

Daniel Fine

Professor Gitta Honegger

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Final Paper - *House of the Spirits* Cultural Probe

As my area of research while at ASU is interactive technology for children's audiences, I joined the Theatre for Young Audiences group for the final project in Dramaturgy. The group consists of Megan Flod, Bradford Forehand, Megan Hartman, Vicki Holden, and myself. We were charged with creating a theoretical study guide for the play *House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende, which the ASU School of Theatre and Film is producing in April 2012. Taking Professor Honegger's lead to push the boundaries in traditional approaches to study guides for theatre performance, I suggested to my colleagues that we style our work on cultural probes.

Cultural Probes are an established method of collecting data, designed to provoke inspirational responses, which enable researchers to get to know a community. There are many key words that resonated with us in the very definition of a cultural probe: provoke, inspire, and get to know a community. Many would argue that it is the theater's job to provoke audiences. Certainly, the novel and the play *The House of the Spirits* is very provocative. Theatre artists constantly inspire audiences with their talent and stories. If we go to the theater to be provoked and inspired, chances are we are also hoping to be engaged.

But as educators and dramaturges, it is not enough to provoke, inspire, and engage our audiences. We must get to know them. Theatre is meant to be seen by an audience. The more we know our audience, the more we can engage them. If we understand the audience's point of

view, we can craft shared experiences that will help to create future theater audiences.

In order to create a new audience for live theater and install in them a passion for this art form, we must fully engage the audience. We must take advantage of modern technology and the tools the students are already using to help us achieve our goals. By interacting with the audience, we not only teach, but we also learn. This is an important lesson in the theater. Theater must be a two-way dialogue between the artist(s) and the audience. For too long education departments have only been interested in a one-way conversation, where they are the teacher at the head of the class lecturing to the student. This is an outdated and flawed model. In today's world educators are no longer simply information givers. Anyone who has access to the internet has just about all the information of the world at their fingertips. Students no longer need educators to provide information. What they do need is guidance in how to interpret and analyze the information. Our job is to help students grapple with understanding the information and connect the dots on how the information relates and pertains to their lives.

We have crafted an experience where the students are asked to relate the themes of the novel and the play to their real world experience. By creating a thoughtful cultural probe that carefully balances the exchange of educational materials, with the creation of content/stories, we hope to engage the targeted High School AP English of twenty in new and exciting ways. Our aim is to get them thinking not only about the themes of the play and novel, but also how they relate to their life, their community, and our shared, global humanity.

The cultural probe kit is designed so that each of the twenty students in the class would receive an iPad, on which they would be able to take photographs, record audio and video, write blog entries, research, and interact with our website. The website houses the project prompts,

provides the students with information, and allows them to interact with each other and the stories they create.

For my portion of the cultural probe I created a template website and the content for the Songs of the Revolution. The website creation and layout consisted of roughly 15-20 hours of work and is not completely functional. As webmaster, I created the infrastructure for the site and crafted how the pages would relate to one another. We envision the site to be more interactive than it is currently. Student would be able to upload their own data and interact with other student's data, by leaving comments, etc. The website prototype is in beta and meant to serve as a sample of the way our content would be delivered and interacted with by the students. The website can be accessed at www.thespirithouse.webs.com.

As a group we took great care and had several working sessions in crafting the over-all experience, both from an educational point of view and an experiential point of view. Our approach to the cultural probe is not traditional in the sense of what a cultural probe is typically designed to achieve. We have crafted a hybrid system that educates the audience about Chile and *The House of the Spirits* and then asks students to engage in activities by creating their own data. We ask them to upload their data to the website, where they can further the conversation by commenting on other student's work. By creating a relationship where their work exists alongside the Chilean and world contexts, they begin to better understand their connection and their place in history and in their current lives. All the activities that are crafted follow this formula of providing historical and/or artistic context to Chile, the novel, and the play and then asking them to connect and relate the information to their lives.

If the probe/website were to be developed, I think that a stronger connection between

each of the five activities could be explored and a culminating activity that wrapped everything up, relating one activity to the other could be implemented. As it stands right now, that is missing and students would be left to their own to discover the relationships between activities and how they work as a cohesive whole.

The Songs of the Revolution section, which I created, takes life from the character of Pedro Tercero Garcia, who is a protest singer in both the novel and the play. Exploring the theme of protest songs and singers, Songs of the Revolution aims to teach students about political activity through music. Presented on a global interactive map, the songs are introduced according to geography. This allows the students to not only learn about the song and what it is reacting against, but also that this type of political action and art takes place all over the world. I ask the students to participate by adding at least one song to the map. By making global connections hopefully they may also make a local one.

The Songs of the Revolution portion of the website has the following subheadings: Songs of the Revolution / Interactive Map / Songs On the Map / What is protest music? / Protest Music and *The House of the Spirits* / Protest music in Chile / 1973 Chilean Coup D'état / The United States and Chile / How can music change the world? / Sing your Song

Songs of the Revolution is a short paragraph, which introduces the idea that art, in specific music, can be a cause/catalyst for social change. View at:

<http://www.thespirithouse.webs.com/songs.htm>

The Interactive Map is the main tool for students to navigate and listen to the sample songs. By placing the music on a map, it clearly shows where in the world each song was written, and where in the struggle is/was happening. This visual medium aids our understanding

of how songs and events are related to each other. More importantly, it shows how, no matter where in the world you are, we all have common struggles and are connected to each other.

