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Introducing Showpony: an inclusive space for cross-arts performance and connection

Abstract:

This collaborative paper argues that on-campus open mic events enrich university culture, which in turn enriches holistic learning and wellbeing. To demonstrate, we present four accounts of Showpony, our university's monthly creative performance and pop up bar night. Originally held in a pub near campus, Showpony shifted into a student lounge space in early 2018. The move followed queerphobic and ableist discrimination against Showpony participants making continued use of the public venue untenable. Initially, we went to campus out of necessity: there is no other nearby venue with a suitably-sized, fully-accessible performance space. However, since moving, we recognise that operating on campus provides other benefits. Showpony nights intervene in and to degrees, cuts through the institutional space. Or, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, Showpony introduces something smooth into an otherwise striated territory. This prompts different ways of being in and working through the space, fostering styles of learning and interaction that don't necessarily occur in lectures or tutorials. Our paper's four accounts of Showpony encompass staff and student perspectives, including participant as well as organiser viewpoints. We aim to elucidate how Showpony has enriched our university culture, and to provide insights for those interested in running similar events.

Biographical note:

We are a group including staff, research degree candidates and students from the University of South Australia. All of us have been involved in Showpony on-campus open mic events, as organisers, performers and/or audience members.

Heather McGinn is a PhD candidate in the School of Creative Industries at the University of South Australia. Her research focusses on the development of her experimental writing methodology, *écriture kinesthétique*.

Chloe Cannell is a PhD candidate in the School of Creative Industries at the University of South Australia. Her research focusses on the representation of LGBTQIA+ characters in writing for young adults.

Pablo Muslera earned his doctorate in 2016 and has presented his work at Shakespeare and literary conferences interstate and overseas. He has taught Creative Writing and Shakespeare Studies at UniSA since 2012.

Lachlan Blackwell is a performer, writer, and director from Adelaide, South Australia. He is currently completing an undergraduate degree at the University of South Australia, with a research focus on mono-normativity and performative identity.

Amelia Walker completed her PhD in creative writing in 2016 and currently holds a teaching only contract at the University of South Australia. Outside of work hours, she pursues independent creative writing research and volunteers for TEXT journal as co-editor of the book reviews section.

Keywords: Collaboration – student agency – queer alliances – inclusive spaces – becoming

Introduction

‘Showpony is the students and the students are Showpony’
– Showpony student organiser Chloe Cannell

This article focuses on the collaborative processes and benefits of student open mic performance events in campus spaces. As our exemplar, we discuss Showpony, the monthly student-led creative performance and pop up bar held at the University of South Australia since 2017. Our aim is to make visible how such events can enhance learning, promote student-student social engagement, enrich student-staff rapport, and broaden the range of campus life experiences in ways that positively impact holistic wellbeing for all members of the academic community. In this way we hope to provide tools and insights of use to staff and students at other universities interested in setting up similar events. We comprise a broad cross-section of Showpony organisers, performers and audience participants, representing staff, research candidate and undergraduate student perspectives.

In this article’s first section, PhD candidate and Showpony student club secretary Chloe Cannell offers an overview of Showpony’s history, format and aims, particularly its focus on supportiveness, inclusivity, and providing a safe space for participants to develop confidence while building community. The subsequent two sections are presented in polyvocal dialogic mode, offering, in turn, student followed by staff accounts of the event and its benefits. First, undergraduate student Lachlan Blackwell and PhD candidate Heather McGinn discuss their experiences of organising and MCing Showpony. As original Showpony organisers, Lachlan Blackwell and Heather McGinn describe early challenges they faced in making the event safe and inclusive, especially for LGBTQIA+ identifying students, as well as how these challenges were overcome. In particular, they relate how a change of venue – from an off-campus pub to the on-campus student lounge – dramatically improved the Showpony vibe, allowing event organisers and performers alike to feel more accepted and open to sharing through performance. Then Pablo Muslera and Amelia Walker reflect as staff members on how Showpony enables pedagogically and creatively beneficial modes of *becoming*. Pablo Muslera

and Amelia Walker approach becoming via two different-yet-articulating critical lenses: while Pablo Muslera draws on Greek philosophers Heraclitus and Parmenides, Amelia Walker takes a Deleuzian turn in the form of Bronwyn Davies' *Pedagogical Encounters* (2009). Following this, a final section consolidates key points of the dialogues and summarises our advice for creating similar events.

