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Vivid Ethnicity: A Mobile Museum for Transformative Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Several ethnic groups in Thailand consider themselves oppressed; arguably, Thai society lacks suitable platforms for multiple voices and perspectives. *Vivid Ethnicity*, a mobile museum constituted by Mahidol University, addresses this issue. Adapting Kenneth Burke's concept of the "dramatistic pentad," communication theory, and the concept of transformative learning developed by Jack Mezirow, *Vivid Ethnicity* creates a theory of exhibition geared toward critical thinking and creative praxis. Ethnographic performances combined with participatory workshops are shown to be key factors in opening up conversations and encouraging audience to construct their own meaning.

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Introduction

The Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council reports a general state of poverty and inequality in Thailand, mostly in rural agricultural areas.¹ Most of the country's 70 ethnic groups live outside subdistrict borders, totaling some six million individuals,² and they face numerous problems related to lack of rights and access to cultural resources, ethnic bias, and cultural transmission.³

Ethnic groups in Thailand experience high levels of discrimination and social inequality. Assuming that limited mutual understanding and multicultural sensibility are among the underlying causes of this discrimination, we experimented with platforms allowing for multivocality and the sharing of multiple perspectives. In 2019, we developed a mobile exhibition platform for such sharing called *Vivid Ethnicity* for the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia (RILCA) Museum of Cultural Anthropology.⁴ Our goals were to promote respect for cultural diversity, contribute to a sense of conviviality, and enable inclusive learning.

With this "performance autoethnography" (for details on our work, see Yamabhai, Knoop, and Cusripituck 2021),⁵ we aimed to answer the following questions:

- (1) How can *Vivid Ethnicity* activities contribute to critical thinking and creative praxis?
- (2) How did the audience experience *Vivid Ethnicity*?

We found that the mobile museum was a successful learning platform that encouraged conversations enhancing critical thinking and creative praxis about multiculturalism; here, we use "creative" to describe conversations that elicit curiosity and a desire

among interlocutors to learn and thereby create their own meaning.⁶ The exhibition improved audiences' self-discovery and understanding in a safe space, one that audiences described as feeling as relaxing as a friend's home.

Theory and practices

Conceptually, our work was guided by the writings of Kenneth Burke, an American literary critic best known for his views of literature as a “symbolic action” where language and human agency combine, and Jack Mezirow, an American sociologist widely acknowledged as the founder of the concept of transformative learning.⁷ Burke's dramatic pentad and Mezirow's transformative learning helped us study the process of experiential learning through creative conversations. Specifically, Burke's “pentad” (a group of five) refers to an analytical framework for the most efficient study of any act comprising five elements: act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose.⁸ In our case, the acts were the storytelling and our listening, the scenes the places we visited, the agents both the participants and the researchers, and our agency lay in engaging creative conversations with the purpose of transforming viewpoints on ethnicity (Figure 1).

Research approach

The methodology we used was performance as praxis of intervention. We applied the ideas of D. Soyini Madison, Dwight Conquergood, and Norman K. Denzin, three scholars of performance autoethnography, which can be defined as reflecting and writing about ourselves in the context of contact with others.⁹ Specifically, we collected data through observation and conversations with the audience. We organized *Vivid Ethnicity* as cultural performers with participatory cultural praxis. We reflected critically on our experiences in terms of how the audiences constructed meaning and how their perspectives changed on ethnicity.

