

Layering Theatre's Potential for Change: Drama, Education, and Community in Aboriginal Health Research

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Abstract

For several years, a group of academic researchers, health practitioners, and theatre artists have been working with the File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council Health Services in Saskatchewan, Canada to develop and implement applied theatre approaches aimed at engaging Aboriginal youth in an exploration of health issues that affect their lives. This article explores the development of this partnership with a view to setting forth what the group has learned about creating relevant theatre arts skills and using these skills to address health issues of concern to Aboriginal youth.

Introduction

Since 2005, a group of academic researchers, health practitioners, and theatre artists have been working with the File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council Health Services in Saskatchewan, Canada in a community-based research project. This project has as its primary goal engaging Aboriginal youth through theatre and exploring health issues that affect their lives and the lives of their communities. We use a variety of applied theatre approaches adapted from David Diamond's *Theatre for Living* and Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Using applied theatre and other arts-based approaches, we co-create spaces in which youth can critically examine the choices they make that affect their health, as well as its potential outcomes. In this article, we introduce ourselves and present some of the ideas and beliefs we bring to this project, describe our theatre workshops with the youth, discuss what they've taught us, and share some of our future plans for the project.

The members of this research team are teachers, researchers, artists, community workers, and students. Our team includes university-based researchers, community-based partners, and both community-based and university-based research assistants. We are supported by a national advisory team as well as Elders and advisors from the community. We work with the youth as a team and also invite other artists to work with the youth. Our theatre workshops involve Aboriginal youth in grades 7 to 11 along with school personnel.

The partnership involves several institutions and organizations based in Saskatchewan, Canada and beyond including the File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council (FHQTC) Health Services which includes the All Nations' Healing Hospital, First Nations University of Canada, Concordia University, the Indigenous Peoples' Health Research Centre, and the University of Regina. We are in year seven of the project and in year three of our four-year Canadian Institutes of Health Research Operating Grant. Several members of the team were born, raised, or live in the FHQTC area, and/or have relatives and friends in these communities.

FHQTC provides services to eleven First Nations communities across southern Saskatchewan. The area is large (insert number of sq. km), with some reserve communities within a few hours of each other, and others with upwards of 6 to 8 driving hours distance between them.

The success of the project is due in large part to the innovative leadership of FHQTC in health services and health policy. In 2004, the FHQ Tribal Council and the neighbouring Touchwood Tribal Council opened the All Nations Healing Hospital which is located on reserve land dedicated to the 34 First Nations that signed Treaty Four. It is one of the only health care facilities in Canada owned and operated by First Nations governments. The All Nations' Healing Hospital provides services to First Nations people and also the entire Fort Qu'Appelle area. Uniquely designed to provide acute care, community health programmes, and clinical counselling, the All Nations' Healing Hospital takes a holistic and integrated approach to health care design and delivery. The Tribal Council's health services program, and in particular the Health Educator together with our community-based research assistant, organizes the workshops and nurtures ongoing relationships with First Nations leaders, youth, community members, and school personnel.

Our work is informed by theories of colonization-decolonization (Graveline; Smith), Indigenous research (Bishop; Kovach), and embodied knowing (Boal "Theatre of the Oppressed"; Fay; Meyer). We strive to deconstruct colonial relationships through our institutional, community, and school-based collaboration. We aim to create more equitable and respectful relationships throughout the research process including among the research team, between the youth and the researchers/facilitators, and among the youth themselves. Ongoing dialogue with the communities we are working with, and ongoing reflection within the research team, keeps us mindful of when we might be perpetuating colonizing processes, ideologies, and behaviours.

The Workshops

In our workshops, we utilize a holistic view of research and education, blending the two with the aid of applied theatre practices, thus making the workshops more appealing to the youth as well as allowing for a rich, layered, generation of knowledge from the researchers and the youth. Our view of health also is a holistic one that looks at health issues within the context of colonization. Nêhiyaw scholar, Willie Ermine, reminds us to consider health as "the optimum well-being of our people. Not the ailments.... [but rather] the good ideas ... the things that give us success" (National Collaborating Centre 4).

