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## **‘I am a Starbucks worker . . . my life no longer belongs to me’: the performance of estrangement as a learning tool**

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In this paper, we explore the use of ‘estrangement’ autoethnography as a means to encourage student autonomy and enhance learning. We include a case study of a structured activity requiring estrangement in consumer spaces to challenge student perspectives of normal environments. Our students welcomed the activity as one which changed their perspectives on consumer culture, and which gave them experiential knowledge on which to base their use of theory. Through exploring this kind of activity as part of learning and teaching practice in cultural studies, this paper contributes evidence of the effectiveness of autoethnography in enhancing university student learning and provides a model for undertaking the performance of ‘estrangement’.

**Keywords:** autoethnography; estrangement; consumer culture; cultural studies; experiential learning

### **Estrangement as a learning tool**

raising consciousness in this context does not consist of telling people what they don’t know, but of awakening their reflective and critical ability. For I know I do not learn anything when I am told what to learn; I learn when that learning comes from myself. (Minh-ha 1991, 109)

Birmingham University’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) holds an important place in the imaginations and on the course programs of those now teaching cultural studies in Higher Education (HE), and is seen as the historical root and setting of a critical and politically focused discipline intent on reinventing long held notions of power, oppression, and agency (see Hall 1996; McRobbie 2005). In 1968, students at the CCCS engaged in ‘a study of the new Birmingham shopping centre, the Bull Ring, as a cultural expression of the spirit of the city’ (CCCS Centre Report 68/9 cited in Gray 2003, 771). Although the exact nature of the activity is unclear, it reflects a commitment to exploring culture and is evocative of the centre’s focus on openness and interactivity (see Gilroy 2002; Gray 2003; Giroux 2001).

Cultural studies has moved on since the late 1960s in methods, theory, and focus, in line with seismic cultural shifts around media and consumer culture. In this paper, we offer a case study that draws on the CCCS activity and provides a model for

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engaging students in critical reflection of their everyday environment through the use of estrangement and autoethnography. In what follows, we discuss the relationship between our approach and more traditional learning tools, before offering a practical example of how we drew on estrangement and autoethnography in our teaching. The results of the case study are presented, followed by a discussion of how the learning model might be further developed in other educational settings.

Our activity done in the spirit of the CCCS activity used methods from within ethnography – including the practice of estrangement. The use of estrangement has a long history in traditional ethnographies. Engagement with the ‘native’s culture’ puts the researcher in the objective position of being able to see things for the first time without the cultural baggage of the native: thus producing what has been referred to as the ‘god trick’ of seeing everything from no location (Haraway 1991). However, more recently estrangement techniques have become aligned with social constructionism and interpretive methodologies; by making the normal appear strange, estrangement activities provide a critical space to recognize the way reality is organized, similar to the notion of alienation or ‘culture shock’ (Atkinson and Hammersley 2007). As one of our students noted, estrangement provides a sense of being ‘*a quasi-outsider*’ (Pete). In this approach to the practice of estrangement, the ethnographer’s experience is located in systems of culture, class, race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on, thus allowing the crucial link to autoethnography (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Coffey 1999; Van Maanen 2011).

In this paper, we draw on the practice of autoethnography as a way of approaching the experience of estrangement, thus making ‘the researcher’s own experience a topic of investigation in its own right’ (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 733). Autoethnography gained greater credibility in the academic community from the 1990s as part of the crisis of representation, and a growing concern with different ways of representing knowledge that highlighted the researcher’s location in the production of that knowledge. Thus, some see autoethnographic practices that emphasize the researcher’s own location as a necessary response to post-structuralist epistemologies where older forms of certainty about the validity of traditional ‘scientific’ enquiry have been replaced by a greater awareness that experience is itself an important contribution to knowledge (Reed-Danahay 2002; Wall 2006).

Autoethnography has been widely used as a research method for teachers to examine their own practice (see Pennington 2007; Vasconcelos 2011; Warren 2011). However, it is difficult to find many examples of its use as a learning tool in the HE classroom. One exception is Camangian (2010) who uses autoethnography to allow students from ethnic minority groups and economically disadvantaged backgrounds to reflect on structures of oppression. Such use of autoethnography in the student–teacher dynamic shifts the relationship away from ‘if you show me, I understand’, toward ‘I show myself’. The experiential learning aspect of autoethnography allows students to reflect on their place in social contexts, with the potential for radical shifts in the ways students understand their relation to the world (other advocates of experiential learning include Barone and Eisner 2006, and The Institute for Creative Change, see <http://creativechangeinstitute.net>).

