

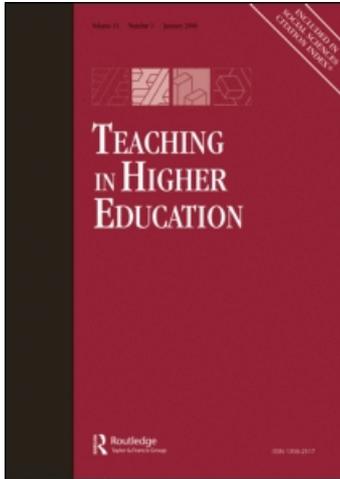
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Boundary crossings: using participatory theatre as a site for deepening learning

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Amongst the academic community there has been an increasing acceptance that knowledge and learning is no longer situated solely within academic settings and that workplace settings are also legitimate spaces for reflecting on practice in order to enhance professional capabilities. Learners are uniquely placed to draw on their workplace experiences as they explore the relationship between this experience and the academic curriculum. Moreover, biography, prior experience and lived experiences are being recognised as legitimate knowledge arenas in tackling challenging issues of inequality and promoting diversity.

Within this context, which teaching and learning methodologies enable facilitators and learners to negotiate the boundaries between workplace and academic environments? This article discusses a multi-disciplinary research project in which youth and community practitioners engaged in participatory theatre as a site for critical action learning. We argue this approach furthers our understanding of the process of in-depth learning concerning issues of equality across disciplinary and cross service dialogues.

Keywords: critical action-learning; equality; practice-based learning; participatory theatre; youth and community practitioners

Introduction

The research project on which this article is based—‘using Action Learning in the professional development of work-based practitioners’ (Kumrai et al. 2009) was part of a practice based professional learning research strand of a University Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. The project aimed to give youth and community workers a creative learning space as part of their work-based training, encouraging them to think critically and innovatively about challenging work situations.

The overall aim of the research was to investigate how participatory theatre can be used in practice-based learning environments. The term ‘participatory theatre’, usually refers to applied or community theatre and derives from radical theatre traditions such as theatre for development and theatre in schools education (TWISFER 2006). In our research the focus was on the personal and professional development of two groups of youth and community practitioners studying in a higher education institution to become professionally qualified. Specifically,

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participatory theatre was used to create a pilot series of interactive activities over two separate days. Through specifically trained facilitation participants shared and enacted real-life stories based on challenging situations they faced in their workplaces around leadership and teamwork. This was followed by opportunities for reflection on their experiences.

We begin by outlining our research framework and methodology. We then explore the value of workplace experiences, how these are shaped by social conditions and the impact on professional development. Next we focus on participatory theatre in the context of a range of teaching and learning strategies designed to deepen critical reflective practice. We explore participatory theatre as a form of personal expressiveness leading to critical action learning which we believe has value in bridging the gap between practice-based and academic-based learning settings. We argue that the process of developing 'aesthetic spaces' (Boal 1992, 18) can enable practitioners to take greater control over sharing strategies for dealing with challenging and complex work situations. In particular, we consider ways in which the power of participatory theatre addresses inequality and its impact on collective active learning.

Our discussion advocates the wider use of participatory theatre to further learners' capacity for critical reflection; to provide a forum for practising the skills and competencies (Brohm 2009) needed to deal with inequalities in their everyday lives, and to provide a creative site which emphasises the social aspect of learning. We conclude this form of critical action learning complements our understanding of cognitive and rational approaches.

Research framework

There were several inter-related objectives. Our first objective was to enhance the leadership skills set of youth and community practitioners as a means of addressing a long-standing tension in this profession between employer competence-led needs and the theoretical and critical basis of youth and community curriculum (Jeffs and Spence 2008). Secondly, we were interested in reviewing the assumption that professionals working with young people in formal and informal education contexts have considerable power in their workplace. The core ethical framework of the youth and community curriculum is shaped by the values, principles and practice of equal opportunity and diversity (National Youth Agency 1999). On the whole, the focus is on how these competencies and practices impact on service at the point of delivery to young people and their communities. We were interested to find out how practitioners identified and understood questions of power and inequality in relation to their own professional development and working lives. Specially as employees who may be subject to poor employment practices due to their unqualified status and as part-time employees.

