Abstract:
In this essay, we outline how materiality can be a tool of critical pedagogy, leading to pleasure, vulnerability, and embodied learning in the classroom. Over the past four years, we have taught an honors colloquium to undergraduate students focused on self-publishing as a means to create social change. As we explore various publishing media, genres, and activist movements with our students, we combine traditional academic activities like scholarly reading and written analysis with informal hands-on craft time. Our students make collages, learn to use the advanced features on a photocopier, and collaborate on hectograph printing among other crafts, all as they begin to put together their own final DIY publication. Students regularly report that the hands-on activities are crucial to their learning, giving them new appreciation for the underground publications they read, through embodied experiences that can’t be replicated with a reading or a quiz. It also builds our community of learners, as we share ideas, borrow glue sticks, and chit-chat as we put our zines together. We will outline how we built and teach this course, placing it within our critical pedagogy – informed by bell hooks, Kevin Kumashiro, and Paulo Freire, among others – and how teaching this course has helped us incorporate embodiment into our other teaching.

Keywords: embodied pedagogy, teaching, publishing.
INTRODUCTION

Alison Piepmeier has argued that, “Zines’ materiality creates community because it creates pleasure, affection, allegiance, and vulnerability” (2008, 230). In this essay, we outline how this same materiality can be a tool of critical pedagogy, leading to pleasure, vulnerability, and embodied learning in the classroom.

Over the past four years, we have taught an honors colloquium to undergraduate students focused on self-publishing as a means to create social change. As we explore various publishing media, genres, and activist movements with our students, we combine traditional academic activities like scholarly reading and written analysis with informal hands-on craft time. Our students make collages, learn to use the advanced features on a photocopier, and collaborate on hectograph printing among other crafts, all as they begin to put together their own final DIY publication. Students regularly report that the hands-on activities are crucial to their learning, giving them new appreciation for the underground publications they read, through embodied experiences that can’t be replicated with a reading or a quiz. It also builds our community of learners, as we share ideas, borrow gluesticks, and chit-chat as we put our zines together.

In this essay, we will outline how we built and teach this course, placing it within our critical pedagogy – informed by bell hooks, Kevin Kumashiro, and Paulo Freire, among others – and how teaching this course has helped us incorporate embodiment into our other teaching.

EMBODIED PEDAGOGY

Over the past five years, we have taught our course, Publishing Underground, to undergraduate students at Oregon State University each winter term. At our large public university, this is a rare small class, limited to 12 students maximum enrollment. As part of the Honors College, this course is one of a suite of course offerings that highlight exploratory discovery and deep dives into areas outside the students’ primary area of study. Our pedagogical approach is informed by our own experiences, by the content we teach, and by the needs of our students.

We have both had long-standing experiences teaching through doing. Kelly started teaching (and learning) with zines as a volunteer at the Zine Archive and Publishing Project, a now-defunct community-run zine library in Seattle. Since becoming a librarian, she has taught information literacy workshops and courses in academic libraries for about a decade. Korey has a PhD in English literature and currently works in the academic publishing industry. He has a background teaching introductory and intermediate writing courses as well as literary analysis. More recently, he has been a coach for a youth mountain biking group. Together, working in the library, we hosted pop-up Crafternoon events, setting up drop-by activities including collage, book making, and serendipitous code-generated poetry.

We developed this course to explore our own shared interests – in publishing, in social change, in community – and to share these interests with our students. From the start, we have made it clear to students that we learn together through reading, discussion, and by making. While we are focused in this paper on the making, which provides the most embodied examples of activities, these three elements flow together: students read before class, and then we may have a focused discussion, but then ideas from the reading reemerge or are newly synthesized in the craft or making activities.

