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Students find the story, then act it out

Story by Tara Ballenger | Photo by Rob Hill

Forget walking a mile in another man's shoes — Matt Saltzberg believes that the path to understanding is to speak a while in his words.

Saltzberg, a Mizzou Advantage fellow for the Managing Innovation initiative, taught a new ethnography theater course for non-majors in fall 2011 to show students the intersection of theater, innovation and social understanding.

Ethnography involves collecting cultural data by spending time in a community. In ethnographic theater, actors conduct in-depth interviews with subjects and use the responses to create a performance piece. Typically, actors portray the subjects they interviewed.

The process requires awareness and reflection, says Saltzberg.

Memorizing the interviews means establishing an intimacy not only with what people say, but also with vocal gestures — every little “like” and “uh” and “you know?” — as well as body language and intonation. As a student practices and perfects the piece, in part by listening and re-listening to the interview, the performance becomes a method of understanding the interviewee.

“You step into this world, and you don't judge the other on your own terms,” Saltzberg says.



Matt Saltzberg sends his theater students into the community to find stories.

When students chose a person to interview, Saltzberg encouraged them to pick someone from a culture or a background they wanted to know more about.

One student interviewed a co-worker about being abused as a child. Another interviewed an elderly woman about growing up as an African American during the Civil Rights era.

Ethnography is part investigation and part analysis and it can use empathy as a tool for social understanding and social justice, Saltzberg says.

“It gives a voice to the voiceless.”

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