The practices employed in autoethnography map onto well-established learning tools used to encourage student reflection. These learning tools include Brookfield’s (1995) critical incident questionnaire, Kolb’s (1984) learning cycle, Schon’s (1983) reflection on action, and Fook and Gardner’s (2007) critical reflection model. What

differentiates estrangement autoethnographic practices from the reflective tools above is the way it helps students view the normative framework in which s/he exist (Ellis and Bochner 2000). We suggest that some traditional methods of reflection exclude wider socioeconomic contexts (for a discussion see Reynolds and Suter 2009). For example, Brookfield's (1995) model suggests using the lenses of 'self', 'student', 'peer', and 'literature' to reflect on the context of learning. These lenses may encourage multiple interpretations of a situation but do not take into account that they may be within the same normative framework as the reflector. Other methods of reflection do cite the importance of the cultural context (e.g. Moon 1999; Hatton and Smith 1995). However, within these models there is no mechanism to critically view this cultural context. In other words, they ask the reflector to consider the environment and its normative framework without a means of revealing what this normative framework might be. In contrast, we encouraged students to break the rules of the environment to create a sense of estrangement, and to reflect on this through autoethnographic representation. In doing so the rules of the normative framework became more apparent.

With autoethnography, personal experience and subjective interactions with the world are drawn together to produce praxes that create new, accessible, and 'workable' ways of thinking about culture and social interaction (Denzin 2003; Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011; Lather 2007). In this experiential model, '[i]deas are not fixed and immutable elements of thought but are formed and re-formed through experience' (Kolb 1984, 9). There is a danger in autoethnographic reflection, which may be understood as treating all experience as knowledge (Young 2008). However, such reflection should be enabled through an engagement with theory which is situated through reflection on the location of the self. In the case study explored in this paper, experiences of the learners were linked to relevant theories of consumer culture, and contextualized through student-to-student and student-to-teacher discussion. We believe that this combination of theory and reflection discourages surface learning (the replication of signs and information in order to complete given tasks and gain grades) and emphasizes 'deep' learning, producing 'a qualitative change in a person's view of reality' (Ramsden 2003, 7).

In the following, we discuss our use of estrangement and autoethnography in an activity that took students to the Bull Ring shopping center. By engaging students in an on-site estrangement autoethnography we feel that the case study offers a unique approach to teaching: one that allows theory to be applied to everyday life so that students can learn theory through experience. In what follows, we discuss the method, giving a detailed account of the module and activity. We also discuss the benefits and potential drawbacks of such a method, as evidenced by the students' assignments and evaluations of the experience. For our students, the activity not only highlighted the controlled and constructed nature of the environment they were in, but also gave a structured means by which they could reflect on their place within it. There are limitations; however, the evidence presented shows an improvement and deeper engagement by students on some of the concepts learnt throughout the module.

### **Case study of the performance of estrangement**

Both authors taught on a third year undergraduate module titled Advertising and Consumer Culture. In this module, students were taught a range of theories relating

to 'consumer culture', which all came from a critical and cultural perspective that emphasizes forms of power and resistance. This content was taught in the classroom both historically and thematically, and included concepts relating to post-industrialization, detraditionalization, neoliberalism, postmodernism, postfeminism, McDonaldization, and Disneyization. The activity came at the end of the module, with the aim of exploring how these taught theories were evident in today's consumer context. The objectives of this activity were to place students in the role of 'stranger' in a context that they were otherwise familiar with (a consumer environment in Birmingham). An assignment then asked students to write about this experience in a reflective style, using theory to understand the experience of the activity and to relate this thinking to wider social and cultural constructs connected to the practices of consumerism.

A total of 30 students were registered on the course. Students could choose between a standard academic essay and the autoethnographic essay. Of the 30 students, 12 opted for the autoethnographic task. These students were aged between 20 and 28, with an equal split of male and female students. Four students were from Eastern Europe, one from East Asia; the rest were UK born. All students are treated anonymously in this paper.