Our pedagogy is shaped by feminist and critical approaches. We consider what Paulo Freire described as the banking model as the opposite of what we seek to create in the classroom: a space where the teacher knows
everything and the students know nothing, where the students are empty vessels simply waiting to be filled. On the contrary, we recognize that our students bring lived experience, in addition to previous formal education, and particularly given our subject matter, all of us have experience as readers, and very often as creators. As white, middle class, cisgender Americans, we recognize that our social identities represent norms within higher education and society more broadly – and we are grateful for how students deepen our understanding with their own knowledge. We approach DIY within the lens that Red Chidgey offers, of “individual action held within a collectivity” (2014, 103). Within the classroom, each learner operates on their own, but we also learn together. Given that we share the output of our learning, the result is more collaborative and community-oriented than many traditional classroom activities.

Serendipity also figures into our pedagogy. Kevin Kumashiro writes that, “Presuming to know and control what students are to learn makes possible only certain kinds of changes and closes off the infinite changes yet to be imagined” (2002, 76). Through our making activities, we are often surprised by what students take away from lessons – on top of the explicit academic course content, they develop a deeper knowledge through the frustrations and delights of trying to make things. It is one thing to read about the gritty aesthetic of an image photocopied again and again; it is rather different to get to try that skill yourself. Indeed, it is serendipity that brings us to embodied pedagogy, which Nguyen and Larson define as, “learning that joins body and mind in a physical and mental act of knowledge construction” (2015, 332). DIY publishing has a long-standing place in youth culture as a mode in which to fool around, throw some things together, and in the process, transform the

These are pages students in our Winter 2021 course made for a collaborative zine: each student contributed one page.

The image on the [left] is by Emma Barbee; the image on the [right] is by Peyton Sims.
content and come to greater understanding of the self and others (Piepmeier 2009; Licona 2005).

PLEASURE

bell hooks has written about the classroom as a place of ecstasy, but also noted how that pleasure can be so easily lost (1994). In our class, we have purposefully chased that sense of pleasure through making things together, but also stumbled onto it unexpectedly. The following are just a few examples of how and where.

THE PHOTOCOPIER CHALLENGE

Many of our students, who are typically in their late teens and early 20s, have never used a photocopier before. Those who have, may have only used basic functions, often as part of an office job. Alongside a chapter from Kate Eichhorn’s Adjusted Margins (2016), we have regularly given students a “photocopier challenge”, which they complete in small groups, working from the various photocopiers in the library. (Over the course of the five years we have taught this course, the library where we teach has gone from a full room of public access copiers – at least 4 or 5 – down to one very locked-down model. This has meant we have used staff copiers, which itself invites some additional excitement, as students get to come behind the scenes to otherwise-hidden staff-only areas in the library). Students are given a book of clipart – something like Craphound or the Dover series – and a bag of random objects, and a list of eight tasks, to be completed in order:

1. Pick an image to work with. Make a black and white photocopy of it.
2. Now, enlarge your image by 200%.
3. Now photocopy the enlarged version, enlarging it again by another 200%
4. Take one of your enlarged versions and copy it as a negative. (Hint: look under “Edit Image.”)
5. Take that negative and reduce it to 25%.
6. Take your favorite image so far and print it 2 to a page.
7. Take your favorite two images and print them double-sided.
8. Pick some items from Kelly’s bag and lay them out on the photocopier and copy that.

BONUS: What happens when you change the density of the image? When you pick “photo” instead of “text”?

Each year, we have noticed similar patterns. Students who have otherwise been quiet in class discussions suddenly take charge, guiding their group through the activities. Students laugh, get quiet in their focus, or express bafflement. Our role as teachers in this activity is to be available but unobtrusive – we may reassure students that it is, in fact, okay that they’re making so many copies without being able to figure out the next task. Occasionally, if a group is truly stumped, we may point them toward the next step, but seek to avoid giving the answer whenever possible. However, students are invariably delighted by something throughout the process – the stark contrast of a negative-printed image, the absurdity of a teeny-tiny version of their image, the strangeness of a fully black page when you didn’t expect it.