Background to Showpony

Showpony Open Mic arose in 2017 out of a need for a space in which creative writing students could share their work in an environment more relaxed and less threatening than the classroom. It was then realised that student performers from other disciplines could also benefit from this opportunity, and so the event was initiated as a cross-arts platform for all students to share their skills and socialise. Part of the impetus for this was the significant levels of anxiety many students experienced when asked to share new writing, or perform in conventional assessment environments, for instance when feedback is being given on creative work in class. From the start, Showpony always had a strong emphasis on inclusivity, confidence building, and allyship. At early events, we also noticed that students identifying as LGBTQIA+ also gravitated towards Showpony; hence queer-friendliness became a core Showpony principle from the outset.

The first Showpony was held at an off-campus pub, selected for its accessibility for students with mobility needs. After the first five events, Showpony shifted to an on-campus student lounge, which had beanbags, food preparation facilities, and a space that could function as a stage. For the first three on-campus events, a pop-up bar was arranged with a local hospitality start-up. When the start-up became unable to commit to future Showpony events, the student volunteer team procured a liquor license and ran their own bar, earning enough to pay RSA accredited bartenders and duty managers award rates, and to retain a small profit for feeding into future Showpony events. Around the same time, students forged a student union club to formalise organisation processes, increase promotion, and gain access to services including sound and lighting equipment hire, and the ability to apply for grants. Showpony has continued in the same space and following the same student-led model ever since.

The format of the night is semi-flexible, containing the same key elements, but in shifting orders and ways. These elements are two or three sets of open mic performances, plus a feature act. The MCs work to be responsive, taking into account who is there; the themes, mediums and genres of creative performances; topical current events; and the general vibe of the evening. In these ways the event is intuitively collaborative even in the tacit interactions between those on and offstage. Generally, however, the night includes at least one feature act, who may perform one or two sets depending on preference and available time. The open mic is always the key focus on the night, in line with the event aim of encouraging new performers and assisting students to develop confidence in their work and themselves. The Showpony student club provides members with opportunities to gain skills, build their CVs and make new friends. Skills include stocking and running the bar and catering, managing the tech and sound

equipment, and generating promotion via social media and posters. When the original MCs stepped aside to take new steps in their studies and careers, they provided mentorship to incoming MCs – and in this way established a culture of ongoing paying forward.

Through discussion of Showpony’s history and format, many of the night’s guiding principles and aims have already begun to emerge. To elaborate on these, we aim to support student’s artistic work by providing a platform for them to rehearse and present their work among their peers without judgement. Showpony also aims to be safe, supportive and inclusive to all students and members of the Adelaide arts community. We pride ourselves on being a queer friendly inclusive space to the best of our ability. Why are queer spaces important? For those historically marginalised for their sexuality or gender identity it is important to find safe spaces free from fear of discrimination or heterosexual cisgender curiosity. Showpony aims to foster a safe environment for people on the LGBTQIA+ spectrum where they may gather, socialise and connect with their community. Queer spaces like gay and lesbian bars are often associated with nightlife such as bars, clubs and parties and can be exclusionary. While these venues are still valuable, Showpony provides a regular open mic event and pop up bar that is open to everyone, including heterosexual and cisgender people, so there is no need to publicly identify on the LGBTQIA+ spectrum to participate. Unlike bars and clubs, Showpony removes the pressure to romantically or sexually engage with others, which is particularly important for asexual and aromantic identities and orientations.

In addition to fostering a safe environment for people on the LGBTQIA+ spectrum to gather, socialise and meet with their communities, we strive to make Showpony accessible to people with differing needs. As well as accessible toilets, we use low lighting and maintain some calm quiet areas to ensure we are a sensory-sensitive space. We ensure our promotion materials are transparent about event accessibility. People with disabilities are often forced to do the work to find out if an event is accessible to them. This marginalises people with disabilities by limiting their participation in social environments. Our student lounge venue provides wheelchair-accessible main entrances, automatic doors, wide hallways and space for wheelchairs to move through, disabled toilets, disabled parking, and is close to public transport. Our stage is flat and therefore accessible to those using mobility aids. We also welcome service animals and offer participants the ability to leave and re-enter at leisure. We have established a culture of performers providing pre-warning about potentially triggering content. Clear start and finish times enable people to plan their transport. Our bathroom facilities enable people with gastrointestinal issues such as IBS to access toilets easily and discreetly. Discriminatory language or violence is not tolerated, and security is onsite during events.