This relates to our third objective which is the extent to which the experience of participatory theatre can deepen learning leading to changes in practice. We were particularly interested in how participatory theatre might enable practitioners to reshape their experiences of oppression and discrimination and develop anti-oppressive practices in the workplace. Within youth and community work training, case studies, problem solving, personal journals and creative writing have all been used to help learners reflect upon, validate and document their experiences and

practices. The use of participatory theatre is not commonplace as a teaching methodology within this community of practice and it provided us with an opportunity to stream in other forms of dynamic and inter-active activities. We adopted a multi-disciplinary approach underpinned by our shared understanding of the significance of equality issues in the workplace and in academic settings. We had worked closely with under-represented groups and these connections were critical in establishing contact with the participants and teaching staff and running the research programme.

Methodology

As an external research team working with a Higher Education Institution (HEI), we had to negotiate the integration of creative and experiential processes into an existing teaching and learning strategy. This involved a series of discussions with the core teaching staff to ensure academic coherence and to maintain continuity which also led to opportunities for the teaching staff to participate in the workshops. The two groups of learners, studying and in paid youth and community work, agreed to take part in the project. Some learners were as young as 20 and the oldest 55. Group A (18 learners) was studying a management and organisation development module and consisted of 12 women and six men with 14 identifying themselves as White British, two as Asian or Asian British and two as Black or Black British. Group B (10 learners) consisted of six women and four men with six identifying themselves as White British and four as Black British. They were studying a module on leadership and teamwork and another on research methods.

We were mindful of ethical issues which might emerge in relation to the disclosure of personal experiences and expectations regarding action and change (Rifkin 2010). To accommodate these concerns both groups were informed of ethical considerations prior to agreeing to take part and were invited to formulate a learning contract. This addressed their needs around learning, disclosure and support from the facilitators. This overall approach underpinned our concerns to enable student voices to be heard, to minimise marginalisation, misrepresentation and essentialism and to avoid the risk of positioning learners as objects and ourselves as voyeurs.

A further challenge was to ensure the workshops furthered the inter-relationship between theory and practice in terms of both the curriculum and workshop delivery. We used a 'live' research methodology which reflected the interactive nature of participative theatre and to provide learners with an opportunity to reflect on their experiences during and after the workshops. For both groups we conducted reflection-in-action interviews in small groups where learners used hand-held recording devices to capture their comments based on a series of open-ended thematic questions. The questions encouraged learners to reflect on the workshop activities, the usefulness and familiarity of the activities, their participation level and how they might apply their experience of their learning from the workshops in their practice. Learners were also encouraged to keep a journal of their reflections drawing on theoretical frameworks encountered in their course modules.

After the workshops we conducted individual in-depth telephone interviews for Group A asking semi-structured questions which focussed on their work backgrounds, the application of the activities in terms of furthering their skills and understanding in relation to equality issues, implementing anti-oppressive practice,

leadership issues, supervising and managing others in the workplace. With Group B we facilitated face-to-face focus groups which provided opportunities for participants to reflect on the workshops and their subsequent practice in the workplace. We used an analytic approach to draw out thematic patterns across the data sets.

Situating participatory theatre within workplace learning

In its broadest sense workplace learning is about ‘encouraging the learner to draw on their experiences of the workplace and develop personal attributes and capabilities’ (Harris 2006, 81). Yet as Harris argues, the status of workplace knowledge and how learning takes place is highly contested. Further, Harris states that the employability field is often characterised by an emphasis on the rational and cognitive elements of learning, i.e. on how individuals acquire skills and competencies, which may be at the expense of an understanding of the complexity of workplace environments and how this impacts on the social relations of learning.