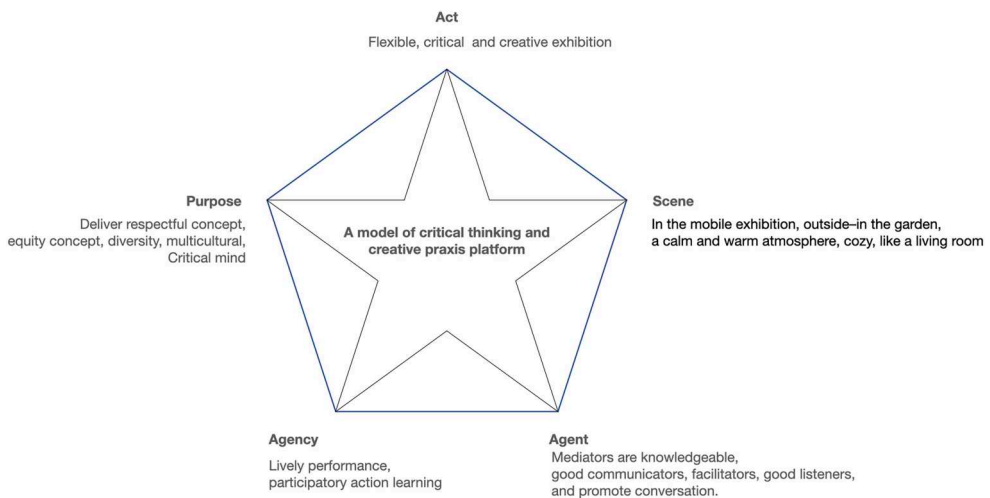


Figure 1. *Vivid Ethnicity's* dramatic pentad transformative learning framework model.

We adapted our dramatic pentad transformative learning model as the theoretical framework of the work.¹⁰ This research was conducted at various venues over two years, engaging about 2000 individuals. Data collection was conducted through conversations and kinesics,¹¹ with spontaneous reactions written down by the audience in a feedback log. There were two types of research participants: ethnic Black Thais and other groups.

We observed the audiences using a form to classify each group of people, their ages, what kind of conversation took place, and what their reactions were throughout the conversations. The most important element was inductive inference; we make a claim based on three sets of data. One is from the observation form, the second is our field notes amassed from the deep listening, and lastly the notes from guest books.

Before (an unsatisfying situation)

Thailand is a multicultural society; however, it is a country with sociocultural inequality across different ethnic groups. One of the root causes of this inequality is lack of awareness or understanding of multicultural perspectives. Most Thai people stereotype ethnic groups who live in the mountains as forest destroyers or drug traffickers with primitive, odd cultures. *Vivid Ethnicity* challenges these cultural biases, providing a platform for people to gain awareness of the groups that compose Thailand's multicultural society.

Vivid Ethnicity is a mobile museum in the form of a traveling trailer, perhaps the smallest mobile museum in Thailand, which acts as a learning platform for cultural transformation; it can be set up very flexibly (Figure 2). The exhibition takes place inside and in front of the museum, which is decorated with ethnic motifs from across the country. The inside takes the form of a living room, adorned with ethnic ornaments and objects of everyday life that have been donated by different ethnic groups (Figure 3).

In front of the mobile museum, educational activities are offered, such as jigsaw puzzles and paper dolls wearing different traditional costumes of ethnic minorities, such as Lawa, Karen, Mien, Lahu, Hmong, and Lisu (Figure 4). The audience learns about different costumes by completing the puzzles and taking pictures of their completed puzzles. Additionally, there are folktales from different ethnic groups, conservation activities, handicrafts and cooking workshops, shooting and hunting, and making teddy bears that wear traditional ethnic costumes. Additionally, we offer academic talks to suit the different contexts we visit. We have traveled all over the country, visiting schools, universities, museums, communities, public events, and museum exhibitions in a total of 13 provinces.

In this mobile museum, the researchers serve as educators, organizing the exhibition and engaging audiences in conversations regarding their learning about ethnic minorities. The data received are then analyzed for a critical reflection of the audience's perceptions of ethnic minorities in Thailand.

***Vivid Ethnicity* as an intervention**

Schools

Over the past two years, to build respect for multiculturalism, equality, and the need for respect for cultural differences, we took *Vivid Ethnicity* to secondary schools to introduce children to more than 70 ethnic groups; most students were unaware that there were so



Figure 2. *Vivid Ethnicity*, mobile museum displays fully functioned.



Figure 3. The interior of *Vivid Ethnicity*.



Figure 4. Everyday life objects donated from various ethnic groups in Thailand.

many ethnic groups in Thailand. After visiting the exhibition, students report having learned about ethnic groups and feeling excited. In Bangkok, in the Ratchaburi and Nakhon Pathom provinces, we offered educational activities suitable for all ages, and the students especially enjoyed the DIY ethnic accessories workshops, which inspired self-esteem and an appreciation of ethnic craftsmanship. Wearing ethnic dresses – a truly enjoyable activity – encouraged the students to interact with different cultures. Most importantly, however, it encouraged them to converse with us, the researchers/educators, which made them aware of constructive making their own meanings in terms of addressing ethnicity.