In teaching this activity, I think of what cartoonist and teacher Lynda Barry calls “the playing-around [...] the gradual figuring out that brings something alive to the activity, makes it worthwhile, and is transferrable [sic] to other activities” (2014, 89). As we teach DIY publishing technologies, this playing-around allows our students to learn the mechanics of DIY publishing, but also to consider how those methods have been used in the past, and may be used in the future. Zinesters often
have favorite tricks of xerography, and our students delight in noticing those in the zines that they read after this activity. Contextualizing the work of 1990s AIDS activists in New York who surreptitiously used the fancy photocopiers in their workplaces in the 1990s, Kate Eichhorn notes the gritty aesthetics, but also speaks to the sense of play. She describes an action where Gran Fury members simply photocopied money – US bills copied onto green paper, with slogans on the backside, were then thrown onto the ground at public demonstrations. Students recognize this transgressiveness in the photocopier challenge, as we typically use photocopiers in staff-only areas, and students often seem aghast at first at the mistakes they make – but then quickly settle into delight as they realize it is okay to mess up, and sometimes those mistakes are actually the best-looking creations you come up with.

HECTOGRAPHY AND FLEETING PLEASURES

The playing-around and its attendant pleasures are also present when we teach our students hectograph printing. Hectograph is a form of duplication where a spirit ink master is transferred to a gel medium, and multiple prints can be pulled from that gel medium. While there were hectograph machines commercially available in the early 20th century, you can DIY the process by using food grade gelatin and liquid glycerin to create a gel medium, and typing or handwriting a master on the spirit ink paper used by tattoo artists to transfer a draft image onto a client’s skin. Our students have never encountered this kind of printing before. The entire process holds a sort of magic, and they’re often deeply skeptical until they pull their first print.

With the hectograph as with the photocopier challenge, students must take the time to play with the process. We have had students leave their master copy to soak into the gel much longer than originally suggested, to test how dark they can get the ink, or to leave their paper much longer. And students end with a clear sense of the commitment and time required to use this method to print a zine or even a poster in any quantity. Hectograph printing does not allow for huge print runs – an original cannot be used more than once, and only a limited quantity of ink transfers to the gel, so the final prints are much lighter than the first few pulled. Left over time, whatever ink is left will sink into the gel and be lost, although the gel bed could then be reused. Today, it is not an effective way to get a message out, but students can appreciate it as a low-cost (if labor-intensive) method for duplication. One hectograph that our students created showed a drawing of a fictional social media feed – the ephemerality of a current format of communication represented in another.

VULNERABILITY

DIY projects can create delight in the classroom precisely because the “do” often feels so seamless, the barrier to entry so much lower than students might otherwise assume. On the other side of the DIY spectrum, however, is the kind of work that requires specialty tools and specialty training. This mode of “high-touch” DIY is anything but seamless and, for the newly initiated, can become an exercise in frustration. Rather than shying away from these elements, we’ve encouraged students to try their hands at DIY projects requiring a high degree of expertise. This pedagogical approach is about creating space for the frustrations that come with learning a new skill and the vulnerability implicit in opening oneself up to the possibility of making mistakes. In a sense, small doses of frustration and vulnerability become the entry point for thinking about the labor and skill often involved in the creative process.
By introducing students to new skills and new modes of DIY production, our aim is also to create a need for shared creation. “Many hands make light work”, and highly skilled and labor-intensive creations often require a collective approach. In this way, our assignments speak to what the authors of the Queeruption Vancouver zine call the “inherently political” (and inherently participatory) component of DIY:

DIY means learning and practicing the skills necessary to create the things we want to see, rather than relying on governments, corporations, and the media to provide for us. When we do things like grow food, sew and repair our own clothes, brew beer, build bikes, create art, films, and music, write zines, and squat buildings, we’re empowering ourselves, while simultaneously taking power away from the forces that attempt to control us. Because of this, DIY is inherently political – it’s the foundation on which a fully participatory and non-hierarchical society can exist. (Ratto 2014, 104)

The assignments and activities students engage in throughout the term – especially detailed and highly skilled work like print-making and learning HTML – access this idea of participatory, non-hierarchical co-creation. While we don’t make any particular political ideologies explicit, we do want to foster experiences that pose alternatives to the current political status quo. These experiences demand a degree of vulnerability from students, but we see this kind of vulnerability as a needed backdrop for truly transformational growth and learning.

