically different perspective.” The pedagogy reframes notions of reflection in public history by creating spaces for students to consider how their own positionality affects their actions as public historians.

Within the context of our project in Geneva schools, personal reflection took a central role in my student’s work. After brainstorming a number of issues the teens were concerned about as a larger group, the students and teens split up into two groups, one focusing on diversity in the city, the other focusing on bullying and violence. As the bullying and violence group came together to craft their required project proposal, which they submitted to the city’s public art committee, my students found themselves at an impasse. What was their role in this project? Were they guides, participants, or both? The group had proposed a project that was deeply personal and reflective. Individual students would each craft a box that would explore the impact of bullying on their life. Filled with personal photographs, thoughts, and narratives, the students would then connect the boxes together to form a larger installation aimed at bringing awareness to the issue. Ultimately, my students chose to participate in the process, each making a box for the installation. Making their box, side by side with their teen collaborators, made visible the ways my student’s privilege had shaped their connection to the issue. One of my students noted, “I experienced bullying, but my parents took me out of public school and enrolled me in private school to help. That doesn’t seem like an option for many of these kids.” Another observed, “At first I couldn’t believe how many students said they had felt bullied and/or witnessed violence in their lives. . . . I guess I never really thought about who it [violence] happens to and why I wasn’t aware of it growing up.” Such reflection allowed my students to recognize and acknowledge the trappings of privilege in their own lives and gave them an outlet to address the feelings those revelations engendered.

In turn, reflections about privilege and power shaped my student’s approach to the final elements of the exhibit. The first draft of the exhibit’s brochure pulled together student research on violence and bullying. Written in the third person, the brochure summarized research on the impact of bullying on teens’ self-esteem. It also included brief bibliographies of participants,
highlighting accomplishments and noted students whose “art has been featured in local art shows” and “published in magazines.”29 The brochure shared the dispassionate academic tone of more conventional public history projects and a focus on the authors’ “credentials” to legitimize their expertise and roles as creators. After looking over the first draft, I encouraged the group to reimagine the brochure not as an exhibit label but as an artist statement. I was immediately struck by how reframing the project’s written elements as “artist statements” rather than “exhibit labels” seemed to provide my students with the opportunity to acknowledge the emotional and reflective aspects of their work. In the revised brochure, each member of the project, both college students and teens, reconfigured their biographies, focusing on a brief statement about what drew them to this project and their goals. Written in the first person, these statements highlighted how individual identities, experiences, and opinions had shaped their work. “I want to show people what occurs at school because sometimes I feel like you don’t ever hear from the people being bullied,” noted one teen, while another articulated, “This box says what I can’t talk about—how bullying feels.” The students placed individual narratives of the creators’ motivations next to a rewritten project introduction that used the communal “we” to describe the overall goals of the exhibit. In their general introduction, the students wrote, “We hope our artwork will raise questions about the effects of bullying and violence on both personal lives and on our community. By looking at individual boxes, seeing how individual stories are also shared histories and bearing witness to the voices ‘behind the walls,’ we hope to inspire change.” By moving between the individual and the shared as well as the personal and the communal, the final project made visible the students’ understanding of how the intimate knowledge that they gained from personal reflection impacted their approach to the work. It also demonstrated how these personal narratives were in continual dialogue with each other. As one student wrote, the project revealed how “people have their own histories which are all smaller stories of the bigger experience.” Visually expressing these histories provided students with a way to articulate and understand differing perspectives of a shared experience, both their own and those of their collaborators.

Intervention 2: Collaboration and Public History

Deep self-reflection also served as the foundation for our collaborative work. Since its inception, public history training has acknowledged the importance
of collaboration. As public historian Rebecca Conard notes, collaboration separates out public history from public scholarship. Within the field, theories of collaboration have focused on the notions of shared inquiry and shared authority. First coined by Michael Frisch in reference to oral history practice, shared authority and inquiry address the idea that public history projects, including oral history interviews, are shaped by both the historian and the community. For public historians, both theories bring up important questions about power and agency within the collaboration. In practice, tensions sometimes emerge between the values that define the work of a “historian” and the work of a “public historian.” Academic historians train their students to enter into the field as historians, objective, critical, and above all, unemotional. Many of these values play a central role in undergraduate public history curriculums. Yet dynamics of power inherent in traditional history training has profound implications for the trust building that is essential to collaborative public history work. As historian Barbra Franco notes, “It is a constant negotiation based on trust and mutual respect. . . . [In public history work] that seems far from the historical practices we have been trained to follow.”

