

## Performing Thyself: Sparking Imagination and Exploring Ethnic Identity Through Singing and Dancing

*A professor stood in front of the classroom. Her stage costume, a traditional Russian dress in bright green (she said it is called sarafan in Russian), contrasted a white board behind her. She was singing a traditional Russian folk song, a cappella. The song was rhythmic and playful, and the professor started dancing in the middle of the song. Some students giggled. Others watched, in awe. The professor continued singing as no world around her existed. At first, it was a rather strange sight, and, if you were to walk into the classroom then, you would not be sure which class it was: Folk Singing? Costume Design? Basics of Dance? It was a communication course, and the topic of that day's class was culture and identity. The professor stopped and asked the class, "Can you describe my cultural identity? And can you describe yours?" The discussion started, and immediately students got involved on the conversation, sharing their ideas about Russian and American cultures. It was the start of an enlightening dialogue about identity, cultural values and the place of culture in our everyday lives.*

My cultural identity is Russian; I am aware that my nationality has become a very important part of who I am since I have moved to the USA. In the United States, I express my culture, among other ways, through live nonprofessional singing a cappella of Russian folkloric songs and occasional recreational folk dancing. I enjoy performing in my identity as a Russian. Russians have a rich tradition of folk singing and dancing. Today, this tradition goes through a complex process of revival folklore to preserve the Russian folk heritage (Earthwatch Institute, 2004). Folk music traditions are slowly integrating back into the contemporary Russian culture: several singers, including Nadezhda Babkina and Pelageya, became widely successful in Russia after reviving old traditional Russian folk songs from Siberia and Malorossiya (a region in the southern part of the European Russia) and performing them in new variations. Yet, many young urban Russians do not have a strong desire to perform folk dancing and singing.

Folk singing and dancing was not something I did in Russia. I felt a strong need for expressing my cultural identity only after I had come to the USA. Here, I discovered how I am different from others; folk singing and dancing was one of the ways to answer the question of why I am different. Now my cultural identity calls for its manifestation; I want to share my ethnic background and show others why it is important for me to be a Russian. Discussions about my ethnicity and national identity in the classroom at the beginning of the semester also help me to clarify possible misunderstandings and intercultural differences U.S. or international students might notice in our communication and construction of dialogues later in the semester. For example, Russians like to express their views directly and present them in a very active manner, with passion and emotional involvement. United States students are not always ready for an instructor's emotional, passionate involvement in course subjects.

In order to establish rapport with students and to start building a constructive community of learning in the classroom, I tell my students about myself, not only by using words, but also by using unconventional techniques. Through performing in my ethnic identity, through interpreting songs I sing and explaining dances I show, I want them to understand who I am, so that I, as an instructor, can have an embodied experience in the classroom. Of course, it is my great hope that such performance of my identity will motivate

some (and hopefully many) students to express themselves and thus rediscover the possibilities of sharing their own ethnic identities with others. The multicultural environment of the American classroom creates a unique opportunity for students and teachers to call upon their cultural identities, and I truly believe that this call can be successfully answered to foster multicultural dialogue in higher education.

When asked a question, “Who are you?” some seek role models; others seek a geographically based answer. “Why do you ask?” might be a question asked in return. Why is it important for us to identify ourselves with culture? Why do our students, for instance, refer to their ethnic heritage? What does it mean for us to understand someone’s ethnic identity? How do the notions of acceptance or denial play out in the multicultural environment of the classroom? These questions motivated me to examine issues of identity exploration through performance in the classroom.

This essay is an attempt to answer these questions and to facilitate discussions about ethnical identity performance. I believe that ethnic cultural identity, expressed through live performance in the classroom in the beginning of the semester, specifically through folk singing and dancing, can set a mood for discussions on recognition of differences and intercultural sensitivity in the classroom. I use words *ethnic* and *cultural* interchangeably in this manuscript, although I recognize differences that can be pointed out between the two. My reason for doing so is to emphasize a strong, intertwined connection between them. Our ethnic identity is often a product of the culture in which we live. Culture, in turn, heavily relies on recognition and understanding of one’s ethnic identity. In addition, I use the term *folk* (or *folkloric*) singing and dancing in the sense of historic traditional singing and dancing of a specific ethnic and/or national group that shares particular societal, cultural, religious, and other common values and beliefs, all of which can be manifested through public or private performance of its singing and dancing. The goal of this essay is to share the experience of performing as a way to illustrate the connection to culture and spark conversations about students’ cultural backgrounds. Discovering one’s identity through dancing and singing allows the instructor and students to engage in fresh conversations about communication within one multicultural environment and connect such performances of identity to communicating one’s culture through means other than words.