Below we outline two different projects that illustrate highly skilled, highly collaborative, and potentially vulnerable classroom work and discuss the learning outcomes of each.

**IDA B. WELLS AND PAMPHLETEERING**

Ida B. Wells has become an iconic figure of early civil rights activism. Her investigative journalism, exposing the horrors of lynching in the American South, earned her a posthumous Pulitzer Prize special citation and laid the groundwork for a large-scale anti-lynching movement in the early 20th century. In this module we examine how Wells broadcast her self-published work, relying on printed pamphlets that were often hand distributed.

The first step to introducing the publishing challenges that Wells would have faced is to offer students a chance to interact with actual printing presses and moveable type. Fortunately, Oregon State University has several working letterpresses on campus. Karen Holmberg, Associate Professor and MFA Director at OSU, oversees the presses and has graciously given our class access to explore the cases of type, and to try their hands at creating a page of their own. This is no small endeavor: assembling a page requires students to perform a number of intricate tasks – finding letters or “sorts” in the many font cases, inserting the sorts into a frame in the right order (which means orienting the letters upside down and backwards in order for the page to print correctly), manipulating the horizontal space between letters (kerning) and the vertical space between lines (leading) with lead slugs, finding graphic elements to complement the text, and making sure that the page content is well-positioned to create a visually satisfying composition (and one that will stay in place as it’s physically pressed into the paper).

Once students have created their frames they are invited to perform the actual printing, which involves positioning the frame and paper, coating the ink roller with ink, and manually turning the flywheel of the letterpress to create the impression.
All of this demands a degree of procedural thinking and precision handwork that can be intimidating at first. Students are of course encouraged to ask questions and help each other in the process. But even with a resident expert on hand the work can become challenging, and – given the small space where the presses and cases are housed – just a little chaotic. But it’s the perfect introduction to Wells’s work, and in many ways may mirror the activist’s early position as editor and co-owner of the Memphis-based newspaper The Free Speech and Headlight. (It isn’t known the degree to which Wells may have helped to run the physical press, but as co-owner she was certainly familiar with daily press operations and may have played a part in its layout and design choices).

After everyone has had a chance to create their own page we turn to a visual analysis of the front cover of Wells’s most famous pamphlet, Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases. While on first glance the cover layout is fairly straightforward – depicting the title in all upper case letters at top, followed by a woodblock illustration of Wells herself, with the bottom of the cover listing the printer and the date – the amount of work the students have put into their own pages primes them to notice details and printerly decisions they may otherwise have overlooked. For instance, the various font styles in the title can now be experienced as actual, deliberate choices made by a printer. And analyzing features that may at first seem trivial – like the decision to change the font and kerning of the subtitle – take on much more analytical nuance and importance. Students begin to see how the closely spaced letters of Southern Horrors are at once a necessity of the physical boundaries of the page and also a way of representing the oppressive horror of the racist culture of lynching. And the “breathing room” of the subtitle’s wider kerning hints at the way Wells’s meticulous data gathering and reporting provide space to understand lynching from a wider social perspective. Rhetorically, we can see how the pathos of Southern Horrors gives way to the logos of “Lynch Law in All Its Phases”, purely through an examination of font and spacing choice.

But more than a method for anchoring close readings of the pamphlet, using the letterpresses gives students the opportunity to experience firsthand the real labor and constant decision-making that goes
into creating even a relatively simple document during this time period. The work of Wells’s early civil rights investigative reporting, her creation of the pamphlets themselves, and her tireless efforts to distribute these materials (at speaking events and venues like the World’s Columbian Exposition) is made just a little clearer through engaging students in the painstaking work of actual printing.

Finally, it’s worth noting that, like so many other Black-owned newspapers at this time, no copy of Wells’s Memphis Free Speech survives. Given this loss, it strikes us as even more important that students experience what it might have been like to operate a press, to experiment with the technology of moveable type, and to consider the labor involved in its use. Anchoring this historic mode of publishing through experiential learning helps to preserve a sense of the activities of The Free Speech, even if the actual artifacts are now lost.