The 12 students who chose to engage in the autoethnographic task attended additional taught sessions that introduced them to the principles of ethnography, autoethnography, and 'estrangement' techniques. For example, one experiential task covered in the additional sessions asked students to stand toe-to-toe with a fellow student. Students then examined how that felt in relation to 'normal' social practices in terms of being close to another person, whether it would feel strange elsewhere (e.g. in a bar, the student lobby, with/without the lecturer in the room), with these reflections building up to an assessment of wider structures and historical constructs of interpersonal communication, gender, power relations, and so on. In these sessions the nature of estrangement was explained, modeled, and practiced ready for the field trip that included further tasks designed to divorce our students from their surroundings.

Following the traditional lectures and additional sessions, students were placed in teams. Instructions were emailed to invite students to meet us in Birmingham's Bull Ring shopping center, where they were given a series of 'estrangement' tasks (see <http://performingestrangement.wordpress.com>). The activities included smiling at strangers, ordering the same product twice from McDonald's, male students walking around a female-oriented space, and sitting still with no distractions. These tasks all related directly to the content taught in the module, but aimed to embody that theory and put it into practice in an everyday setting. All activities were done by the students alone. A team-leader, or 'captain of consciousness', decided who did which task and monitored their team's performance. After the activities, students and tutors returned to the university for debrief and discussion where we could share experiences, find comparisons and contrasts, and make links to theory.

### **Assessing learning and autonomy**

Many themes emerged from the written assignment, and the themes discussed below do not offer a clear narrative of student essays. In the following, we draw together accounts of control, liberation, and prohibition as these provide a taste of the kinds

of reflections and learning that estrangement and autoethnographic practice created. Following our discussion of the assignment, we turn to informal feedback to provide an insight into student reflections on their learning.

In relation to control, Sally's essay seemed to demonstrate clearly the kinds of insights that such autoethnographic practices created: this insight being significant enough to draw on in the title of this paper. Sally's essay contained the following:

I am a Starbucks worker, for example and I work on autopilot a lot of the time and I put all my efforts into making drinks that I forget everything else around me, so much so that as Marx (1844) writes, my life no longer belongs to me but to the object (the drinks I am making).

This insight came about from two of the estrangement activities – counting the smiles in a Disney shop and ordering the same meal twice at McDonald's. Sally was a student who, like many, engaged in service-sector work as a means of earning additional money during her studies. In Sally's reflection, the process of engaging in this activity permitted her critical distance to explore the lack of control she experienced in her own part-time employment and the task allowed her to experience her own life differently. The critical learning element of Sally's reflection is thus evident above through Sally's realization that as a Starbucks worker she was not the person in control of her performance, but instead her worker identity was subsumed within the consumer item she is serving/selling.

As with Sally's reflection, many of our students' essays featured the theme of control including Maya who gave this observation having silently watched shoppers:

...as I analysed my surroundings, I became more aware of the movements of others, and how they seemed determined and purposeful: endlessly seeking the next thing to consume. Lee (1993, 8) referred to it as an 'autonomous force' yet I disagree with this: the people in this space were focused and without much control over themselves... they were losing this autonomous control and surrendering to their wants and needs.

In this extract, Maya's account provides a reflection of her deeply embodied experience of the task, where she sat in the Bull Ring without any distractions. In doing so Maya identifies what she saw as focused chaos, where shoppers appeared both 'purposeful' and lacking control because of their consumption practices. In making this series of observations, Maya moves toward supporting the literature in this area by identifying a relevant text and citing it according to standard academic procedures. What is new for this student, and others in the cohort, was the confidence with which they challenged theory and the sense of authority in her account. Maya's statement, 'I disagree with this', allowed her to develop her own theoretically informed perspective based on experience.