Community malls

We took the mobile museum to malls in downtown Bangkok, generally on weekends. The Chang-Chui Mall invited *Vivid Ethnicity* to events such as Children’s Day that included themed programs such as “museum jobs.” Inside the mobile museum, we provided a library to teach skills, such as how to become a researcher, while outside, we held participatory workshops demonstrating how to become a museum educator, conservator, or curator. At Lido Connect, a cultural space in central Bangkok, we created an educational program to introduce the multiple ethnicities in Thailand with workshops by having participants create accessories and color paper dolls with different costumes; the participants reported that their attitudes toward ethnic groups in Thailand had changed.

Museums

We presented *Vivid Ethnicity* in museum parking lots in Bangkok. We organized activities such as conversations about ethnic artifacts with one of us, a researcher and educator, as a key actor mediating the conversation. The visitors showed a keen interest in the mediator's narrative and the ensuing conversations. In front of the mobile museum, we set up a museum shop with goods from ethnic communities; we also introduced a coffee shop, which played an important role because it exposed visitors to new smells and tastes – creating a multisensory experience. These educational activities were widely publicized and drew family groups to the mobile museum, where ethnic toys, games, conservation activities, and cooking workshops were especially popular.

Black Thai festival

When visiting ethnic communities in the countryside, we created special exhibitions for festivals. The Black Thai festivals in the Petchaburi and Ratchaburi provinces are annual cultural events aimed at transmitting ethnic traditions to the next generation and celebrating the Black Thai. On these occasions, we displayed Black Thai beds, clothes, and other artifacts to make the audience feel at home, although some children said they had never seen such cultural artifacts before. The most popular activity was the bakery workshop, where the children made *korkhud*, or Black Thai cookies.¹²

Activities: collecting social objects and conversations

During the fieldwork, we collected special materials that served as “social objects,” objects chosen not for their artistic or historical significance but for their ability to spark conversation¹³; these objects allowed us to create shared meanings with the participants during our conversations about different ethnic groups. Most audience gave positive feedback about what they had learned about clothes, kitchenware, instruments, toys, and hunting tools; for instance with smiley faces on their forms and comments such as, “It’s interesting, I never known this before” or “This is a fun and creative toy; it is simple and smart.” These multisensory interactions – touching and playing with the objects, hearing stories of the ethnic groups, observing the artifacts, and smelling and tasting coffee and different foods – acted to change people’s perspectives toward ethnic groups: “This has changed my view on ethnic groups in Thailand” or “My grandma is this one, just like this picture. Can I borrow this book to show to my grandma? I feel so proud.”

In yet another acknowledgment, a girl said that she was a member of this group, surprising her friends by revealing her ethnic identity for the first time. Another visitor said, “I am proud to belong to this ethnic group.” This is notable because, in Thailand, most ethnic groups identify themselves as Thai rather than their specific cultural identity.

Activities: educating

Vivid Ethnicity provides a mode of learning that participants can experience in different ways. The educational model follows that of Karen McPhail-Bell – an Australian researcher on indigenous topics – and colleagues, who use what she calls the “All

Teach, All Learn” approach.¹⁴ For instance, we learn from the audience about the meaning of the artifacts and objects they bring and share with us, and the audience learns about the objects that we display. In some cases, they know more about these items than we and have their own associations and interpretations; this turns the exhibition into a space of meaning making and sharing. The activities and services at *Vivid Ethnicity* contribute to developing participants’ critical thinking through creative learning activities and exposure to different ethnic groups.

How visitors learned

Black Thai

In 2019, we took our mobile museum to several Black Thai annual festivals,¹⁵ where members of the community acted as co-creators with us. This process was particularly interesting when they shared their secret recipes such as snacks with us. A special co-creator was the owner of the Pantanom Museum, a community initiative in Petchaburi province.¹⁶ She curates her museum as a donor and an interpreter and donated several cultural objects to *Vivid Ethnicity*, promoting it in her community and telling stories of the Black Thai to younger generations. Many Black Thai we worked with were proud that their stories and objects were being shared with a wider audience; as first-time museum-goers, they were willing and eager to learn more about other ethnic groups as well.

Other groups

Members of other ethnic groups were enthusiastic to learn about the other ethnic groups in Thailand. We received many questions on that point, with visitors expressing a desire to learn about the everyday lives of others and indicating they had gained a better general understanding of other people: “In the multicultural world, I have learned and now understand myself and others better.” Additionally, in the guest book, there were several messages showing how visitors came to understand more about ethnic groups; they reported that they had learned new things about several ethnic groups. Some said they felt a changed attitude toward ethnic groups, from looking down on them to appreciating multiculturalism and feeling pride in their own ethnicity: “It is such a great learning space to show the respect and equality of ethnic groups in Thailand.”