WEB PUBLISHING AND SOCIAL MEDIA

As with the module on Ida Wells, our class session on social media begins with an exercise in document creation. In this case, rather than using physical tools to create printed pages, students experiment with an online HTML and CSS editor to create simple web pages.

We begin this session with a broad question: what makes social media publishing distinct from other more traditional kinds of publishing? The terrain of online social media platforms – YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tik Tok, etc. – saw explosive growth in the first decade of the 21st century, growth that still continues (though corporate consolidation is increasingly becoming the norm). When these technologies first appeared they were celebrated as communication innovations that transformed users into authors, bypassing the editorial filters of more traditional publishing technologies. As Clay Shirky wrote at the time, publishing to the web had become “a button”: “There’s a button that says ‘publish,’ and when you press it, it’s done” (Saraiya 2012). There is an immediacy to this kind of publishing that has obvious mass appeal. Authors – now “content creators” – no longer need to rely on the intermediary of the publisher, giving them what appears to be total control over the ability to broadcast their message to an audience. However, another expression that circulated around this same time, made popular by tech publisher Tim O’Reilly, troubles any easy sense of authorial control: “If you’re not paying for it, you’re not the customer; you’re the product being sold.”

All of the social media tools we discuss in this module are free to use, and all of them transform users not only into authors, but also into a consumer group that can be targeted with product advertising. More troubling, these platforms often track and store different kinds of user data, creating profiles that can be used to further tailor advertising, and are open to exploitation and broader forms of state and corporate surveillance.

Why mention all of this in a module about the more fundamental languages of web publishing? In part, because these languages – primarily HTML (hypertext markup language, responsible for the fundamental structure of a web page) and CSS (cascading style sheets, used to create the overall “look and feel” of a web page) – are largely invisible to students, who are accustomed to interacting with social media solely at the level of the user interface. And the invisibility of the languages of the web is one concrete way we can begin talking about other aspects of social media technologies – like targeted advertising and surveillance programs – that are also rendered invisible.

The exercise itself is fairly straightforward. Using www.w3schools.com, which offers step-by-step tutorials on HTML and CSS coding, students get into small groups and work through the introductory levels
of each tutorial. They are presented with the challenge of creating a simple web page, understanding basic HTML document structure, using HTML element tags, and styling aesthetic elements like font and color. They also witness firsthand how browsers transform this code into the pages and interfaces they’re used to seeing online. Similar to the session on Wells, the experience of performing the work of web design gives rise to a transformative awareness of the labor involved in the production of social media platforms. In this case, making labor visible isn’t about signalling the intellectual and physical work of social activism, as it was with Wells’s anti-lynching publications, but about coming to an understanding of how commercial technologies have packaged that labor into the sleek interfaces we’ve come to know. By struggling with basic web design we can begin to “look under the hood” of web publishing.

While the W3Schools tutorial isn’t overwhelming, students are often coming to web design for the first time, requiring them to rely on group members to offer input and help solve problems. The small frustrations experienced as part of the exercise also give students a new appreciation for the seamlessness of Instagram or Twitter, opening new ground for analysis. Students might consider, for example, why these services seek to make their tools so frictionless, or what this emphasis on usability entails. They can also begin to question how this kind of “frictionlessness” might actually predict the sorts of content these platforms encourage. One discussion during this module revolved around the concept of the “influencer” – social media personalities with large followings whose role is to recommend certain products or create realistic scenes in which a product is featured prominently. The boundaries between the actual lives of influencers and their commercial aims becomes blurred in the social media environment.

There is, in effect, a seamlessness between real life and scenes constructed purely for advertising purposes. Students also begin to explore their own roles in these environments as both producers and consumers, and what it means to tailor one’s biography to an audience of other consumers. These conversations require a willingness to share personal experiences and be open to new interpretations of those experiences. This kind of vulnerability is especially important when it comes to conversations that focus on online surveillance. There is a profound sense of unease when students consider the potential for unknown or hidden audiences – audiences like state and corporate actors whose interest in user-generated content is more about predicting or policing behavior. Here, we like to mention resources like Surveillance Self-Defense from the Electronic Frontier Foundation and discuss tactics for maintaining privacy in online environments. Again, the web design work that students engage in helps set the stage for talking about web surveillance and privacy. Having been exposed to the basic languages of the web, and having explored even rudimentary web design, students take on a new appreciation for how the architecture of the web can be both dystopian – transforming people into data that can be bought, sold, and tracked – and potentially liberating –providing a standardized platform for sharing any kind of message with a worldwide audience.