As I considered how my undergraduate students were going to develop the bonds of trust essential to public history work, I turned to scholarship on public art. Community artists have different ideas about community collaboration and the role of the “expert.” Both public artists and public historians observe that collaboration is a dialogical process, but public artists also acknowledge that the process “changes both the participants and the artist.” In public art practice, there is neither the desire nor the expectation for the artist to be dispassionate and removed from the community. As community artist Pepon Osorio observed about his classes, “The student learned that for each piece of information you gain you must share yourself personally. There is always a dual center of power in the relationship.” In descriptions of their work, public artists emphasize their role as caring participants in relationships built on empathy as well as reciprocity.

In my course, students quickly realized that reading about community collaborations did little to prepare them for an environment in which they had to build trust with community partners. Within the first week of our collaboration, students articulated their challenges working with the teens. “It was difficult to establish a connection at first,” a student wrote. “I didn’t understand where this disconnect between us was coming from. The teens
were very loud and outgoing, but incredibly reserved about their personal lives.” Another commented, “I could sense a little bit of resentment in their body language . . . they were hesitant to trust us.” Looking back at the collaboration’s early struggles, a student reflected, “I think it is of huge importance to be able to create a community-like atmosphere with the teens, but it took time to build trust.”

In the first weeks of the collaboration, I used various activities designed to make visible the shared experiences of my students and our collaborators. My students quickly identified the many ways our collaborators seemed “different” from themselves. As one student confessed, “It makes me nervous to start this [the collaboration] because I’ve only ever worked with kids with [a] very similar background to myself.” In their journals, students commented on how activities like the privilege walk made shared experiences visible. “I have experienced bullying,” one of my students remarked, “and I felt more comfortable knowing that I wasn’t the only one that had to go through hard times during grade school. With this experience you get to share with everyone [and] I feel closer to the teens.” Another commented, “I felt like through sharing our stories we were able to sympathize and understand each other’s struggles. I left that day feeling like our group had just shared a special connection.” In these reflections, students highlight feelings of closeness, comfort, and connection within the group and with individual teens. The feelings were valuable in my student’s eyes because they served as the starting point for bonds of trust and respect that were central to the collaboration.

The influence of community arts pedagogy and theory on students’ understanding of collaboration is most visible in the transformation of their thinking about their work with the teens over the course of the semester. In the beginning of the project, my students expressed frustration over what they viewed as the teens’ unwillingness or inability to contribute to project brainstorming sessions. “Are they afraid to make a difference?” one student asked. “[Afraid] to be right or to have an opinion? Do they just not see community problems in Geneva?” Initial efforts to move past the early “icebreaker” activities and begin project planning were met with frustration. One student commented, “I feel awkward that we as HWS students are dominating the discussion.” Another confessed, “I left kind of frustrated,” adding, “It was hard to get the teens to talk and I feel like it [the brainstorming session] didn’t push the class forward at all.” Even in these initial stages, however, students were able to employ affective skills in empathy to reflect on project planning
and how they might work with students. “I wonder,” one student asked, “if that [teen participation] has something to do with comfort level?” Another remarked, “Since there was no baseline level of trust, we got very ‘safe’ ideas from the students,” ideas that “did not require them to open up.” Another student theorized, “I think they know more serious things happen in the community, but just don’t feel comfortable enough to share certain experiences.”