Workplace experience is a significant element in professional development programmes. Learners may be required to show evidence of what they learn in their workplace in the process of becoming critical reflective practitioners, both ‘in’ and ‘on’ action (Beatty 2001; Boud, Keogh, and Walker 1985; Brookfield 1995; Brown, Fry, and Marshall 2001; Moon 2004; Schön 1987; Weil and McGill 1989). Within other professional sectors there is a well established repertoire of teaching and learning methods designed to support learners in developing their critical reflective practice. These include journals, diaries, case studies, role plays and simulations (Bolton 2004; Brookfield 1995; Brown, Fry, and Marshall 2001). Significantly, the value of learning through creative self expression has been encouraged through the use of personal narratives, autobiography and storytelling (Egan 1995; Moon 1999). However, the focus of these learning methods differs. Bolton argues that there are many advantages to using stories as ‘story structure assists understanding and memory . . . and the study of our own stories enables us to work constructively with our own experience’ (Bolton 2004, 101).

The stories enacted using participatory theatre techniques provides a site for critical action and reflection. As a learning participation paradigm it explores how people learn from each other through social interactions. The rationale for this paradigm extends beyond the concept of an emerging community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) as it embraces notions of power and hierarchy. In this sense it is more aligned with Rainbird’s view which critiques the concept of community of practice for its ‘emphasis on the consensual at the expense of an analysis of the power relations which underpin workplace practices’ (Rainbird, Fuller, and Munro 2004, 40 quoted in Harris). Another reason for adopting this approach was to highlight the significance of biography and prior experience and their impact on how the relationships between employees and employers are played out in the workplace. (Evans and Kersh 2006). We wanted to look at the inter-play of personal history and workplace experiences with economic, social and political conditions.

A final consideration was to explore how participatory theatre can develop understandings of situated intersectionality. As the lives of practitioners and the young people they work with are mediated by the inter-relationships between race, gender, class, sexuality and disability, we were interested in how participatory theatre can bring together the inter-connections of lived experiences to further a deeper

analytical understanding of structural and political intersectionality (Jordan-Zachery 2007). We recognised tensions in using this concept, namely that it has been used to explore the complexity of multiple dimensions in social groupings (Anthias 2001; Brah and Phoenix 2004; Yuval-Davis 2006) whilst the concept of multiple identity throws light on differences within and between groups (Crenshaw 1991). Despite criticism of some theorists for producing somewhat artificial social categories (McCall 2005), intersectionality nevertheless offers a useful framework for analysing the positioning of marginalised groups and possibilities for social action (Crenshaw 1989).

A site for reflective practice and action learning

The ability to analyse their lived experiences helps learners retain a sense of ownership of their work and develop individually as professionals (Egan 1995; Moon 1999). However, as Moon argues, the ability to learn from experience is not a given. The willingness to identify and share experience may be influenced by, for instance, the learners' confidence, level of trust and the value they place on their experience.

For many learners, including youth and community practitioners, despite their level of experience, the process of moving from descriptive to critical reflective practice can be challenging, involving the capacity to think beyond immediate experience and accept difference and multiple meanings whilst retaining a sense of self. It also entails avoiding essentialism, the privileging of some experiences as more relevant or true than others and personal narratives in which learners are positioned as 'voyeurs' or 'objects' (Hooks 1994; Moon 2004). Kelly points out that this is especially true in action research on professional development programmes as the sharing of personal experiences, no matter how innovative or creative the pedagogy, may not necessarily lead to a critical understanding. Following the radical educationalist Paulo Freire, he argues that 'critical perspectives should be seen as an achievement rather than a natural outcome of participants' experiences' (Kelly 2000, 96). Freire emphasises the importance of learner centered learning, through which individuals and communities come to accept responsibility for developing critical perspectives. This entails the formation of learning communities who work together on identifying common concerns, in other words, 'problem-posing'. As communities begin to plan strategies for change they begin to take responsibility for understanding the patterns of oppression and inequality which underpin many of the negative conditions they are experiencing. This may lead to developing the capacity to think differently and critically and begin to take responsibility for their own lives and learning (Freire 1972).

This process of 'problem-posing' is at the centre of Forum theatre, a form of participatory theatre. Forum theatre was developed by Augusto Boal as part of the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal 1979). He argued that theatre like education, should be based on dialogue among people – in our case, youth and community workers – who in the process of re-enacting a story are both actors and spectators, or what Boal calls 'spect-actors'. Forum theatre then provides a space in which to share workplace problems and open up possibilities for a range of critical understandings and actions which may lead to solutions.