**EMBODIED LEARNING**

Alison Piepmeier notes that, “*A big part of the thrill in making zines is the manual work it takes to put them together*” (2008, 230). Throughout our class, we find that to be true – and that the thrill of that manual work often supports learning the academic content we explore together.
This course is unusual, both in its content and our approach. Much of the other teaching we do offers fewer obvious paths to creative activities, fewer natural opportunities for embodied learning. However, our experiences with this course inform our other teaching, and we have sought ways to get our students doing hands-on work in a variety of ways. To give just one example – Kelly used to regularly teach a required research course for English literature majors. Korey came as a guest lecturer to speak about citation practices, and developed an activity where students would work in groups to come up with their own citation style – whatever rules they wanted to impose. We have the students write their citations up on whiteboards around the room, and then do a gallery walk, so everyone can see what their classmates came up with. We choose to have the students write the citations out, on display, in part because it gets them up from their desks and moving around. It also affirms, if in small ways, the ideas of pleasure and vulnerability. In this activity, students sometimes delight in the opportunity to make citation as difficult for others as they experience it to be, coming up with absurd or silly rules. In other cases, students clearly feel a pressure to do it “right” – writing their citation up on the board puts their ideas out for all to see, but in a relatively low-risk environment. Once students have had a chance to express their frustrations, they often open up about their fears: of being accused of plagiarism, of being marked down despite the strength of their ideas. Being able to have a little fun also allows us to open up.

Even in smaller ways we incorporate the embodied learning lessons in our teaching – through silent writing activities by hand where students are used to typing, for example. Kelly often teaches
incoming students about basic research, and will pull a cart of books, journals, and unusual physical materials in so that students can explore, first-hand, materials they may otherwise only encounter in digital formats. Considering opportunities for embodied learning can help reframe even rote activities to open up the potential for pleasure and vulnerability, recontextualizing learning.

**CONCLUSION**

As we finalize this article, we have finished teaching this course for a fifth time. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we taught entirely remotely. Still, embodied pedagogy shapes our approach, even by Zoom. Our students all picked up craft kits, filled with the materials needed to engage in the term’s hands-on activities. And, while in-person group work was obviously not possible, we designated time for DIY activities during class. The simple act of making something simultaneously – in a shared digital space if not in the same physical space – still has the power to create a sense of collective work. While we had to adjust the hands-on activities, we saw many of the same joys and vulnerabilities emerge. In one instance, our students read the article by Alison Piepmeier we have cited in this piece, and together we turned some music on and made pages for a collaborative zine, all working from our individual homes. In fact several students commented that this collaborative crafting time, even while not co-located, provided a needed break from screen-intensive remote learning environments.

Just as students experienced pleasure in previous terms through the experimentation and exploration of the photocopier challenge and hectography, our students this term found pleasure in embodied learning. One of our students even tried

*Pages from untitled zine by Brandt Bridges.*
out hectography on her own! While we described above the shared delight in experimentation with hectography, our student who tried it on her own had her own solo discoveries, even finding that a certain type of felt-tip marker worked well in lieu of spirit ink. (We now have something new to try when we teach the course face-to-face again!)

In terms of vulnerability, the pandemic offered its own opportunities. Many of our students made perzines as their final projects, many of which were quite in-depth, longer and more intricate than required by the assignment. Some students wrote directly about their experiences of the pandemic, while others reflected on travel, family, and other things they missed.

Ultimately, the virtual class still prompted engagement in the hands-on, still fostered a desire to create something physical, and still provided a framework for an embodied community, brought together by shared work, shared joy, and shared vulnerabilities.

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