As the previous quotes suggest, for my students, foregrounding the importance of personal connections in the early stage of the collaboration helped them envision the project through the lens of dialogue. “Communication skills specifically, I felt were extremely important in this project,” one student observed. The student continued, “When it comes to communication skills it does not exactly mean being able to talk constantly; it also means being a good listener. I realized that it was important to actually sit down and listen to what the teens had to say throughout the project. In order for them to feel comfortable with us, we had to be able to listen and get to know them.” Others acknowledged how creating these personal relationships stretched their comfort level. “Through this class, I learned how integral it [dialogue] is to fostering a rapport within groups,” a student commented. In addition, as evidenced in student reflections, honesty, not respect or consensus, became how my students defined the dialogue experience. “Because everyone was so honest we learned a lot about each other,” commented a student. Another wrote, “I have learned to talk with many of the teens individually and honestly about who they are.” Another explained, “Being honest, personal, and a listener is the best way to reach out to them in gaining input” because “if we want to create a meaningful project, both sides need to be honest with each other.” In their highlighting of “honesty,” the reflections speak to the ways in which the skills of the contact zone—“communications across lines of difference and hierarchy that go beyond politeness but maintain mutual respect”—became a means by which students assessed their own learning and the success of the project. As one student commented, “[In traditional public history collaborations,] the role of the historian is to be a facilitator and they should not insert their voice into a project . . . What makes our project different is the honest stories of individuals.” From the college students’ reflections on the project emerge a tenet central to a social justice–oriented public history practice: the assertion that public history is a collaborative endeavor.
Intervention 3: Knowledge and Public History

As public history practitioners seek to incorporate voices from the margins of history, they struggle to reconcile radical impulses with deeply ingrained ideas about knowledge and the role of the expert within the historical profession. As historian Denise D. Meringolo points out, early public history programs “initially focused on the products of public history work, not the process. . . . Such an approach retained the expertise and authority of public historians.” Other scholars argue that not only does public history need to advocate for reflective public history “experts”; it needs to expand the definition of expert and reimagine their role. Equating expertise with authority and knowledge complicates public historians’ efforts to work with communities. In turn, expanding ideas about expertise to include the community also necessitates a reconsideration of what is considered knowledge in the field.

While notions of participatory museums and community-curated public history projects have garnered attention within the last ten years, community artists have a long tradition of working alongside community members and drawing from community expertise. Perhaps because public historians are, more often than not, trained in the history profession with all its deeply rooted epistemologies, I turned to ways of knowing articulated in community arts to provide my students with frameworks for understanding how knowledge is created in a collaborative, nonhierarchical setting. These contemporary theories draw from the same historical well as public history.

Framing students’ work within the tradition of community arts helped them reenvision their role in the project. As they began to articulate the process of collaboration, my students located trust at the site of personal interaction, not expertise. As one student noted, “We can’t take a top-down approach, where we think of the teens as more or less passive consumers, receivers of our expert wisdom. That approach goes again[st] our goal of creating a socially engaged project because it neglects their personal voice.” Another student observed, “The project needs to engage in continual dialogue and create open relationships between our two groups.” In emphasizing the importance of having the form and content of the project emerge out of a dialogue, students also articulated a collaborative public history practice that privileged everyday experiences and realities as ways of knowing. “In order for this project to work, it needs to include personal experiences,” one student commented, “let the teens talk about what they want to talk about, and in a sense, let them create the project which shows their views accurately.”
Another student observed, “An active part of this project is considering how information is collected through dialogue and presented through art. . . . In our project, active listening is extremely important, because that is how we get information.”

In turn, teens involved with the project spoke to how they felt the project honored their voices and expertise: “The project talked about what a lot of us felt,” wrote one teen. Another observed, “We all hear ‘don’t bully’ and things like that, but you don’t ever hear from the people who are bullied.” One revealed, “I showed up because I found the topic really interesting.” They continued, “A lot of people have been bullied, and it’s something that we know.” When asked to articulate what the teens felt that my students learned from the collaboration, a participant commented, “The college students learned that we are mature, we know school stuff.” The teens’ comments also speak to how privileging everyday ways of knowing also served to decentralize authorship. Both the college students and the teens felt they had a stake in this project and could lay claim to project ideas.