Our open mics would not be possible without a team of student volunteers. Showpony is the students and the students are Showpony. As a result, our collaboratively-produced event is regularly filled with wonderful local talent from students and some members of local arts communities. We have regular and new faces attend and perform every month, and new types of performance feature at our events such as, most recently, dance. Amateur performers tell us this provides a great opportunity to test out new material or practice for upcoming professional gigs. New performers tell us this is where they feel safe to perform for the first time. Students

not doing creative practice degrees – like business or engineering – tell us it is a fun place to go on a Friday night and practice their creative arts outside of their main degree focus. Being involved in this event has shown the determination and resilience of students to build their own spaces to create and connect.

The student perspective: encouraging emerging artists and celebrating diversity

Heather McGinn:

In her recent TED talk, comedian Hannah Gadsby poses the question, ‘What is the point of my human?’ (TED 2019). I discovered the point of my human in the putting together of Showpony. Being an organiser and MC for Showpony was my opportunity to repay the favour to the creative community in Adelaide by lifting others into the transformative space of the open mic stage. When I first entered the spoken word scene in Adelaide, I was ill, lonely, and uncomfortable in myself. Rediscovering my confidence through performance poetry fostered my drive to achieve my academic and creative goals, and Showpony allowed me to ignite the same passion in my university peers. Taking this queer punk spirit to its natural home in the West End of Adelaide made sense, but it was not without its challenges.

On paper, the West End of Adelaide is an ideal home for open mic events that attract emerging artists, with its grubby footpaths, street art, and beer-soaked air, but the first home of Showpony was something of a traitor in Hindley Street’s midst; gentrified, made over, and sterile, it was ultimately too conservative to handle the sparkling queerness of our hosts, performers, and audience.

Lachlan Blackwell:

The original venue felt foreign, hostile, and lent itself to the normative. It promoted a culture in which queer was dominated by the mainstream; our event felt as though it needed to be hidden. The toxicity of normative pressure was impacting our vision for Showpony, which in turn impacted the performers and volunteers.

After being press-ganged into moving our event upstairs, making it inaccessible, we moved onto campus, and revived student life in the process. Free from the bewildered queerphobia and associated hostility offered by our former venue, Showpony now thrives in our new home: the student lounge. Complete with beanbags, snacks, a bar, and a warm welcome from the event organisers, performers feel at ease to hone their respective crafts. Performance is after all, a skillset that can only be learned through doing, but as a novice performer, where do you start?

Heather McGinn:

Adelaide’s open mic scene is vibrant, but it can be overwhelming to new artists. Similarly, beginning university, especially if you have moved far from home, is daunting. How do you

make friends, find a way to practice your craft, and get to grips with the social side of academic culture?

Showpony was born as a response to the realisation that both open mic and university spaces can be intimidating to those who are new to these worlds. The attitude of punk DIY offers a solution; if the space for your expression, connection, and community does not yet exist, create it yourself. The guiding principle of punk DIY to disrupt the commodification of the arts through making patrons pay a cover charge and expecting them to pay for overpriced food and drink also appealed (Culton & Holtzman 2010). The organisers of Showpony bring a set of skills to this enterprise that have allowed us to rise to the challenge. We know how to find a venue, provide a bar and catering, set up the technical requirements, book bands, and host an event. Along the way, we have learned how to engage students and mentor up-and-coming performers, as well as how to promote our event and invite participation from the wider Adelaide artistic community.

Lachlan Blackwell:

Showpony has structured itself as an open space within an inherently oppressive institution (Althusser 1971). Performers have commented on that although they are reticent to share their creative work in a classroom context, the atmosphere at our open mic events puts them at ease with the idea.

What makes Showpony different from other open mic events in Adelaide is our openness, and the soft landing that is supplied by a supportive audience. An inclusive atmosphere, free of judgement, is crucial in maintaining our empathetic connectivity, and encourages wellbeing in our student community. As an MC, the most effective way of encouraging students to perform for the first time, or to perform something new, is for me to provide an example of how to do it.

Heather McGinn:

As well as performing half-finished songs, poems written on the way to the event, and experimental prose, I regularly perform pieces that deal with tough topics, including mental illness, rape, violence, abortion, and abuse. This shows prospective open mic performers that these topics are not off limits. In fact, speaking out about these difficult themes can be cathartic, and the response from the audience always proves that you are not alone in your struggles. Being heard and finding out that you are not the only one who is going through difficulties is healing. The payoff of vulnerability is the recognition of yourself in your peers. This promotes trust between the performer and the audience and leads to friendships being forged which positively impact a student's experience of university, which is particularly helpful for students who identify as othered in some way, whether they are queer, chronically ill, or an international student. Showpony's zero tolerance attitude towards homophobia, racism, and ableism gives our community the permission to be vulnerable and offers peer to peer support that helps alleviate the feeling of isolation associated with being a marginalised person.