A second area of learning from the activities was in students' investigation of consumer culture and gender identity. Both educational and consumer spaces are highly gendered (see Harris 2004 for a discussion of 'school halls and shopping malls'). This aspect of consumer culture was in the module content and estrangement tasks so it is unsurprising that gender featured heavily in student reflections. The observations around gender were particularly evident in one task where students had to walk around the British female-oriented sex shop, Ann Summers, while asking themselves a series of, 'What if?' questions (e.g. how would it feel if I changed the

color scheme?). One female student, Josie, who did this activity, reported the following:

I found shops such as Ann Summers extremely liberating and intimidating at the same time. It's a cocktail of emotions that range from feeling social acceptance for having sexual desires and being able to be open about them...but also embarrassment of having those sexual desires made open and public to the strangers around you. My teammate found Ann Summers a comfortable environment...however she was dislodged from this comfort when an older male was within close proximity to her... Ann Summers does have an element of a woman's locker room environment where men are openly discussed and even mocked within a sexual narrative.

We see Josie develop critical consciousness around gendered aspects of Ann Summers, particularly in relation to the folding of public and private spaces of sexual desire, and prohibition in terms of age and gender. Indeed, much gender studies work in education has suggested a 'missing discourse of desire' in relation to how girls' and young women's sexuality is made invisible in educational settings (Fine and McClelland 2006). Yet through the activity, Josie was able to actively voice her sexual desire and note how desire in this consumer space was managed by the presence of others. This could be compared to Zac's 'male' experience of the space in the following:

I felt so uncomfortable when entering the store that it led me to consider the cause. Ann Summer gives women a voluntary spatial identity associated with a place outside of the home (DeSena 2008); a gendered space where lone males are frowned upon...I felt mocked because males are only represented as blow-up dolls or phallic objects, such as shaped pasta...I am expected not to enter.

Above we again begin to see an understanding develop around Zac's own position in a highly feminized consumer space. His isolation from this space led him 'to consider the cause': this statement suggesting a move away from mere description of his experience and toward critical reflection.

The responses above demonstrate that the performances were allowing a greater engagement with the studied topic and that the normative framework was being revealed. But, both Zac and Josie's account demonstrates that reflections were sometimes more personal than theoretical – in other words, they felt personally affected but, in these examples, unable to extend to a critique of the social forces that caused this. Josie's account allowed her to recognize the awkwardness of being around men in Ann Summers, but not the gender power implicated in such awkwardness. While Zac expressed resentment at being excluded from Ann Summers, rather than allowing the experience to challenge Zac's own social position in consumer spaces (as a white, heterosexual male, who can otherwise occupy space relatively easily). We return to this in our discussion.

### **Feedback**

Students were given three opportunities to provide feedback: straight after the activity in an informal debriefing, through formal module evaluation, and from a request by email six months after the activity. Because of the nature of this paper, we

are less concerned about the formal university 'student satisfaction' evaluations for this module (although it was high). Instead, we focus on the more informal feedback derived from the debrief and follow-up about the estrangement activity in what follows.

We believe the debrief at the close of the activity was a significant space of learning and an essential component of the task. The danger that students may generalize an individual experience as reflecting some final 'truth' (Young 2008) was avoided as the students shared experiences and both students and tutors provided theoretical interpretations. By scaffolding, we were able to facilitate moments of learning and relate this learning to the body of knowledge presented in the module. The debrief cemented ideas, showing what was shared, and gave rise to further issues that needed to be discussed in the written assignments. At the close of the debrief students were asked to note what worked, what did not, and how we could improve the task, and responses were collected.

Some students' feedback reflected the notion that if they had not engaged in the activity they could not have written the essay. Such feedback reveals something of student concerns about grades and outcomes, rather than the experience of learning – and interestingly in the context of such an activity, engenders a missing critical reflection on the normative framework of education itself. However, others were able to recognize how it helped the process of learning other students commented that they 'enjoyed the process of getting out of my comfort zone' and 'the tasks enabled me to consider the nature of consumer culture'.

Another common response from the debrief was that the autoethnography task had been 'fun'. Students had enjoyed the game nature of the day and being placed in unusual situations. They had also enjoyed the group activities and supported each other through it. One observation for us was how these students were facilitating their own networks of support, which then provided a critical space to enable reflection without fear of exclusion. There is a danger in a model of HE that caters to the market, where 'fun' is sought to increase student satisfaction to the detriment of academic quality and possibly learning. But given how students' feedback and assignments imply that overall a different form of learning took place, we would suggest that the purposeful nature of their experiences helped to constitute this sense of fun.

