

Community Engagement Fellows Project Report 2017
Deborah Currier, Associate Professor, Theatre and Dance Department
Theatre Education/Endorsements Director

**Project Title(s): Connecting WWU Theatre Education Students
with Underserved County Schools
&
The Cultural Heritage Performance Project**

The rewarding outcome of my participation in the Community Engagement Fellow program is multifaceted, with my participation in the fellowship resulting in two separate projects, both in different stages of completion as of May 2017. I will focus my report first on the project that successfully completed its first iteration in March 2017. I will then briefly describe the project that I am working on with my CE Fellow, Evan Mueller, which is on a much longer timeline and is in its initial phase of information gathering in the community.

The most important aspect of the CE Fellows program, to me, is the amazing connections, fruitful dialogue and creative brainstorming that happens during the cohort meetings and gatherings. After 16 years in the Whatcom County community, it has been a refreshing and inspiring year. I have enjoyed meeting new community partners as well as re-connecting with community organizations I have worked with for years in a productive space set aside for really focusing on partnerships. It is so beneficial to have the cohort support and actual time set aside to give community engagement the energy and critical thinking it needs to be successful.

The completed project I did this year was a partnership with Everson Elementary School in Everson, WA to design and implement an after-school theatre residency for 3rd-5th grade students. Everson Elementary has suffered for years with very little enrichment activities available to them, as they are too far from Western's campus to effectively engage large numbers of WWU students. My THTR 450: Advanced Theatre for Youth class and I delivered a seven-week residency to Everson Elementary between the end of January and mid-March of 2017. The community partner was actually Kevin Devere, principal of the school. He and I have worked together in years past, but were never able to figure out how to connect the WWU students in an intentional way that met their program learning outcomes and met course learning targets at the same time as delivering an on-going residency for the Everson students. The secondary intention was to create something that would be sustainable as an annual offering and not just the "one off" types of workshops I had been able to arrange in the past.

The CE Fellowship allowed for this program to not only come to fruition with dedicated time and energy spent on creating a syllabus for the THTR 450: Advanced Theatre for Youth in partnership with the Everson school community that met the learning goals of both the elementary school arts enrichment endeavors and the goals of the course. The THTR 450 course has specific learning outcomes and assessment activities reliant upon practicum experiences:

- * To further explore the foundational philosophy, literature and techniques of creating theatre for and with youth established in THTR 350: Theatre for Youth I.
- * To gain an understanding of the special skills and knowledge required in youth theatre through hands-on work with students ages 3rd-5th grades
- * To strengthen related theatre for youth skills in communication, adaptation, directing and performing

In partnering with the elementary school, we were able to co-construct a syllabus for the course which ensured that WA State Arts Standards were being met for the 3rd-5th grades and the learning targets of the WWU course. The best possible outcome has come from this community engagement project in that the next iteration of the course and partnership will now include Nooksack Elementary School, another under-served, outlying Whatcom County elementary school.

The ongoing CE project to report on is the Cultural Heritage Performance Project, which Evan Mueller and I are working on together. The scope of this project is quite large, and we are lucky that the CE program is there to support this endeavor for a longer timeline than just one year. The project will engage the faculty and student resources of current programs in Theatre (and hopefully Cultural Anthropology educators, Whatcom Libraries, Allied Arts and/or other community programs) to

gather, explore and script community stories/memoirs and then share those stories through a public performance. This idea has led to a number of concurrent and related smaller projects in the Bellingham community, one of which is a partnership with the Bellingham City Club to create some programming related to water: water rights, wells, the Hirst Decision, etc., that uses some of the Applied Theatre/Documentary Drama techniques outlined in the Cultural Heritage Project proposal. The end result will be a series of first-person monologues, scripted from compilation interviews with local stake-holders in the water rights issues, performed by WWU theatre students at a fall meeting of the Bellingham City Club. We hope to be able to incorporate the monologues into the larger Cultural Heritage Project.

I return to the tremendous benefits of the CE Fellows program in not only connecting WWU faculty, students and staff to the Whatcom County community but also in engendering creative and critical thinking about coursework and program goals in unique and reinvigorating ways. I am so grateful that I was able to be a CE Fellow this year, because it has been an oasis of connection, communication and collaborative (not competitive) partnership across disciplines and organizations. The best part is that the partnerships and collaborative discussions are not ending with my time as a CE Fellow, but will go on for years to come.