Over the years our workshops with the youth have ranged from two to five days in length. More recently, the three day workshops have been shown to work well because it gives enough time to build trust and community, while at the same time, allows the youth to see their accomplishments as a group working together. Our early workshops took place in schools on reserves and focussed on health issues that Aboriginal youth face and the decision-making processes that surround them. Youth identified and prioritized health issues that had a negative effect on their lives. Issues identified were somewhat

predictable (drugs, alcohol, smoking) and we soon realized that the youth were feeding us the responses they felt we as adults were expecting to hear. Attendance at these workshops was problematic as youth were absent from school for varying reasons. In spite of these challenges, our early learnings with the youth were powerful. The youth revealed that peer pressure was why many negative issues were so prevalent, and also that lack of volition and personal agency were significant factors.

In 2008, we revised our approach to utilize a more holistic understanding of health with a positive focus in decision-making. The workshop now is a judgment-free space: “We are not going in with value judgements – ‘this is bad’, ‘this is good.’ We are trying to help [the youth] look at what decisions they are making and how they are coming to make those decisions, so that they can reflect and make a healthier choice” (“Workshop” 4). The teachings of Willie Ermine mentioned above have influenced our workshop practice by encouraging us to work towards well-being, and we see this success emerging through the workshops and through the interviews and interactions with the youth. The youth are now more deeply engaged in the workshop processes and are offering richer insights into the knowledge we know is located in their experiences, their relationships, and their communities. These findings are supported by comments from the youth’s teachers and community elders, who often wonder “What have you done with the kids? I can’t remember seeing them acting this well”, and who provide positive feedback concerning the youth’s post-workshop behavior. Such feedback has been instrumental for the continuing success of our research approach.

Each day, our workshops begin in a circle with a prayer by a local Elder in his or her language and in English. Following a brief greeting by the leaders and an equally brief introduction to the day, we move into a ritual of sharing through a talking circle (see fig. 1). Linds, et al. (“Talking Stones”) writes,

In many Indigenous communities, the talking circle is an important ritual which is used to create a space for self-determined sharing. People sit in a circle while an object (in our case a stone) is passed from one to the other in a clockwise manner. Each person holds the rock before deciding whether or not they will speak.... This sharing, even if it is only one word, develops an atmosphere of ritual and community.

Much of the first day of our three-day workshops concentrates on exploring and affirming the youths’ individual capacities and strengths in the context of theatre and other games (see fig. 2). By the second day of the workshop, the playful yet purposeful use of the games allows us to move into Image Theatre work. We introduce the youth to shaping with their bodies static images of actions, conflicts or symbolic meanings (see fig. 3). On the third day, through small group discussion, we guide the work to narrative images and storytelling of health concerns including community dynamics and perceptions of risk (see fig. 4). In our workshops, we as leaders set a direction for general activity; however, the youth create the specific path for us all to explore. The work is co-

determined in the relationships developed through the daily rituals, talking circles, and games.

Theatre Games as a Generative Process

Although theatre games can sometimes be used simply as ice-breakers that lead to the work of story telling, exploration, and performance, we have learned over the years that the games have had a different function for the participating youth.

Using Boal's ("Games") Arsenal of the Oppressed, which are games and exercises that re-sensitize the actors to their bodies and to each other, the activities encouraged youth to pay attention to their senses which they are not normally conscious of. For example, games were structured to develop from simple actions to more complex forms of inter- and intra-personal interactions. Debriefing of the games also helped youth express their ideas and feelings, and developed group cohesion and trust. Youth responded positively to the emotional content and the physicality of the body work inherent in this type of applied theatrical process.

One critical aspect of the games relates to the communal context of the work demanded from the youth. Often the workshops brought together youth from different reserve schools or from different classes in the same school. The games enabled the creation of a new community working together. One such game, for instance, "Wizards, Giants, and Elves" involves a whole-body variation of Rock, Paper, Scissors where there are two sides and each side tries to capture members of the other side if the character they portray has more power than the other sides'. Each team must decide together which character they will be for each round of the game. (In this variation, Wizards have power over Giants, Giants have power over Elves, and Elves have power over Wizards.)