Further, setting as the goal the creation of a dialogue-driven project, one viewed through the lens of community-based art, allowed my students to focuses on the process of creation rather than the product. “Again, it comes back to making a better effort of hearing all voices instead of getting impatient and suggesting my idea,” articulated one student. Another observed, “I think I need to take a step back and lose my grip on the perfectionist inside of me. . . . Art embraces imperfections.” Another noted, “I am realizing, that I cannot expect us to produce a beautiful work of art. It is more important in socially engaged art to make everyone’s voices be heard, because in the past and currently, there are voices that are silenced in this community.” A particularly reflective student offered this perspective on the collaborative process:

Along with the idea of trust as a key theme, so was participation. I talked about “directed participation” in my journals and how that was the only thing that seemed to be occurring at first. We told the students what to do and they did it; there was no give-and-take of ideas. In fact, many of them asked us at first what they should put in their boxes. It was as though they needed our approval to feel like they could participate. Since we wanted these boxes to reflect unique and authentic voices, this was not the style of participation we were hoping for. However, as the project progressed, it became a very dynamic and joint project. They suddenly had no problem
abandoning our ideas for their own, and even became a bit defiant when they didn’t like one of our suggestions. The fact that they were comfortable enough to challenge us means that they were comfortable with us in general. At the beginning of the semester, we couldn’t pay them to challenge our ideas or us. However we now feel like their voices are in this project just as much as ours.

Participants’ reflections reveal how knowledge emerged as a function of the collaborative process and a product of the group’s discussions.

Focusing on the process rather than the product of the collaboration addressed important affective student learning outcomes. In their discussions, students grappled with both emotion and reason, pushing themselves and their collaborators to identify feelings, articulate choices, and express their vision for the project. Because this happened across lines of difference, the project participants also found themselves collaborating on shifting grounds, as group dynamics constantly changed. As one student commented, “Adjusting to this project was hard for all of us. Having to share ideas and discuss uncomfortable situations with the teens really contributed to the construction of community within our group.” The teen’s reflections supported my students’ assessment of the importance of emotional awareness to fostering shared voice in the project. “I felt like the students who came from HWS wanted to talk with us,” observed one teen. Another commented, “I love how we got to talk with each other and then decided to make two different projects.” Questions of what elements to include in the piece, how to create an overarching narrative for the project, and how their understandings of the topic would be communicated in visual form were all determined and weighed among the group, making knowledge a function of community. As the quotes suggest, my students were also aware of what they gained through these interactions, a pedagogy that placed students in dialogue with individuals from different backgrounds supported the course’s affective learning goals focused on empathy, openness to new ideas and different perspectives, and attentive listening.44

**Intervention 4: Assessing Success in Public History Projects**

Over the past twenty years, public historians have all struggled to define and assess success in their field. Contemporary definitions of success emerging from the field often focus on the content of a public history project: Did the
project narrative balance multiple points of view? Did it incorporate relevant scholarship? Was it historically accurate? As Cathy Stanton comments, “Public historians could attempt to understand much more clearly what the social consequences of these collaborations are” but often fail to do so because “this requires a set of skills that historians do not generally have, since the discipline is focused on the past and on the evidence of documents.” Little has been written about how to determine if a public history project engages with the affective dimensions of community work and the results of such engagement. Such assessment is vital for public history projects that operate on an emotional as well as a cognitive level. The absence of theoretical understandings of success that address the affective learning outcomes of public history projects pushed me to look to community arts to help rethink what success means and how to measure it in ways that acknowledge the transformative power of the work.