The pilot workshop programme incorporated some of the key elements of the Forum theatre process and was designed specifically for youth and community

practitioners to explore themes of leadership and teamwork. In the first part of the workshop programme, a series of techniques known as ‘gamesercises’ and ‘image theatre’ were used to develop a common ground in which participants worked together on developing trust and confidence, deepening their awareness of communication skills, including non-verbal and verbal body language, close observation and listening skills.

This session provided the building blocks for the second part of the workshop, the Forum theatre itself, in which participants shared stories of work experiences which they had found challenging. Then they selected a story from their group and enacted it to the larger group. Members from the larger group were invited to comment and to enact alternative interventions to the situations presented and so re-create a range of alternative strategies. The interventions were discussed by the rest of the group members and subsequent interventions invited. The stories constituted generative themes (Freire 1974) as they encapsulated themes from their lived experiences.

Deepening experiences and reflections through active participation

The process of engaging actively in a range of participatory theatre techniques gave participants a unique opportunity to re-trace work-based experiences, reconsider their responses to situations examined, and critically review their understandings of managerial functions such as leadership, teamwork and equality. The following extracts are drawn from across the data sets and provide insights into broader and recurrent themes. Whilst they do not represent an individual or collective analysis, they illustrate some of the challenges youth and community workers face.

Enhancing leadership sets

In the first part of the workshop programme, participants engaged in gamesercises to experience different aspects of group leadership and team building especially building greater confidence, trust and emotional intelligence amongst group members. Some participants commented on how little they really knew of each other despite belonging to the same learning group. This resonates with Harris’ (2006) observations about the emphasis given to the cognitive and rational aspects of learning compared to the social relations that help construct the environment for such learning. It may also suggest a constant need to actively maintain the social relations of learning.

After taking part in one of the exercises about building group awareness, Lionel was surprised that he knew very little about the range and extent of professional experiences that his peers had:

... when we all lined up in terms of length of experience I saw how much experience there was. I was quite shocked at where some people were on the line-I was surprised at how knowledgeable they are to their level of experience. (reflection-in-action interview)

Sally who was a part-time student had recently joined the full-time group of students and had noted the tension that existed between the full-timers and part-timers when

they were together in class. Her participation in the gamesercise activities gave her an invaluable insight into her colleagues and clarified why some of the tensions existed:

the activities were fantastic-they broke things down and it really has been a turning point, not just for us, the new students, but for the whole group. (in-depth telephone interview)

For Sally, being able to identify a critical shift in her social relations with other learners has been a significant growth or 'turning point'. Recognising the impact on her own learning and that of others is a recurring theme in the post-theatre interviews. As Egan (1995) and Moon (1999) have argued learning through stories and personal narratives can facilitate greater collaboration, the de-scaling tensions and individual and collective transformations.

Another participant, Roxy, a team leader, had already begun to apply the learning she had gained from the gamesercises to her workplace. She started using the learning to help her strengthen her working relationship with staff and volunteers:

I think that some of them {gamesercises} would be, like, quite useful if you've got a new team or if the team is not quite working how it should ... it's quite a fun way of trying to get people to do something ... it's a good way of doing it without actually just giving them orders and stuff, it's more like they're involved with what you're doing. (in-depth telephone interview)

Roxy's comments also indicate her questioning approach to teamwork and the realisation that members might have different needs requiring more active interventions by her as a team leader. Her experiences also prompted her to explore alternative strategies for developing and motivating her team and to rethink how her leadership style could be more distributive and consensual.

The workshops were not designed to train participants in how to deliver the gamesercises. However, the nature of youth and community work as an informal educative process means that some practitioners are familiar with semi-structured activities. For at least two of the participants, the workshops reminded them of the centrality of tools such as gamesercises to work with young people and spurred one of them, Neville to use them on a forthcoming youth exchange visit:

I'm planning with some young people to organise a youth exchange with an Estonian group. We will be looking at using it (the activities) as well. (in-depth telephone interview)

These reflections indicate ways in which participants reconfigured their learning from participant involvement to the development of their own repertoire of skills which they then intended to apply to their own practices. As Moon has argued the ability to learn from experience is not a given but, in this case, we have examples of two individuals who used gamesercises to develop their understanding of leadership and teamwork in their work.