We initially wanted youth to develop their abilities to tell and perform the stories from their lives. However, over the past five years, the youth have made it clear that they were more interested in 'playing' than in 'making a play' (in fact, one youth said this directly during a workshop). This was a switch for us and we have had to adapt to this dynamic. Our work differs from performance-making in that our focus is on the processes rather than on creating a final product such as a play or a production for public performance. We mark many small moments of discovery as *products* through observing each other's processes; through reflection, photography, and mural building; as well as through sharing circles. Meanings for all participants – researchers, youth, elders, teachers, community members - emerge as the work moves from early-stage laughter-inducing physical games to later stage embodied engagements with the challenging living realities and the hopeful imagined worlds of the youth.

An important value of these games is the establishment of a relationship between adult facilitators and youth participants through the games. Not only do all the adults engage in the playfulness of the activities, but the games also set the tone for the remainder of the time working with the youth, including subsequent workshops. These games were not separate from the methodology of our program. "They built a sense of common purpose

while unlocking issues the group was investigating” (Goulet et al. 97). Some of these issues include leadership, collaboration, community strengths, and health-related issues such as peer pressure and violence.

Because these games focus on re-sensitizing ourselves to our bodies, they also become a way to use the body to express stories. We use verbal and non-verbal language like Image and Story Circles. As we have discussed elsewhere, “[the youth’s] stories describe how Indigenous youth feel constrained by forces of social control within, and external to, their communities, and perceive themselves to lack agency to effect change.... Theatre can support decolonization by creating a safe, creative space in which Indigenous youth can free their minds and bodies” (Goulet et al. 90). Thus a key ingredient has been providing the creative space to identify what issues are important in their lives, with an emphasis on health-related decision making.

The issues that have been raised include peer pressure, addictions, suicide, gangs, and lack of self-esteem. Listening to their stories, we discovered that peer pressure was not the same as bullying. Their stories showed that violence was not by others, but often internalized as the youth pressured themselves to engage in unhealthy or risky behaviours because the need to belong to the group exceeded their need for their own well-being.

The theatre process has enabled us to see how colonization has affected generations of Aboriginal people, economically, politically, emotionally, and spiritually. Colonization has caused continuing stress affecting generations of Aboriginal people, in what Duran and Duran (1995) call a ‘soul wound; perpetuating the kind of symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) such as powerlessness (reference missing).¹

We have found that group bonds are necessary to help protect the youth from this colonization process. The theatre workshop becomes a safe place to deal with peer pressure. “The social nature of drama appeals to youth who like to do things with their friends and who are motivated by their peers. But at the same time, the performative nature of interactive drama requires risk taking, which requires participants to act confidently. One participant explained, “Drama, it’s physical. People are watching you. It’s about confidence, self-esteem....” (Goulet et al. 104).

Youth were also asked to give feedback on the workshops, either through in-depth individual interviews, or through focus group interviews, involving several (3-6) youth and a community/research facilitator. These interviews gave the youth the chance to debrief and reflect upon what they had learned, as well as informing us about the process. Many comments referred to taking off the “mask” these youth felt they needed in their daily lives. Often their comments also helped shape the creative and educational process of future workshops. For example, as we have written previously, “We also responded to participants’ voices in the initial data collection and focused subsequent workshops more on the theatre games and less on a forum theatre performance” (Linds et al., “Indigenous Identity” 43).

Conclusion: Rehearsal as Reality in Aboriginal Health Research

Augusto Boal conceived of Forum Theatre performances as a place to ‘rehearse for reality’ (reference). Though we have not yet taken a story to a public Forum Theatre performance, we have found the workshop space provides another possibility for participants to try out new behaviours in a similar way.

We found that participants in these theatre workshops enjoyed the opportunity to have fun while learning and reflecting upon their condition as members of a community of practice (reference), and that this contributed positively towards the healing process and the youth’s overall health. Often they experienced powerful emotions as well as insights on how to respond differently, and learned to de-normalize current unhealthy behaviours and develop the confidence to try out, or even rehearse new, more positive, behaviours. For instance, the physical release of the movement combined with quick pace of interaction often caused laughter, so decision making and actions were perceived as fun and approached by the youth in a more positive manner..