The map is built in Google maps and embedded in the website. When clicked, each pin opens a content box, which contains: a link to the song, a brief introduction to the song and a learn more link, which leads back to the website, where each song has it's own webpage with more information and questions about the song. In future development it would be best if the map was hosted on the website, so users would not have to leave the website. It would also be an improvement if the video/audio for each song was embedded in the content box, rather than leading the viewer to an external website. In addition, it would be great to develop the questions that are asked about each song into a more fully realized interactive activity. In the section Sing your Song students will further interact with the map, by placing their own music onto it. View at: <http://www.thespirithouse.webs.com/songs.htm>

Songs On the Map is a list of all the songs that are located as pins on the map. This provides another way of navigating the songs, by simply clicking through to their webpage, rather than exploring them through the map. This area was developed as a fallback in case the interactive map fails to load properly. By navigating the songs by this method, users do not see the link to play the song or read the brief introduction of each song. In a fully developed site, with all the bugs fixed, I think that I would eliminate this section, forcing viewers to explore the music solely through interacting with the map.

Ten songs were chosen to be placed on the map. They are: *Bayan Ko* by José Corazón de Jesús and Constancio de Guzman from the Philippines / *Come Out, Ye Black and Tans* by Dominic Behan from Ireland / *Deportees* by Outernational from Phoenix, Arizona, USA / *Fight*

the Power by Public Enemy - NYC, USA / *L'Internationale* by Eugene Pottier from France / *Los Libertadores* by Rodriguez and Carrera from Chile / *Manifiesto* by Victor Jara from Chile / *Redemption Song* by Bob Marley from Jamaica / *Strange Fruit* performed by Billie Holiday, written by Abel Meeropol from NYC, USA / *Zombie* by Fela Kuti and Afrika from Nigeria.

The songs were chosen to present variety in geographical location, in order to show that this protest music happens all over the world. The next consideration when choosing the songs was the student user. I tried to balance the songs by choosing historical pieces that they may have never heard, with modern songs they may more easily relate to their lives. By choosing a reggae and a hip-hop song, it is my intention to show them that these types of song, which they may have thought of as only entertainment/pop songs do have a deeper meaning and a connection to social and political struggles.

It was import to me to include a song from the Southwest, in particular Arizona, if possible. My research unearthed an entire movement of protest songs based on Arizona's controversial passing of SB1070. *Deportees* was chosen from the many that belong to the movement Sound Strike.

There are two songs that represent the struggles in Chile. *Los Libertadores* talks about the first revolution in Chile and the colonization of South America, while *Manifiesto* more closely relates to the story of *The House of the Spirits*. Learn more about each song and view at:

<http://www.thespirithouse.webs.com/songs.htm>

What is protest music? section of the website is a brief overview of what protest music is. Students are introduced to the concept of a protest song and what it tries to achieve. View at:

<http://www.thespirithouse.webs.com/songs.htm>

Protest Music and *The House of the Spirits* provides an analysis of how protest music is used in both the novel and the play. The connection between protest music and *The House of the Spirits* is the catalyst for this entire section of the cultural probe. View at:

<http://www.thespirithouse.webs.com/songs.htm>

Protest music in Chile section provides a historical context about the protest movement, in particular through music, in Chile starting in the 1960's. It provides a brief introduction to the Nueva Canción (New Song) movement and introduces some of the leading Chilean protest musicians. View at: <http://www.thespirithouse.webs.com/songs.htm>

1973 Chilean Coup D'état section offers some history of the second Chilean revolution in order to provide a context for what the music was reacting against. View at:

<http://www.thespirithouse.webs.com/songs.htm>

The United States and Chile section makes a connection for the students on the relationship between the two countries by briefly explaining the CIA's involvement in the Coup and the resulting solidarity movement that grew in the United States. After providing a brief historical context, this section focuses on the musical and social connections between the two countries. View at: <http://www.thespirithouse.webs.com/songs.htm>

How can music change the world? section attempts to inspire and motivate the students. The aim here is to really encourage the idea that art, in this case music, has the power to transform lives and influence humanity. View at: <http://www.thespirithouse.webs.com/songs.htm>

Sing your Song section provides the interactive instructions for the student. This is the synthesis of their experience for this portion of the website. They are directed to create or find their own protest song. I encourage them to make one or find one that speaks about a struggle or injustice in their local community, or at the very least is a cause they feel passionate about. Once students create or find their own song they are asked to add it to the interactive map, based once again on geography. Students are able to navigate and listen to each other's songs and see how theirs and others are inter-related to songs of the revolution from all over the world. View at: <http://www.thespirithouse.webs.com/songs.htm>

In creating a hybrid cultural probe in place of a traditional study guide, we hope to encourage theatrical education/outreach departments to think outside their normal practices. Through the creation of this website/cultural probe we have drawn inspiration from the source material and the theatrical artists who push the boundaries and take risks on stage. Traditionally, theater education departments create study guides that are meant to introduce the audience to the play, playwright, history and themes/context of the play. But they rarely are engaging, nor do they ask the audience to be creative and interact with the themes of the play. By creating a hybrid cultural probe we hope to engage the students in an interactive way, while learning about their experiences, in order to forge relationships within a community and stir in them a love of theatre.

Works Cited

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