As I have previously mentioned, I presented my personal account of how I perform my Russian identity through my live singing and dancing and of the ways performing my identity helps me to connect with students and motivates them to rediscover their own cultural identities. Next I will discuss cultural identity and the importance of understanding how ethnic and national identity can be manifested through traditional singing and dancing. I will then examine implications of performing folk heritage in relation to constructing and expressing one’s cultural identity. Finally, I will concentrate on the educational value of live singing and dancing, using the concept of a performative dialogue, adopted from Magowan (2000), as a way to facilitate discussions of how cultural differences (such as ways of thinking) can be understood and appreciated in the classroom.

### **Defining Cultural Identity**

Identities can be thought of as “stable features of persons that exist prior to any situation, and are dynamic and situated accomplishments” (Tracy, 2002, p. 17). Tracy argues that identities are enacted through talk, but I want to add other forms of expressing one’s identity, such as nonverbal cues and performance acts. The last one is especially important in

light of social identity, which includes ethnic or national identity. Social identity can be defined as an individual's self-concept developed as a result of membership in and belonging to social groups. Values and emotions associated with a certain group create a shared social identity (Tajfel, 1978). Simply put, cultural identity involves a set of common, shared values and beliefs of a particular group, or culture. National identity can include ethnic identity; however, it also can be understood as a more complex, broad phenomenon that might be bounded by macro-culture and shares historical, geopolitical, social, economic, and cultural commonalities. In this essay, I address national and ethnic identities without necessarily concentrating on their differences.

Ethnic identity is examined here as social identity, which does not necessarily mean that personal identity cannot be influenced by culture, ethnicity, or nationality. Instead, for the purpose of this discussion, I point out *socially* important factors of understanding ethnic identity, but mention implications and reflections of cultural identity on individual in relation to a classroom setting.

### **Expressing Identity through Dancing and Signing**

Tanno (1997) identified several ways in which ethnic identity is evolved: identity as symbolic themes, such as a common language, rituals, or shared world views; identity as historical consciousness, which can be described as a sequence of events and struggles over time that reflects continuity from past to future; and "identity as social consciousness manifested through seeking communal or group acceptance" (p. 28). Each of these ways, in my view, can be identified and thus manifested in traditional, or folk, music heritage, such as singing and dancing.

First, shared world views, values, and beliefs traditionally have been expressed through ritual dancing and performance. For instance, Native American cultural music heritage, including dancing, is a good illustration of rhetorical efforts by Native Americans to transcend cultural values and invigorate tribal culture (Morris & Wander, 1990). Symbolic representation of culture through music and performing arts contributes to the formation of ethnic identity and provides common points of references to Native Americans.

European dancing also helps to reinvigorate and manifest cultural identity, whether through professional or nonprofessional performances (Kidder, 2003). Dance rituals and performances can go beyond exotic relics. For instance, the meanings embodied in the dance performance by an indigenous group of Peninsular Malaysia, Hma' Btsisi', "form the foundation of Btsisi' beliefs" (Nowak, 2000). Dance is seen as a way to identify and distinguish oneself from others, and, in a specific context of Btsisi', traditional dancing is a way to draw attention to a Malaysian minority (Nowak). In short, identity as a symbolic theme constructs a common basis for reference and becomes a basic building block of ethnic heritage.

Identity as historical consciousness expresses notions of place of a particular ethnic group in society and its struggle for a distinguished existence. Such consciousness is easily traced in the traditional music heritage of Native Americans and African Americans. Native Americans' identities, for example, historically suffered from generalization (Jackson & Levine, 2002). Today, their ethnic identities, as expressed through music, are often commercialized to attract the attention of other dominant groups in society (Jackson & Levine). Australian Aboriginal artists are also familiar with the process of commercialization of their ethnic music heritage.