Scholars in community arts have put forth several useful models for assessing the success of their projects that directly connect their work to social justice goals. To begin with, community arts pedagogy compels us to consider not only the ways in which public history projects grapple with multiple points of view, understand community in context, and debate issues of voice but also how public history projects undertake such work within the context of social power. As community members and artists involved with the community arts group Appalshop note, art serving social justice ends “focus[es] . . . on how power is organized, used and shared in a community.” In doing so, community arts pedagogy pushes us to understand history’s role as a technology of power and wield that power to create a counter-discourse aimed at reclaiming dominant historical narratives. Community arts’ focus on process over product also encourages public history educators to include community building in their definition of success. Finally, community arts practice urges us to consider the importance of transformation on an individual level measured by a growth in participants’ critical thinking, affective skills, and self-definition. Community artist and educator Dudley Cook eloquently sums up the various intersections between these elements in his theory of social change: “Effective cultural organizing for social justice begins small, with the individual. First, one discovers his or her own truth of an issue, and then tests and develops that truth in dialogue with others. When this individual and collective learning process is multiplied, a national movement for reform develops and changes society. Such a movement can
only be sustained when this grassroots process of individual and collective learning continues to inspire awareness and shape the actions.” As I turned to evaluating my student’s collaboration on a project that was ephemeral and limited in its reach, I found such models useful for helping me consider how projects similar to my own in scale might measure success.

I examined both student reflections and the final products of the collaboration to assess how students grappled with multiple points of view, debated issues of voice within the context of social power, and articulated their growing understanding of the community. The Diversity in Geneva group decided their project would showcase eight city residents from a variety of backgrounds and ages. The project featured large portraits of community members with accompanying text from oral history interviews. This format emerged from conversations with the older teens at the after-school club who had shared their struggles growing up as children of color in Geneva. Perhaps as a response to my student’s lack of awareness of communities outside the colleges, the teens spoke to community dynamics of visibility. Describing the origin of the project, one teen wrote, “I was just thinking about everyday life in Geneva and thinking about differences when I was in school and in the community as well. And I think it needs to be talked about more often, because we talk about diversity, but a lot of people don’t really know what that means.” Another noted, “I think most of [the] White people in Geneva doesn’t notice the [racial] divides, but when you live in a neighborhood like mine, you notice it.” In the brainstorming phase of the project, my students quickly embraced the teens’ idea to focus the project on making the city’s diversity more visible by printing large portraits. The size of the portraits, three feet by two feet, as well as the choice to display them outside in a public plaza, were deliberate decisions the students’ and teens’ made to achieve their larger goals. As one student observed, “A large part of the project for us is not the physical posters but how they will be displayed because it influences how the project is interpreted. By having all the posters next to one another, the audience is able to see the diversity in all the community members and compare and contrast them more critically. . . . I also think another valuable aspect of having the posters displayed together is it enhances the conversation and dialogue about diversity in the community that we hope will take place after viewing all the portraits.” Likewise, the Behind the Walls project creators wanted their project to be something that made visible the hidden histories of bullying by showcasing the experiences of those who have been bullied.
The exhibit brochure claimed, “Through these boxes we have compiled a myriad of stories about the lives violence have touched . . . making visible the impact of bullying on individuals and the community as a whole.” The groups’ choice foreground these underrepresented histories in the exhibit, revealed their growing understanding of how individuals can be active agents in the creation of their own histories. As one student stated, “While it was surprising that so many of the kids had already experienced bullying . . . I think the more important takeaway was that they did all, in fact, have something to say.”

Understanding their work in context also meant that the students and their projects grappled with questions of who and what represented community. “As we have seen in class, most of the people with the power to shape public art and history projects are still White and hold the purse strings,” one student wrote. They continued, “When making public projects about ‘the community’ we need to ask, who are the people we are talking about?” Students worried about how to limit the scope of the project, some wanting to “make sure we have every group of people involved in the community,” while others believed, “We need to focus on the voices of the kids and their experiences with diversity within their community and their opinions on what the Geneva community looks like.” Questions over who to interview were complicated by my students’ worries. Students and teens worked together to develop the scope and plan for the diversity project, but because teens could not leave the center, the actual interviewing was left to my students. They met this challenge with a range of feelings. “I do think we tried to get a diverse group of community members,” explained one student, “but I will forever be slightly angst-ridden about how we went about collecting our interviews. How is this project influenced by the fact that we had to rely on the small number of people we already knew in the community to provide us with a way to be done with a project on time?” As they worked through these emotions in their groups, they acknowledged both their own positionality and the community context of their work. As one student commented, “I am happy that our project included voices from community members of color; however, I wonder if their responses were influenced by the fact that it was all-White HWS students interviewing them.” Initial reflections about their own communities and identities helped students understand how their positionality in the Geneva community shaped their project.