Exploring power relations through collective actions

Participatory theatre offers the creation of a physical learning space where power dynamics including oppression can be explored. The range of workshop activities involved participants creating collective knowledge and responses. The learning gained was reflected in the participants' post-workshop comments.

The gamesercise 'Columbian hypnosis' in which pairs of participants completed a series of silent leading and following activities resulted in a detailed discussion of how it felt to be a leader or a follower. Tony, a team 'leader' reflected on his experiences:

... what one might perceive as a right way of leading may have implications to the people who are following. Maybe they are struggling to keep up, as was the case with me this morning. And maybe it might have felt different, leading from the front, thinking everything is going on fine, ... but yet there is a need to focus on the people that are following you, so that you maybe able to be together. (in-depth interview)

This extract provides an insight into Tony's awareness of how teams are made up of individual members, the importance of recognising different abilities, the impact of the demands of leaders upon individuals and the significance of group cohesion. Tony's comments indicate a sensitive understanding of building a team, recognising the impact and power of leadership styles and, as stated by Brohm (2009) the importance of such platforms for critical reflection and the practising of skills and competences to address oppression.

This form of activity provided the necessary groundwork for the second part of the workshops where work experiences were explored.

Participants developed four stories from each workshop and chose two to enact. Each story reflected the complexity of youth and community work practice and the challenges faced by youth and community workers as they struggle to negotiate the demands of management, conditions of employment, work with young people and other key stakeholders and constantly changing policy. Tariq's story 'No Credit' is included as illustrative of one of the stories, a real life situation which provoked energetic discussion, useful insights and interventions and which appeared to have had a lasting impact on the way participants thought about themselves and their work life.

Tariq's story: no credit

Tariq is a team leader on a youth project. He and his team had worked hard to set up a successful scheme for young people. His manager, Ed, had a history of driving the youth workers hard but he recognised the success of the project and wanted to publicise it in order to support an application for further funding. Ed invited a local councillor to visit the project. When Councillor Johnson came to visit, he applauded the project saying that he thought it was very worthwhile and should be supported. However, instead of introducing Tariq and the team so they could be congratulated, Ed claimed all the credit. Tariq and his team are upset and feel that their hard work should be acknowledged, especially as this is not the first time Ed has neglected to acknowledge them. They are proud of their work as a team and also of the young people's achievements on the project.

The story was creatively set up by Tariq and other participants using symbolism and metaphor in which a Roman Emperor (Ed the manager played by Tariq) lounged in a makeshift carriage driving his workers (Tariq and his team) before him, using a whip. The workers including Tariq complained amongst themselves but felt incapable of challenging him. The next phase of the story where the manager was presenting the project idea to the local councillor became more 'realistic', as Tariq ineffectually attempted to speak out.

Boal's (1992) idea of 'aesthetic spaces' was brought alive in how the story was enacted, particularly the Emperor image, which evoked both laughter and horror from the other participants and generated a lively response including agreement that there was a problem which most participants could identify. The 'problem-posing' element focussed on how an oppressive style of leadership could be challenged. Participants were able to re-enact the story through their interventions. The first intervention was by a young white woman participant who enthusiastically rushed onto the scene as Tariq unsuccessfully attempted to confront Ed. This intervention led to a heated discussion amongst the other participants about the nature of the underlying problem. Jordan-Zachery's (2007) notion of intersectionality arose with a heated discussion as to whether this was a case of an individual careerist manager or about racial discrimination. All of a sudden, Tariq's identity as an Asian and that of his manager as a 'white' person were more explicitly acknowledged as was the possibility their might be racist undertones in his manager's actions. Other interventions included speaking directly to Councillor Johnson and spending time on developing a strong team who could work together to challenge Ed's oppressive practice and engage him in a dialogue about the issue of joint recognition of their work.

Tariq commented on the value of working with other participants in exploring solutions which acknowledged a more measured use of power:

Everyone suggested the ways and means, without upsetting my manager, of getting what I wanted. (in-depth telephone interview)

Tariq's own understanding of dealing with this challenging situation was represented through his increased sensitivity to others' feelings. He felt he had become more receptive to other forms of responses which did not reproduce oppressive practices, undermine or marginalise others. The exploration of his story empowered him to become a more conscientised actor in his workplace rather than just being a 'voyeur' or an 'object' (Hooks 1994; Moon 2004).