The popular music created by these groups is heavily drawn from folk traditions of the past and manifests continuity of ethnic heritage (Dunbar-Hall & Gibson, 2000). Ghana, the traditional Maltese singing, is a significant phenomenon in today's Maltese culture (Cassia, 2000). Maltese identity is represented through traditional music festivals and communicated through historical reflections on singing heritage in geopolitical settings of Malta and other Mediterranean societies. History of culture, therefore, can be told through folk music, and songs and dances are not only cultural artifacts, but also communicative manifestations of one's cultural identity.

The most interesting implications for cultural identities come from the process of evolving identities through social consciousness. Dunbar-Hall and Gibson (2000) emphasized the social implications of popular music made by Australian Aboriginal artists through analysis of different songs that have a strong ethnic identification. They claim that songs contrast societal expectations imposed on minorities with those imposed on European Australians. Minorities thus try to understand and negotiate their geopolitics through identity expressed in their popular music.

Marimba, "a folkloric dance historically associated with Nicaragua's Masaya region during the Sandinista government of 1980s," is revived by local folk groups today (Borland, 2002, p. 77). Not surprisingly, creative freedom experiences certain restraints in contemporary Nicaraguan society, and the Masaya dancers strive to maintain their regional identity. Dancing is seen as socially meaningful and influential in the society, and identity as represented through folk dance, struggles to receive national acceptance.

The performances on stage are connected with those off stage (Heller, 1991); yet, off stage performances can be truly authentic and evolutionary when they come from non-professional performers who negotiate their own cultural identities through their traditional music heritage. This idea was actively explored by Luther Halsey Gulick, who was behind the program of folk dance education for girls in New York schools at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Winter, 1999). Through learning and practicing folk dances, particularly of Anglo-Saxon heritage, girls were thought to be reacquainted with their cultures while absorbing and consuming a newly emerging, novel all-American immigrant culture. Winter (1999) argued that "the dance would reacquaint the dancers not merely with their own culture, while exposing them to immigrant cultures as well." Even though Winter, who critically examines the program, gleans that dance discourse was directed at achieving public identity by a woman only through her body, lessons on how to present one's cultural heritage to others, as manifested through self-expression in off stage nonprofessional folk dance, can also be learned.

Thus, singing and dancing is a natural, powerful, and successful way of performing and expressing one's identity. We as instructors often perform our identities in the classroom, intentionally or unintentionally, albeit the few of us who dance and sing in the classroom on a regular basis. But because the classroom is not a passive environment, instructors can benefit most of the time from interactive identity performances and engage students in performative dialogue that will help to unveil and grasp difficult concepts.

### **The Concept of Performative Dialogue**

In this essay, I use the concept of performative dialogue to discuss the ways to engage students in the learning process. By performative dialogue, I mean instructor's interaction with students through some kind of live performance. I argue that performing folk singing

and dancing is an unconventional, but promising, way to create a common platform for a meaningful discussion and dialogue about cultural identities in the classroom.

Magowan (2000) argued that indigenous dance is a “poetic politics of cross-cultural encounter that engages Aboriginal identities with those of the Australian nation” (p. 308). Magowan called it “a performative dialogue” between indigenous communities and the government and claimed that this folkloric dance language was translated into political discourse. Performative dialogue of shared dance, as formed by different communities and adapted for contemporary performative statements to negotiate its existence within the nation-state, posed a problem of the authentication for Aboriginal groups. Such negotiation of a minority’s place and recognition by dominant ethnic groups is vivid in performances of dance, repositioned for the stage in concerts and ritual arenas. But the concept of performative dialogue can be useful when applied to understanding a “common dance” between the instructor and students in the classroom.