In their questions of whose voices to include in their final projects, one can see students’ and teens’ warring desires to both celebrate Geneva’s diversity
and call attention to issues of racism and oppression. In a conversation with
the group before opening night, the students and teens expressed their wor-
ries: “I hope it [the project] brings respect to people of color. I know com-
ing from a low-income community of color, sometime you don’t realize that
White people are not the only ones who can be racist. I hope it really brings
out the fact that we can all have prejudice and misperceptions,” voiced one
teen. One of the college students mused, “One thing that I am personally
questioning is if we plan to celebrate the diversity in the community or start
a dialogue about how the diversity can create divides. I feel that at first we
wanted to celebrate the diversity in the community; however, working on
this project has made me more aware of the issues that arise from it. One
thing that has come to my attention just from the teens’ comments is that
people from different ethnic groups usually do not socialize.” These tensions
between a more celebratory message and a critical one are familiar to public
historians like Linda Shopes, who observed that community history projects
often celebrate imagined, nostalgic pasts, and rarely confront deeper histori-
cal contradictions. Viewed through the lenses of Shopes’s critiques, my stu-
dent’s public projects were perhaps not as radical as they could have been. In
the narrative that accompanied the photographs, the Diversity in Geneva group
acknowledged that “despite living in the same community, residents have a
range of experiences and perspectives,” and they pointed out that “interviews
hint at the ways in which differences create divides.” But their project did not
call attention to systems of oppression that support racial divides and ste-
reotypes in the community. Likewise, the Behind the Walls group articulated
their desire to “raise questions about the effects of bullying in both personal
lives and on our community,” but their narrative did not call attention to how
structures and institutions silence narratives of bullying.

I would argue, however, the radical potential of the projects lay not in
approaching the community from an oppositional stance but rather from an
intentional practice of creating relationships. In their reflections on the final
projects, both the students and teens spoke to their desire to create com-
munity through breaking down stereotypes and recognizing commonalities.
Such work lies at the foundation of social transformation, for, as art educa-
tor Pablo Helguera points out, socially engaged art is assessed on its ability
to create an “emancipated community. . . . This means that its participants
willingly engage in a dialogue from which they extract enough critical and
experiential wealth to walk away feeling enriched, perhaps even claiming
some ownership of the experience or ability to reproduce it with others.” 51
Both end projects sought to create community. “I think our project is power-
ful,” commented one student, “because it starts a dialogue.” They continued,
“Our project seeks to raise awareness for violence and bullying by creating an
art project where we are constantly talking and evoking conversation with
the kids we are working with.” Another student pointed out that “creating an
environment where the kids are willing to talk about bullying and violence is
extremely important because while it does not solve the problem, by bring-
ing awareness to a critical issue, it can cause someone to help someone else
that is a victim or a bully.” Still another observed that while visitor num-
bers to the exhibit “weren’t gigantic, I believe we were still successful . . . . We
laid the foundation work for tools for social change. We completed the proj-
ect, and the kids that helped us were proud of what they did. They brought
their parents to the opening, and I overheard them talking to visitors explain-
ing what it’s [the exhibit’s] about in hopes of starting talks about bullying.”