We were also interested in the sustainability of the task, and wanted to see if the learning that occurred had any bearing beyond the task so students were contacted by email six months after the activity. This was after the assessment had taken place and, being a third year module, the students were no longer members of the university: comments had no bearing on education or results.

For all of the students that we contacted, there was a sense that the activity had a lasting impact on their sense-making around consumer culture. For Pete, it allowed him to view capitalism in action:

Everything in that shopping centre looked comfortably and possibly globally familiar . . . I had, of course, seen all that before. Nonetheless, the teaching style made me a quasi-outsider. It made me pay attention to the process of consumption by teaching me how and what to observe . . . Consequently, the teaching style allowed me to better understand the hypothesis that consumer culture can be seen as people consuming things not necessarily to fulfil their needs, but to meet the requirements of the capitalist apparatus.



Pete's comment that he could only ever be a quasi-outsider was valid as he could always resume the position of 'consumer' (many students did their shopping while the activity took place!). His reflection on the task did not reflect total change; as he states himself, he had 'seen all that before'. But for Pete the activity seems to have solidified the nature of consumerism and his awareness of his place within that system, recognizing that his consumer practices may not be as comfortable as they may seem. Indeed, later in his email Pete continued:

Notably, I think I enjoy visiting shopping centres less . . . Don't get me wrong I didn't particularly enjoy this environment before the task but I have found myself doing more shopping online. I think I noticed how all consumers end up buying the same things when at a shopping centre and I became slightly disillusioned by the way consumers are directed around the environment, similar to cattle.

The challenge of stepping outside consumerism was stated by one of the lecturers at the start of the module, with the claim that 'knowing does not free you' and an admission of his own consumption patterns. Here Pete echoes these sentiments. Shopping online rather than in shopping centers is a hollow victory for anti-capitalist practice, and shows that the urge to consume is not dissipated by knowledge of the system: a general dislike of shopping centers does not constitute radical social change. Overall there was no evidence from essays or feedback that the consumerist drive in these students had been reduced but plenty to demonstrate that their understanding of consumerism had changed.

In addition to demonstrating a change in attitude, one observation from the post-activity feedback was that many students held on to the task with some ambivalence. Cristina, for example, found the experience empowering:

In terms of the influence that this experience has had on me, I think that it managed to teach me how to isolate myself from these [restricted] elements [of consumerism], by either ignoring them or by increasing my ability to control my reactions.

Cristina's account is couched within ideas of self-control and individualism that could reflect a consumer culture where individual control is privileged above social change. But her sense of control does reflect the activity's aim of greater autonomous learning, which here could be said to provide a sense of greater *overall* autonomy. Other students, however, were clearly struggling with the consciousness-raising that the activity prompted. Ahmed, for example, wrote:

I was only recounting the trip to Birmingham yesterday. I enjoyed the unit and it did open my eyes a bit about certain characteristics of shopping centres that perhaps had gone unnoticed. When I have visited shopping centres since . . . I continued to notice more of the elements that make up the consumer . . . I think I speak for a few of my ex-classmates when it made us feel a little jaded finding out more about consumer culture in general as it revealed perhaps a few too many truths about something we all partake of on a regular basis . . . I guess nobody wants to see behind the curtain.

There is a complex relationship in Ahmed's reflection of the task, who is not only able to recognize the reality of the situation – the task 'did open my eyes' – but also has a sense of not liking what was found. Estrangement is meant to create discomfort since it should provide a sense of alienation from 'normal' situations. However, in

Ahmed's feedback, this discomfort appears to have residual feelings of apathy. Ahmed's suggestion that the task provided him with 'too many truths' identifies to us the need for further support with such activity. But we also see evidence that Ahmed's learning endures beyond the module and his university education, as he recounts how he continues to map relevant aspects of the task in his consumer practices.

## **Discussion**

We began this paper by reflecting on the practice used in 1968 by the CCCS of taking a class into Birmingham to help students reflect on the 'spirit of the city'. Birmingham has changed since 1968, as has consumer culture, the mediated landscape, and theories for making sense of these changes. In this paper, we have described a reappraisal of this activity and tried to think about how autoethnography might be useful as a form of experiential learning for students to engage with theory on a different level. Our aim in adopting this method was to produce a form of learning where student experiences became the springboard to engage with the taught theory. As one student, Martin, wrote: 'While theory was able to teach me why I felt uncomfortable, experiencing it myself made the learning material more believable'.