Lachlan Blackwell:

The audiences and team has grown and currently produces a queer friendly night aimed at queering performance, queering what an audience should do, and a ‘place’ that can be traced back to the ideology of pushing boundaries in what University students, clubs, and spaces can produce as culture within institutions and normativity.

Another way that Showpony offers openness is in inviting artists across a spectrum of genres to perform, rather than focusing on one, such as spoken word or music. We also manage a balance between more experienced performers and complete novices, meaning that the up-and-coming artists get a chance to observe the experts in action, as well as pick their brains for advice during the intervals. What started as an idea for an event that would foster the creative endeavours of less experienced performers has ended up being so much more than that. Connections have been made between students that otherwise may have been at risk of feeling isolated and adrift in this new world of university. Discussions during the intervals move organically from students getting to know one another, to swapping tips on how to improve performance, not only onstage, but in academic life. Peer support such as this encourages engagement in campus life and makes university seem welcoming rather than intimidating.

Heather McGinn:

Peer support stands out to me as the most important element of the Showpony experience. To see some of our performers to go on to be featured on Triple J, and others having their own shows in Adelaide Cabaret Festival has been really rewarding. The connections made through our event have fostered budding arts careers and led to professional performance experience and opportunities.

Being a student-led event that has claimed a physical space within the university itself means that students feel a sense of ownership of their student lounge, which is after all, a space designed for them to connect and relax within. Now that Showpony has been established, I have reached the logical conclusion for my initial goal of living out the point of my human; I have handed over the MC reins to an emerging artist and stepped back to be an observer. What I observe is a space that is home to novices and experts alike, one that glitters with a queer punk ethos and fosters peer support in our creative community and the university, and is a testament to the possibilities of student-led performance events.

The staff perspective: spaces of encounter, being and becoming

Amelia Walker:

People often ask, ‘What is Showpony?’ Everybody would have their own answer to this question. To me, as a staff member, Showpony is not *what* but *where*: a *where* that is crucially about *how* and *why* and *who* and the *ways* these things flow together. This *where* is a mental space: internal and personal, yet shared; it is political. It is a threshold – many thresholds – a zone of liminality, of border crossing, testing, experimentation, opening, discovery. It is both

in and between, public and pedagogy, a net of striations that beg the smooth. Pablo Muslera, what is Showpony to you?

Pablo Muslera:

Showpony opens up tensions between academic and poet, author and audience, student and educator. I want to liken it to the flux and ‘becoming’ of Greek philosopher Heraclitus, and the permanence or ‘being’ theorised by Parmenides. At Showpony, fixed roles such as teacher/student are challenged in the Heraclitean river of the performance space.

Amelia Walker:

Being and becoming. These are concepts also crucial to Bronwyn Davies’ notion of the pedagogical encounter: learning that entails ‘openness to relationality, to an ongoing process of becoming, in dialogue with others, both in and across communities ... generated through a continual Deleuzian unfolding of thought and practice’ (Davies & Gannon 2009: 4). Fundamental to the pedagogical encounter is permission to be vulnerable. Showpony facilitates this by providing a safe space for staging risky encounters, for opening ourselves to change.

Pablo Muslera:

The crowd at Showpony’s launch in 2017 was a familiar one: students, former students and colleagues whom I knew well. The venue was likewise familiar: an alcove in a pub with a microphone, flanked by tables and chairs. In this sense the Showpony launch was a comfortable performance setting. It represented the permanence, the ‘being’ of Parmenides. I saw students perform poetry, stand-up comedy, and music. I realised that while these were expressions of who they were as people and creative individuals, and so embodied the principles of Parmenides – people who create continue to do so, and a public performance is merely a reflection of this aspect of their identity – there was also something else happening which fed more directly into the concept of flux, of becoming, popularised by Heraclitus.

The tutorial room was replaced by this new, darkened space of possibility, where students who were hesitant to contribute in class suddenly bared their inner selves on the stage, taking a far greater risk in a public environment than they would dare to in the closeted environment of a university classroom. New talents were discovered: for storytelling, musical performance, and comedy, without the constraints of set topics, referenced commentaries, or theoretical frameworks.