Finally, student work speaks to how individual transformation should
also be factored into definitions of success. A focus on the civic outcomes
of collaborations overshadows the equally important personal transforma-
tion such work engenders. Community arts’ focus on the process over the
product suggests that evaluation of the capacity of the end product to enact
social change is a limited perspective on success. As community artist Judith
Baca explains it, “The process, that part, which is the ephemeral part of the
work, . . . [is] probably the majority of the work. My work leaves a record of
that process . . . in the two millimeters of paint. But previous to that, three
quarters of the work is in the community cultural development work. The
work in which the community has interacted with us, in which it participates
to create the monument.” 52 In the case of my students, the projects they cre-
ated didn’t result in tangible social change evidenced in fundamental changes
to structures of oppression in the city, but the seeds for such changes lay
in their understanding of the personal transformations they undertook in
this course—their affective learning gains. Echoing the focus on process over
product, students and teens wanted to “be judged on the personal impact
rather than the art itself. If it affects peoples, their emotions, they are inspired
and it makes them happy—then that is successful.” They wanted to make
“people in the project feel that they had a voice [in the project] and were
able to speak to community members through a different venue” and
spoke about the individual impact the work might have: “I’ll be happy if it
makes one person think. If they keep it with them while they are living.” While, as one student observed, “there is no true way to measure whether or not that [social justice goal] is accomplished,” it is clear from student and teen reflections that by the end of their collaboration, they viewed themselves as agents of social change. “You can’t make every single person happy,” one student remarked, “but you can get people to talk and that is what these projects did.” The teens also expressed a sense of agency and empowerment as a result of participating in the project. One teen admitted, “I liked making the art and feeling like you were doing something for the community. It felt like we were making a difference.”

Students also spoke to change within themselves. Through their connections with the teens and the larger Geneva community, students identified their need to rethink their own place(s) in the world, becoming more insightful and self-aware regarding the social contexts of their own lives and the lives of others. “I have never worked with anyone other than upper-class, White children,” recognized one student. They continued, “To be thrown into a shared project with many different cultures and backgrounds was different than anything I have ever done. However, I think it was also the most rewarding of anything I have ever done. Between lessons of trust, participation, and voice, I will take away more than I thought I could from this class.” Another noted, “This project was a learning experience for me in that I had to self-reflect on why I felt so uncomfortable at times. . . . In this class I had to push myself further and further outside my comfort zone it progressed. This course was more of a personal journey than I ever anticipated.” For many, these personal transformations are what set this class apart from their other educational experiences. One expressed it this way: “As a White, middle-class college student it is easy to read about inequality and never take the time to learn about the social inequality in the community I live in. I spent last semester in courses focusing on social, racial, and gender inequality; however, I never applied that understanding to my daily life. I want to be more involved with the inequality that occurs around me daily.” Students’ learning outcomes came about through personal interactions and the work collaborative public history projects require. “Until this point,” noted one student about a particularly meaningful conversation with a teen, “I had thought of our work as really just an art and history collaboration, but now I saw it transcend into a different level; one akin to friendship. I am not suggesting I will leave and become great friends with the kids, but I realized that while these kids may
not remember us in five years, our impact for some may last a long time.” In a field that teaches objectivity, placing awareness of self and others at the center of interpretation and critical skills is a radical proposition. Through a recognition of issues of power and privilege in the community, a focus on process over the product, and the students’ and teens’ personal transformations, these projects illustrate new affective learning outcomes for public history education that support larger social justice goals.

The Future of Public History Education

In 1987, G. Wesley Johnson and Noel J. Stowe looked back at the development of the public history field and argued, “To date, no one has articulated acceptable theoretical underpinnings for the teaching and practice of public history.” Twenty years later, NCPH president Rebecca Conard urged historians to “rethink public history education.” More recently Denise D. Meringolo has postulated that “we have not fully understood history as service, so we are not effectively training the next generation of public historians.” As the collection of chapters in this section suggest, perhaps the tools for reimagining public history education lie in its interdisciplinary and decidedly radical roots. In 1927, John Dewey reminded us that “the deepest and richest sense of a community must always remain a matter of face to face intercourse,” and my study suggests that public history teachers might be well served by thinking carefully and critically about how we guide students through such intercourse. Pedagogical practices that foster self-reflection, emphasize collaboration, critique traditional forms of knowledge, and look for success in personal transformation are important training elements of teaching future public historians. I would argue that training in such affective skills are necessary if we want to keep public history relevant in a changing world. While the guidelines and practices developed in the years since Johnson and Stowe called for a new theoretical model for teaching public history speak to how public history teachers and programs have addressed the practical challenges of educating graduates and the cognitive learning outcomes of a public history degree, public history educators have failed to speak to affective dimensions of their work. If, as educator Julie Ellison claims, “the emergence of a new kind of public humanities registers most powerfully at the level of who we are,” then focusing on how public history can help one get a job as a historian, or how it can provide a history department with a way to recruit more students to the history major, at best undersells the field and at worst runs the risk of creating a generation of public historians who reproduce the
very power relations public history has the power to disrupt." Training that teaches students to recognize history as a technology of power and provides them with the affective tools of empathy, awareness of self, and reflective judgment acknowledges not only the minds of our students but their hearts and souls as well. As bell hooks argues, "Dominator culture has tried to keep us all afraid, to make us choose safety instead of risk, sameness instead of diversity. Moving through that fear, finding out what connects us, reveling in our differences; this is the process that brings us closer, that gives us a world of shared values, of meaningful community." 58