In practicing this activity, we were not aiming to produce generalizable results, and were working within a qualitative framework where meanings attached to learning were more important than providing standardized, measurable frameworks. We would argue that the small sample allows deeper and more meaningful understanding of how these students engaged with autoethnography to apply theory to everyday settings. We hope the activity described in this paper provides a useful starting point for others hoping to develop more autonomy and reflection in the way students take up different bodies of knowledge.

Our own pedagogy in this activity was in principle a pragmatic one of helping students to engage with a very rich but often obscure theoretical backdrop in cultural studies. We wanted to see students use this theory more autonomously in order to understand how that theory related to wider structures – and students were told the task would be an exercise in making this critical link. We would have liked to produce an 'emancipation from all authoritarian forms of knowledge...linked...to the possibility of achieving a more equal or just world' (Young 2008, 204), but made no claims to offer an alternative system. Our aim was not an exercise in 'w/ri(gh)ting' to disrupt the grand narrative of the teaching environment (Roth and McRobbie 1999) and we did not seek to produce a critical performance pedagogy that 'leads the way to social change' (Denzin 2003, 225), regardless of our own political aspirations for such change.

There are limitations to the activity. One observation was that the learning in relation to cultural studies' body of knowledge sometimes fell short of the critical move toward locating this reflection within wider social structures. There were 'transformative' moments and many students experienced 'a turn in understanding' (Meyer and Land 2006). But some of the responses tended toward a sense of personal inequality as opposed to wider cultural inequality – even while this was openly discouraged in the debrief (see e.g. Josie and Zac's responses above). More could be done in the future to show students how to scaffold between lived

experience and wider constructs of power that make these experiences more than individual – especially when the normative framework is deeply embedded and embodied, such as in notions of ‘equality’ in gender and class.

In terms of the limitations, we could also question whether such activity benefits all students equally. The autoethnographic assignment was completed by 10 of the 12 students who went on the trip. Grades of the 10 students who completed the autoethnographic assignment were above 60% for all but two. This is indicative, we believe, of the high level of engagement developed through the practices of autoethnography. However, two students decided to do the more traditional assignment, and notably gained first class grades for their essays. These two students were already high-grade achievers, and it could be suggested that they made a strategic decision at ‘playing safe’ to minimize the risk of a new form of written assessment – though both expressed how useful the activities had been in helping them understand theory.

Differentiation is also needed for those who struggle academically. One student failed the assignment. This student was engaged in the discussion and tasks; however, as a student from another continent, she faced a steep curve in relation to language. A non-conventional means of learning may have proved a hurdle too far, and we could have done more to recognize how the performance of estrangement rested on aspects of consumer culture appearing otherwise normal – for this student, both the UK education system and consumer culture were perhaps already alien. An improvement in her engagement was witnessed during the actual task, for example, in the supportive nature of collaboration between herself and her cohort, but this was not transferred to the written assignment. This student failed other modules with more conventional patterns of delivery and assignment so her performance cannot be isolated to the experimental nature of the exercise. Nevertheless, the cause of student failure needs to be addressed and more emphasis should be placed on whether autoethnographic learning models are helpful to all.

One clear outcome of the activity was the impact this experience had on our own plans for teaching. The use of controlled, active-learning activities are high on our agenda for the next academic year. There is also room to develop these activities for a more radical approach. In terms of the assignment, we chose a reflective essay format. But the production of an autoethnographic text is intended to trouble traditional academic forms: for example, in autoethnographic stories and performance (Ellis 2004; White 2006) or dramatic texts (Denzin 2003). Equally, there are opportunities for how we are understanding ourselves as teachers. Camangian (2011), for example, sees himself as a ‘classroom teacher with revolutionary politics’ whose mission is, ‘to create socially and academically empowering opportunities for our youth to learn in their own images, in their own interests, and in their own voices’ (134). While we continue to have an honest and open debate about the opportunities and limitations of this form of learning, we agree that it can be used for radical purpose or equally with an agenda of enlightening students and improving autonomous learning. Despite the concerns we raise above, the use of this activity has re-energized, changed, and challenged our own teaching practice and, significantly, improved the learning process for our students.

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