The theatre games also gave the youth practice in health-related decision making and the chance to become more aware of what happens when they act in certain ways and not others. As one participant pointed out, “I didn’t learn about decision-making, like should I make a good decision or bad decision. I just learned how it felt [to make a decision]” (interview with Destiny, March 18, 2010).

One issue for us has been continuity both in, and between, workshops. Some of the participants reported that when they returned to the school or community after the workshop, they had trouble dealing with their new awareness and the changes that they had made in their attitudes that occurred during the workshop. They often claimed that they had acted in the workshop a certain way because the game put them into a particular role. Thus they were able to keep themselves relatively safe when back in the classroom.

On the other hand, some participants had other reactions. During a debriefing after an activity, one participant shared with the others (who showed agreement by nodding their heads), “What can we do? Everybody uses alcohol and drugs. That is the way it is on the reserve”. Their stories often showed they lacked confidence that they could change these issues. The ‘characters’ in the plays would often be participating in, for example, alcohol and drug use without too much thought of making choices because they felt it was ‘normal’ – what ‘everyone’ did for fun. In the eyes of these youth, there just wasn’t any hope of becoming agents of change; following the crowd appeared to be a better choice than resisting and perhaps living in isolation.

Throughout the workshops, it has become evident that many youth felt embedded in a system affected by colonialism. One opportunity we have had is to provide safe spaces to address the intergenerational damage from historical and ongoing colonization.² The workshops foster a sense of agency by encouraging youth to explore options and to examine choices.

Based on feedback and perceptions gained during the workshop, we are continually adjusting our methods, our techniques and our processes. For example, we are developing different debriefing techniques that are more culturally appropriate and relevant to youth's interests. In one workshop, one of us was using standard debriefing questions after an activity such as, "What happened? What is this about? What did you learn?" When one person responded, the non-Aboriginal facilitator asked follow-up questions to the same person but there was often no response, or very limited one word answers. In one case, a young man became aggressive at this point. One of the other facilitators mentioned this experience we were having to her husband, who was from one of the reserves we worked with. He responded, "Well, yeah. White guys are always asking questions to make us feel stupid". Thus, in the following workshops we adjusted the process of feedback retrieval accordingly, in a way that is less reminiscent of the residential school experience (i.e., direct questions aimed at participants), and instead focused on collaborative storytelling, using focus groups, talking circles, reflective drawing exercises, and visual elicitation methods.³

During the workshops we ordinarily take hundreds of photographs, and we are starting to find ways to work with these photos by presenting them during the workshops as slide shows, or asking participants to caption particular photos, titling the slide show, or adding music. Another element we are incorporating is the presence of participant cell phones, music devices, and video recording capabilities. In future, debriefing may also include other ways to include the layering potential gained in using video or audio recordings, independently or merged with the still image, and supported with transcripts or annotations from other sources.

As we continue to work on developing our workshops with Aboriginal youth, we are also expanding our activities to share findings, compare strategies, and learn from one another by fostering relationships among partners who work with Aboriginal youth in the areas of arts, health, and social development. With communities and universities working together, theatre workshops such as these offer the possibility for Aboriginal youth to explore and critically examine a wide range of health and other issues in their daily lives.

Acknowledgements: The authors thank M. E. Powell for help on an earlier version of this paper.

Endnotes

¹ For more elaboration on this as part of our work, see Goulet et al, "A Decolonizing Space".

² See also see Chansonneuve, Deborah. *Reclaiming Connections: Understanding Residential School Trauma Among Aboriginal People. A Report Prepared for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation*. Ottawa, ON: Aboriginal Healing Foundation. 2005. Print. and Wesley-Esquimaux, Cynthia C. and Magdalena Smolewski. *Historic Trauma and Aboriginal Healing. A Report Prepared for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation*. Ottawa, ON: Aboriginal Healing Foundation. 2004. Print.

³ See also Smylie, Janet and Marcia Anderson. "Understanding the Health of Indigenous Peoples in Canada: Key Methodological and Conceptual Challenges." *Journal of the Canadian Medical Association* 175.6 (2006): 602-605. Print.

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