Notes
5 NCPH, for example, suggests, “Undergraduate programs that offer public history should keep the following four basic priorities in mind: (1) Provide students with strong training in the basic skills of the historian; (2) Provide students with a solid grounding in historical content; (3) Introduce students early in their studies to the wide variety of careers that incorporate some component of public history; and (4) Encourage students to participate in field-based research, service learning, and/or internships.” NCPH Curriculum and Training Committee, “Public History for Undergraduate Students,” October 1, 2009, http://ncph.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Undergrad-Best-Practice.pdf.
8 Joan Middendorf et al., “What’s Feeling Got to Do with It? Decoding Emotional Bottlenecks in the History Classroom,” Arts and Humanities in Higher Education 14, no. 2 (September 2014): 171. See also Chad Berry, Lori Schmied, and Joseph Schrock, “The Role of Emotion in Teaching and Learning History: A Scholarship of Teaching


14 Ulbrich, “What Is Community-Based Art?”; Goldbard, “Postscript to the Past.”


17 Behind the Walls, Geneva, 2016, exhibit brochure.

18 Johnson and Stowe, “Field of Public History,” 18.


24 HWS student reflections were drawn from three sources: the community of origin paper assignment, weekly journal reflections, and a final paper. The study was approved by the HWS Institutional Review Board, and students gave consent for their work to be used anonymously. These writings have been lightly edited for publication.

25 In the version my students participated in, they were asked to form a line and step forward from that line if they agreed with the statement read. The statements, adopted from the textbook Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice, were designed to call attention to class, gender, racial, ethnic, and religious difference. For example, students were asked to step forward if their school holidays coincided with religious holidays they celebrated or if they attended grade school with people they felt were like themselves. Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell, and Pat Griffin, eds., Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice (New York: Routledge, 1998).


29 *Behind the Walls*, Geneva, 2016, exhibit brochure, first draft.

Conard, “Facepaint History.”


As public historian Benjamin Filene notes, “Professional historians have been trained to be wary of emotion. Years of graduate work and peer review inculcate the value of being dispassionate. We are supposed to gather evidence, evaluate preponderances, and track patterns, all with an eye toward creating balanced interpretations.” See Filene “Listening Intently: Can StoryCorps Teach Museums How to Win the Hearts of New Audiences?,” in *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, ed. Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski (Philadelphia: Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, 2011).


38 Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” 34.
39 Meringolo, Museums, Monuments, and National Parks, xxi. See also Stowe, “Public History Curriculum,” 46.
41 See, for example, Wing Luke Asian Museum’s Community-Based Exhibition Model Handbook (Seattle: Wing Luke Asian Museum, 2006); see also Animating Democracy’s History as a Catalyst for Civic Dialogue (New York: Americans for the Arts, 2005), which explored three case studies of history projects that explicitly engaged with the public with the goal of fostering social justice.
43 Teen comments were drawn from two sources: written reflections and a survey completed at the end of the project. The study was approved by the HWS Institutional Review Board, and administrators at the after-school organization gave consent for teen work to be used anonymously. These writings have been lightly edited for publication.
48 Haft, “Voices from the Battlefront.”
51 Helguera, Education for Socially Engaged Art, 13.
52 Hershman, “Interview with Baca and Lacy.”
53 Johnson and Stowe, “Field of Public History,” 12.
54 Conard, “Facepaint History.”
55 Meringolo, “Learning to See.”