Some, as with the young lady mentioned above, even found the confidence to declare pride in their cultural identity, for instance, “I am one of this ethnic group. I feel so proud.” Such comments inspired the students to explore deeper layers of each other’s ethnic backgrounds. At a school in Lamphun province, most students belonged to an ethnic minority. When they visited our exhibition, we asked about their ethnic background, and they proudly told us. These younger children were proud to see their cultural artifacts on display, which we could deduce from their delighted faces and big smiles (Table 1).

Results

The *Vivid Ethnicity* mobile museum has been traveling around Thailand to share knowledge about the country’s different ethnic groups with local communities. The

Table 1. The distribution of types of venues, detailing places, audiences, numbers, context, and content.

	Secondary schools	Museums in Bangkok and other provinces	Malls	Black Thai festivals
Where	- In Bangkok - Ratchaburi - Phetchaburi	- National Museum of Bangkok, Uthong, Ratchaburi, Nakorn Srithamarat, Chumporn - The Golden Jubilee Museum of Agriculture office - Community museum in Lanta Island, Krabi province	- Chang-Chui - Lido connect	Black Thai villages in Phetchaburi and Ratchaburi province
When	- During the learning hours - School academic expo	- School days and on the weekend - Museum expo	Afternoon till night Weekend	Black Thai cultural transmission festivals in April
Duration	One-day trip	One- to three-day trip	Three-day trip/ weekend	One- to three-day trip
Attendance	500	1100	200	200
Subjects	Multicultural perspective	Multicultural perspective	- Specific themes - Active learning in multicultural themes	Cultural transmission

conversations during the exhibitions have been valuable, with visitors indicating that they have learned something about other ethnic groups (e.g. “Good activities, varieties of sacred objects helping us to learn more about different ethnic groups in Thailand,” “Interesting and remarkable exhibition,” and “A new way of communication to highlight the different ethnic groups in Thailand”). Of particular note was the following comment: “Most Thais know others, but do not know themselves. I believe that this exhibition will encourage Thais to learn more about themselves. Congratulations on a well-done and useful job for Thai society.”

Around the country, *Vivid Ethnicity* was a safe space where members of ethnic groups could feel confident in expressing their identity (e.g. “It’s so cozy, I feel like at home,” “I feel like I am in a hill tribe village,” “It’s a very warm interior design,” “It feels like visiting a friend’s home”). However, we understood that most of all, it was we as educators who were appreciated based on comments in the guest books: “Interesting presentation, a very informal way of communication. Great conversation, which is easy to learn,” and “Very interesting exhibition. The educator is very knowledgeable.” The exhibition achieved the intended outcomes for all participants to date. Visitors have developed critical thinking based on their awareness of previously asymmetric relations, and this often led to them revealing their own ethnic identity.¹⁷

This conclusion is not only based on verbal and written evidence but also from the body language of the participants and other nonverbal signs. Several visitors said they learned about other ethnic groups from the conversations, while also expressing respect for their culture and traditions. Some students acknowledged that they had learned from the educational programs and workshops.

Moreover, some Thai participants who had previously felt superior to the minority groups showed a changed perspective toward other ethnic groups. A particular group acted at first as if they could not care less about ethnic groups and were a bit sarcastic

at the beginning, but after a conversation with us, they became more curious. Having originally based their attitude on stereotypes of ethnic groups destroying forests across Northern Thailand, after the conversations, they calmed down, lowered their voices, and asked to learn more. We are confident, therefore, that in such exchanges, we were witness to fundamental shifts of opinion and changes of meaning, which are key indicators of critical thinking and creative praxis.

Conclusion and interpretation

The *Vivid Ethnicity* mobile museum functioned as a transformative learning platform to inculcate critical thinking and creative praxis skills for many participants. We provided open content through social objects, which invite the sharing of experiences and knowledge exchange and enhancement through conversation. Hands-on activities helped our participants experience cultural diversity through multisensory engagement. In line with our previous work, we can conclude that we have created effective educational activities using transformative learning theory and participant observation.¹⁸ What we have achieved fits well with the model we devised earlier.