### **Connecting Performative Dialogue to Learning**

Performative dialogue can be particularly useful in helping students grasp complex course material and facilitating students’ learning. Vygotsky’s concept of the zone of proximal development explains how instructor-student engagement in performative dialogue resulted in a fuller understanding of the meaning of cultural identity concept. The concept of the zone of proximal development, a level of development attained when engaging in social behavior, suggests that a learner’s heterogeneity should be placed at the center of the educative process (Vygotsky, 1926/1997). Further, the art of the teacher is in directing and regulating personal activity, engagement of the learner (Davydov, 1995).

Choosing specific examples of folk dancing and singing for in-class performance can help instructors and students to express their identities, to bring to light identity issues, and to experience the personal and social values we live by. Our constructive community of learning is based on shared knowledge about our identities (Berger, & Luckmann, 1966). In my classroom, I was able to scaffold the discussion about cultural identities so that students were able to grasp concepts unfamiliar to them and contribute to a dialogue about the role and function of identity in communication. Many educators face the challenge of presenting complex abstract subjects. That is why the student-instructor interaction in the form of performative dialogue can generate considerable interest among university instructors.

Interactive learning environments encourage young people to explore their identity, discover themselves, and share their worldviews with others (Bers, 2003). This is especially true for university environments where expression of one’s ideas takes different creative forms. Through creative forms of discourse students can better formulate their views and share opinions. Performance of one’s identity can become a major method for introducing one’s ideas or identity without the automatic denial of these ideas by other members of society. Students often refer to their own experiences, their own stories and their own shared cultural knowledge to argue their points of view. In the multicultural setting of today’s U.S. university classroom, this is an especially important and valued way of creating and maintaining dialogue (Hendrix, Jackson, & Warren, 2003). The university can become a place where cultural identities are expressed and praised so that students feel comfortable sharing their views and opinions, which is an essential first step in learning in discussion and seminar course settings. Performative dialogue can prevent students from building invisible barriers between themselves and others, between the instructor and students, between

domestic and international learners. Expressing views through dancing and singing can spark fresh conversations and encourage both students and the instructor to learn more about one another outside of the classroom. It can serve as an innovative technique for establishing rapport and creating a unique atmosphere in the classroom, where the listeners in the course become members of a constructive community of learning.

### **Using the Instructor's Cultural Identity as a Starting Point**

Often, the identity of an instructor is not present in the classroom. Instructors' identities are neglected in communication studies on effectiveness of learning and successful presentations in classrooms (Wood & Fassett, 2003). Perspectives on instructors' and teachers' identities are usually disembodied and do not reflect the complexity of classroom interaction. I argue that the identity of a teacher, specifically her or his cultural identity, can be manifested, expressed in the beginning of the semester through live singing and dancing, to create a friendly, culturally sensitive environment in the classroom.

I suggest *performing thyself* to students, specifically sharing one's cultural heritage as manifested through folkloric singing and dancing. Performance will immediately attract the attention of uninterested and uninvolved students, spark interest, and serve as a starting point for a novel, fresh conversation about identities of students and a constructive community. Ask students to do the same: prepare and perform folkloric singing or dancing and then share opinions about how their cultural heritage can contribute to the overall learning experience of others at the university. (After all, university learning also involves learning about others in the world around you!) The discussion can further develop around issues of understanding our cultural heritage and exploring the ways our culture affects our everyday communication with each other.

Not only can such performative dialogues help to create a comfortable learning environment, they can also encourage students to discover themselves and others through unconventional paths of positive, non-traditional thinking and behaviors, in contrast with conventional methods, such as short introductions and stories about their interests and hobbies.

The instructor can express her or his ideas through music, particularly folk singing and dancing, and then invite students to participate in this "performance hour," which can be either spontaneous, impromptu, or prepared in advance. Performing myself through live singing and dancing of Russian folk music has led to great discussion and several students performance in my classes.

### **Conclusion**

This essay presents the concept of performative dialogue as a unique, innovative way to initiate and establish cultural connections and discussions of culture and identity in the classroom. Performative dialogues can connect the worldviews of different cultures and backgrounds and appreciate such differences. In addition, live dancing and singing can set a mood for classroom discussions later in the semester about the importance and implications of multiculturalism in the USA. The performative dialogue technique can also be used later for stimulating thinking about issues of morality and identity and about personal and social values in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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