Amelia Walker:

I have witnessed this too – the confidence students gain because Showpony sits outside of rubrics and assessment; a different set of criteria apply. Students who would have gotten high distinctions if English were their first language can hear the applause and know their words are good.

Pablo Muslera:

As an academic supporting a colleague and students, my perspective at the first Showpony was of an observer, one who politely declined student's requests to get up on stage. It seemed impossible to cross the chasm between audience and performer, academic and poet, and most importantly, educator and student: at a University-sponsored event, this Parmenidean barrier separating these roles seemed unassailable. However my enthusiasm for the concept behind Showpony remained; the possibility of crossing the pedagogical boundary between theory and practice, and witnessing the dialogue between author and audience; multiple voices conspiring to add meaning to a poem or song or narrative composed in solitude was an embodiment of Bakhtin's heteroglossia: where a multitude of voices contribute to the meaning of the overall 'text' of a live spoken word event. My own role, however, remained constant: an observer, marvelling at the bravery and aptitude of others.

This changed at a later iteration of Showpony, after the venue had been swapped for the more congenial environment of the student lounge. I had convinced a couple of my current poetry students to attend – these were students who had been difficult to engage through traditional tutorials in past courses – but in this new space, they performed their poetry, to enthusiastic responses. Following this revelation – that such a space can engage those who find it difficult to participate in regular classes, and so demonstrate the very principles I'd been teaching, about poetry as an act of expression, as a way to most directly communicate to an audience – I felt something shift within me, a Heraclitean awakening. I realised that if I wanted to enact my self-concept of an educator with integrity, who actually believes in the concepts they teach as more than just filler for two-hour tutorials, I needed to practice what I preached. At the next Showpony event, I inhabited the role of poet rather than academic, and added a different voice to the one usually experienced by my students: that of a fellow conspirator, sharing the terror and excitement and opportunity afforded by the stage. I read my poems from my smartphone, as I had seen several of the other performers do.

Amelia Walker:

What I take from your anecdote is that the change of space sparked a series of other changes. It encouraged students who had been difficult to engage in class. It flipped the teacher/student roles you alluded to earlier: when your students performed, you gained the confidence to do it too. In this way, you underwent a form of becoming. This affirms Davies' argument that space is crucial to pedagogy and pedagogical encounters. Much 'more than a passive backdrop to human action', space exists in relation with place yet exceeds place for 'place signifies a somewhere that already has an identity' whereas space 'is not fixed ... is open to multiplicity' and crucially 'active in shaping what is possible' (Davies & Gannon 2009: 5-6).

Pablo Muslera:

This new inclusive, non-threatening space made a real difference to what is possible. As a result of performing I was left with a broader appreciation of students who'd taken the risk to perform at this event; a parallel to the one I asked of them each week in class, to share their original prose or poetry or sketches. This has had flow-on effects: some of my other students have also

found the shift within them, sometimes coming along to Showpony with no intention of performing, and being encouraged on stage by the safe space of the student lounge, and the cheap drinks and cheaper cheese toasties.

Amelia Walker:

These are the kinds of encounters and transformations I work my arse off to make happen in classrooms. Yet at Showpony they happen organically, almost inevitably – outside the classroom and yet within the institution of learning, at least physically, albeit in ways that rub against and push beyond the institution’s formal agendas. I think this is understandable through thinking Henry Giroux’s notion of ‘public pedagogy’ in relation to Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of striated and smooth space.

Public pedagogy (Giroux 2004) is radical learning outside of conventional educational spaces, for instance through film, performance, exhibitions and arts practices that bring people together to think deeply and enact dialogues about issues of our world. Public pedagogy encourages personal growth and political awareness, yet it is neither assessed nor tied to any specific curricula. Although the name public pedagogy might seem to suggest taking pedagogy out of the institutions and into the public, for me, the aim is to bring a public pedagogy spirit into university learning. Showpony facilitates this, and does so through complex interactions between the striated and the smooth. For Deleuze and Guattari, striated space is ‘that which intertwines fixed and variable elements, produces an order and succession of distinct forms, organises horizontal ... lines with vertical ... planes’ whereas smooth space is ‘a space of affects, more than one of properties ... it is an intensive rather than an extensive space, one of distances, not of measures and properties’ (1987: 479). A simplistic reading might take this to mean that the smooth and striated are opposed, that the smooth represents freedom and striation constraint. But the relationship is more complex than this. As Bronwyn Davies explains, Deleuze asks us to think of the smooth and striated, ‘not as alternatives, but as existing together in the same space. The modular lines of force create rigid striations, and at the same time offer places for experience and experimentation, in which new movements become possible’ (Davies 2009: 21). Showpony happens on the university campus – an institutional space, a striated space. Yet it interrupts this space, introduces elements of the smooth.