However, even though the exhibition seems to have succeeded, we do think there is room for improvement. We could collaborate with scholars of other academic disciplines or other stakeholders to share artifacts and stories of and about ethnic groups. Additionally, *Vivid Ethnicity* can become a general participatory and activist platform. We can also follow up with previous visitors to observe whether they have retained what they learned or acted upon their new perspective. Finally, contemporary ethnic arts could be included, such as bands, artists, storytellers, and performers. This will benefit those from these communities and plant the seeds of better understanding and appreciation.

We found that the strength of *Vivid Ethnicity* is its organicity; however, an active narrator or mediator is indispensable for its success. As researchers and educators, we participated in the exhibition by creating conversations based on objects and stories about the cultures of ethnic groups. The exhibition and resulting conversations were flexible and adaptable to wherever we went. This makes *Vivid Ethnicity* an innovative resource suitable for learning regarding several subjects and contexts.

Among the strengths of the museum were the conversations about social objects that invite people to share their own experiences. In the future, mediators need to have good knowledge about the social objects and most of all should communicate well and possess the ability to listen empathically and provoke discussions. Following our framework (Figure 1), we used “lively performance,” engaging in authentic, organic conversations and participatory actions that allow audiences to learn experientially. The goal of these activities is to generate respect, equity, critical thinking, diversity, and multiculturalism. Our mobile museum activities stimulate critical thinking and creative praxis brought about by the participants’ self-discovery. An unexpected and reflective effect we observed was that engaging in conversations led some visitors to ask whether their previous biases had contributed to the inequalities suffered by ethnic minorities.

Notes

1. Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council. *Poverty and Inequality Report*.

2. Premisrat, Thailand: Language Situation.
3. Thailand Science Research and Innovation. *Report on Ethnic Groups*.
4. The Museum of Cultural Anthropology is located at the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia (RILCA) at Mahidol University, Bangkok (Thailand), and is operated by the iCulture group.
5. We treated the wider context of our activities, including immediately preceding ones. See Yambhai et al., “Participatory Engagement Sustainable Innovation,” 195–212.
6. Ellis and Barrs, “Assessment of Creative Learning.”
7. Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*; Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation*.
8. Littlejohn, *Theories of Human Communication*.
9. Madison, *Critical Ethnography*; Conquergood, *Cultural Struggles*; Denzin, “Constructing New Critical Inquiry,” 51–56.
10. Cusripituck and Yamabhai, “Reflection on Pendantic Approach,” 29–41.
11. Such as nonverbal signs (hands, eyes), bodily communication, and facial expressions.
12. *Korkhud* are the product of our research project “Cultural Transformation of cultural Transmission for Black Thai ethnic groups,” cocreated with a younger generation of Black Thai keen to transmit knowledge in a contemporary way. The cookies are a symbol of modernity; they have a unique recipe and are stamped with an image of a Black Thai house.
13. Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, discussing Engeström, *Social Objects*.
14. McPhail-Bell et al., “All Teach, All Learn.”
15. Black Thai festivals are annual cultural transmission events taking place in April in all villages of Black Thai residents. In 2004, there were an estimated 100,000 individuals, dispersed over a dozen provinces, who would self-identify as Black Thai. Most live in the Petchaburi and Ratchaburi provinces in central Thailand.
16. <https://www.facebook.com/PhiphithphanthPanThnxm/>.
17. In one case, a student gradually revealed her identity and shared her cultural background to her friends after she felt that Vivid Ethnicity was a safe place and on her side.
18. See note 10 above.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Riemer Knoop is a classicist and archaeologist with a PhD in Etruscology, who was previously a producer for public television. He has held several positions in the Dutch heritage industry and founded Gordion Cultureel Advies (1998), advising institutions and governments regarding cultural policy. From 2011 to 2019, he was a Professor of Cultural Heritage at Reinwardt Academy, Amsterdam University of the Arts. He has conducted research on heritage theory and social sustainability and coauthored *A Sustainist Lexicon: seven entries to recast the future – rethinking design and heritage* (2016), *Straatwaarden: in het nieuwe landschap van maatschappelijke erfgoedpraktijken* (2017), and *Meer staatwaarden: een pleidooi voor erfgoedmaken als engagement* (2019). He has been a visiting professor in Italy, Thailand, Egypt, Russia, Columbia, and China.

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