Steve felt that the Forum theatre experience made him more aware of changes in other people as well as himself:

It made you think there isn't just one way of dealing with it and I think he (Tariq) thought afterwards, there are lots of other options ... (in-depth telephone interview)

Steve's reflections about how he and others found a range of options provides an insight into how a multiplicity of approaches can lead to transformative learning and collective action. In this sense, thinking about different strategies for change enabled

Steve to take a greater responsibility for his own learning and develop a more critical view of the world around him (Freire, 1972).

Similarly, John found himself identifying with elements of Tariq's situation and realised that the experience of re-enacting possible actions could help him deal differently with workplace situations:

One of my co-workers has a tendency to take their (other workers) opinions and-if you said something-to get in there first and say it. So I pulled him up on it where maybe before I've just taken it on the chin. Yeah, definitely I saw different approaches and was able to do that myself. (in-depth telephone interview)

Tariq's story illustrates that by sharing a workplace problem through the process of 'problem-posing' other participants were able to rethink their responses to similar workplace situations. In John's case he was better able to understand oppressive behaviours, think differently and take responsibility for his individual learning-an 'achievement' that was made possible though such critical reflection without unduly expecting it to be so (Kelly 2000).

Discussion

We have identified three areas which explore how participatory theatre can further an understanding about the inter-relationship of the social dynamics of the workplace and academic settings and in addressing issues of power and discrimination.

Complex spaces

The National Occupational Standards for youth work require training providers to offer a curriculum which enables practitioners to operate effectively in ever challenging working environments. Specifically, as British government agendas move towards more integrated and joined-up training and working practices staff across professional specialisms in working with young people are reviewing their practice. Our findings conclude that participatory theatre can provide a paradigm shift in the depth of learning at pre-service and in-service level across a wider set of professionals working with young people. From the perspective of encouraging greater equality and active participation, a rethinking of a wider range of teaching methodologies should be considered as an opportunity to enhance learning. When training other professionals, a fundamental consideration would have to be whether existing learning and teaching strategies are designed to reinforce or re-distribute professional power in routine interactions with users and other peers.

Youth and community workers, through their value base, experiential pedagogical frameworks and interactions with young people, all of which are underpinned by the principles of voluntarism and informal education, are better prepared to engage with creative forms of learning. Different professional sectors, on the other hand, may provide resistance to unfamiliar teaching methods. Providing structured opportunities to discuss how participatory theatre differs from role-play and acting and to explore moving outside traditional learning comfort zones is a pre-requisite to planning the delivery of this form of learning.

Critical praxis

One of the motivations behind undertaking this research was to test out whether the boundary crossing between the sites of work and formal education could be bridged so that critical praxis can be enhanced. The evidence gathered from workshops, interviews and focus groups indicates that learners were willing to identify, value and share work experiences with their peers. Individual participants had opportunities in small groups to recount their stories. However, more investigation is needed to find out how decisions were reached in the final selection and re-enactment of a story. The workshops facilitated spaces to reflect on practice and oppression in the workplace and to develop new kinds of knowledge. They provided a compressed but comprehensive learning environment. This dynamic process helped to create a more direct connection between this learning experience and work situations. Through an exploration of power dynamics relating to their unqualified status and the inter-connections between gender, ethnicity, sexuality and disability, learners were able to explore similarities and differences in the challenges they faced.

Multiagency dialogue

Our evidence indicates that participatory theatre has the potential for enabling youth and community professionals to become more skilled at addressing anti-oppressive practices and enhancing the quality and range of services delivered to young people and their communities. The prominence of multi-agency working and the reliance on effective inter-professional relationships to deliver services to young people is also a timely reminder that participatory methodologies have wider benefits across subject disciplines and professions. A key challenge is that other professions such as youth offending services may have different reference points in terms of values, policies and ethics about working with young people. The enabling and empowering approach of participatory theatre can open up creative spaces for inter-professional dialogue. More critically, such dialogues can help generate ‘communities of practice’ which serve the interests of young people rather than preserve the status of individual professions.

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