Pablo Muslera:

Heraclitus also troubled dichotomies such as ‘up/down’ and ‘day/night’; he saw the world as being in perpetual flux (Long 2008: 252). My own perspective as educator and audience member was flipped on its head when, emboldened by the students I had coaxed into performing, I joined them on stage. In doing so, what we shared was a result of my ‘becoming’ as one with them, surrendering my educator’s mantle in exchange for the microphone of the performer, of the student willing to open themselves up on stage. Although Parmenides was quite right when he said that poets can’t *not* be poets, there’s something very different from a poet lying dormant in the audience, to one being forced to adapt and grow into the version of themselves which must connect with others live, and convince them of the integrity of their creative vision: that they actually believe what they say. This, for me, was one of the main

benefits of Showpony, and I found that this has led to an increase in my own creativity, as well as greater confidence in my teaching practice: in this sense, the academic was taught by his students, and the author became informed by the performer he had to shift into for five minutes on stage. I've found that joining my students in this performance space has led to subsequent performances elsewhere, such as art festivals and radio programs, and a spike in my own creativity. The integrity of the creative and pedagogical persona are both enhanced by the experience of seeing others dip themselves in Heraclitus's river, forming a unity between their own creative impulses, the necessary performer's anxiety, and the resulting dialogue with the crowd. The overall 'text' of Showpony, then, is one which relies upon a multitude of voices, alternating between audience and performer, educator and student, and all of the rich antithetical elements which create the tension required for creative growth. In this sense, the artistic and humanistic nourishment of such a place could be compared to Orson Welles' analysis of Shakespeare's Falstaff, 'for [its] goodness is like bread, like wine' (in Bloom 2017: 4).

Concluding thoughts

Our focus in this article has been on the collaborative processes and benefits of student open mic performance events in campus spaces, with the aim of providing information of use to others interested in running such events. We have discussed as an exemplar, the monthly student-led creative performance and pop up bar, Showpony. The article began with an overview of Showpony's history, format and aims as recounted by Showpony student club secretary and PhD candidate Chloe Cannell. Chloe Cannell's account focused on supportiveness, inclusivity, and providing a safe space. She shared some of the strategies the Showpony team puts in place to facilitate this. These include ensuring accessibility of the event space itself and in promotion materials; responsive MCs; encouraging a culture of paying forward; sensitivity to others' emotional needs as expressed through provision of content warnings; and more. Overall, Chloe Cannell foregrounded the importance of community and collaboration in producing student events, and observed some of the ensuing benefits.

Following Chloe Cannell's account, Heather McGinn in dialogue with Lachlan Blackwell provided two more student accounts of Showpony, this time from the perspectives of the original MCs and organisers. Noting early challenges, they related how a shift of space helped make the event safe and inclusive for LGBTQIA+ identifying students, as well as students with access requirements. Pablo Muslera and Amelia Walker then reflected as staff members on the pedagogically and creatively beneficial modes of *becoming* that Showpony enables. Pablo Muslera and Amelia Walker approach becoming via two different-yet-articulating critical lenses. Drawing on Heraclitus and Parmenides, Pablo Muslera related his differing experiences of performing first in the off-campus pub space and then in the student lounge space, noting how the latter, as a 'darkened space of possibility', enabled him to bridge the teacher-student divide in pedagogically enriching ways. Affirming this, Amelia Walker likened the Showpony space to Davies' theory of pedagogical encounters, observing that by Showpony sitting 'outside

of rubrics and assessment’, Showpony enables forms of learning that are difficult to facilitate in classrooms, but flow freely in the smooth space of the performance environment.

Overall, our accounts make visible how events like Showpony can enhance learning, promote student-student social engagement, enrich student-staff rapport, broaden the range of campus life experiences, and thus positively impact holistic wellbeing across the academic community. Through describing strategies, we put in place to support inclusivity and the ways in which we overcame early challenges, this article provides a resource for staff and students at other universities interested in setting up similar events. However, the most important resource in our case was the people who got involved and the community that continues to grow. Therefore, focusing on collaboration is our key recommendation for establishing and maintaining student spaces and activities that nurture transformative creativity, connection and (inter)personal growth.

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