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Recommended Citation

Noble, Steven (2005). "Adults and Youth Performing the Dangers of Crystal Meth: Working Within Differences for Unity in Community," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2005/papers/32>

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Adults and Youth Performing the Dangers of Crystal Meth: Working Within Differences for Unity in Community

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Abstract: *This paper explores the process of performative inquiry alongside Pratt's focus upon content within his teaching conceptions. Also, the inclusion of working across differences of youth and mental disorder as a means to bring unity to the broader community is examined.*

Introduction

The focus for this rurally based study is to conceptualize teaching as found within performative inquiry and performed adult education while embracing group differences (knowledge, social location, ethnicity, gender, age, mental ability). This paper draws upon the work of Pratt's teaching perspectives. Through performance, the work endeavors to create a synergistic and more unified community sense. The project evolves in response to a pressing local need: addressing the influx of crystal meth, other drug taking, and youth at-risk activities within local middle and high schools. This study contributes by reminding that adult education is located within more immediate, existential, embodied, and performed realities. Also, through this research a concept of performativity is used as a teaching methodology within other adult education settings.

The Context

Following an initial round of creating popular theatre (*Shaken: Not Disturbed...with a twist!*) within the local context of Duncan, British Columbia the initial cast determines the next community need they want to performatively address. The group remains comprised of 12 adults living with mental disorders (most are multiply diagnosed). Their raising the community's awareness about mental disorder is a success. But what community performative inquiry/teaching can they do next?

The answer comes from within the group itself. A few of the members describe how their entry into the mental health system has come as a result of their drug-taking in high school and in their young adulthood. What if we examine what is going on among youth today. In order to examine youth realities we mark out the landscape of our project. The Cowichan Valley on southern Vancouver Island in BC has 4 high schools and 8 middle schools, all within rural regions. The town of 3,900 is sandwiched between two larger centers: the provincial capital, Victoria (pop. 300,000) to the south and Nanaimo (pop. 75,000) to the north. The surrounding location is struggling economically because of declining fortunes in lumber, mining, fishing, and farming, with most work coming from low-wage retail, and hospitality/tourism jobs. Poverty is a widespread reality. There is a much higher than provincial average reliance upon social assistance. Domestic strife (spousal abuse, separation, divorce, alcohol abuse) is above the provincial average (Stats Canada, 2003). As it turns out the conditions for widespread drug use, in particular the cheap hit and high of crystal meth, has easy access here.

Marginalization, based upon disability and poverty, is a constant that the group works with and through in order to create the recent production. Most are unemployed, many rely upon disability payments of about \$700 a month to live. Youth fare better in

the cast, but only slightly. A scarce few are doing well because of a more together home life. As the adults in the group work, there are medication changes, shifts in diagnoses, the intensity of feeling life with a mental disorder, and the constant experience of physical illness and fatigue. “*This is important work,*” the group states often. “*We want to warn the town that crystal meth is here....it is taking away the life and lives of people.... We have to keep going.*” Money is found, donations are sought, and the work continues.

Because the cast is exploring youth behaviour, the decision is made by the group to invite several youth to be part of the ensemble. The resultant show, *Crystal Diagnosis*, has a cast of 13 with participants (6 youth, 5 living with mental disorder and a counselor and the facilitator) and ranging from 15 years to 63 years. The performative inquiry, play development, and rehearsals took place in the local community center, with community shows taking place in the community centre’s theatre mainstage. From the initial offering of shows, the play tours across Vancouver Island performing in front of various youth, school, addiction, church, and community groups.

Research Design

As part of the collective research efforts, cast members ventured out into the community to interview two key groups of local individuals: youth who used drugs, including crystal meth and adults who had used drugs as youth and their stories of entry into the mental health system. Two separate lists of questions were designed and used, loosely, by each interviewer. Depending on comfort level and direction stories took among interviewees, the interview schedule was variously depended upon for guidance. Also, various films were viewed to understand “popular” conceptualizations of drugs and drug taking. Movies included: *Thirteen*, *Trainspotting*, *Requiem For A Dream*, *Higher Learning*, and *Reduce Speed*. The advent of crystal meth entering the local public school system had also prompted adults from the community to come together in search of understanding the issues and problems related to drug addiction, while learning how to address the mental health concerns.

As each interview was listened to collectively, various points and themes slowly emerged and were initially discussed. There was no concern as to how to stage anything early on. That came much later back in the rehearsal hall. As part of this initial information gathering, there was also the sharing of stories by some adult cast members of their entry into the mental health system through drug taking.

Key among the efforts of the group was making sense of how to best capture what was uncovered that resonated with the existential realities of high school and middle school youth, while still relaying the much needed information about crystal meth. Above all, we did not want this to be a “don’t do drugs” kind of play. Instead, we wanted to say we know you are thinking about drugs or are currently doing drugs, but that action has consequences....here is some information. The decision remains yours. With these considerations in mind, the group went back to the rehearsal hall to develop what would eventually become “a warning play.”

The performative inquiry lasted 4 months of weekly meetings (each lasting three hours). The structuring of popular theatre processes ameliorates the ambiguity and chaos that often mark arts-based research. As group members became more comfortable with: a) each other; b) the process of embodied learning; c) telling stories; 4) improvisationally

developing a teaching/learning intervention using performance, and; 5) performatively teaching in front of groups (the larger community and in some instances youth peers)...deeper explorations of existential realities were achieved. Data constructions include: my reflective notes, recordings of cast dialogues, press coverage, art created, the play itself, and audience reactions/understanding.

The process comes full circle when the cast engages in dialogue with various audiences for their feedback, the sharing of stories and experiences, and deeper exploration in the topic of crystal meth use.

Adult/Youth in Teaching ↔ *Learning as Performative Inquiry*

Working across difference within a rural group moves the facilitator outside of his or her taken for granted world of teaching, learning, and education. The development of theatre, through performative inquiry allows for the bridging of differences through the use of bodyminds interacting. Knowledge gained is neither wholly objective nor subjective is an action that evolves through (inter)action.

I reach for Pratt's (1998) *Five Perspectives on Teaching in Adult and Higher Learning* as a prod as to what I should be mindful. Immediately I gravitated toward the *Social Reform* perspective, but immediately realize I am not directly foisting ideals upon the group and so I move on. I do not see that as my role. Centrally for the projects I find myself working within, and the people I enjoy working with, there are often histories of abuse, violence, oppression, identity erasure, and silence. Then I see it.... The *Nurturing* perspective. For both youth and mentally diverse adults, living with powerlessness is common as the teens speak about adult authority figures telling them how to be, while clients of the mental health system share their own selves being constantly manipulated by medical and caregiving authorities. Initially there is some nervousness from all the participants, largely because of being strangers but also the youth are uncertain about how to work with some of the adults. In a short time, with the assistance of a variety of theatre games and exercises boundaries become broken down, familiarity with one another allows for creative, performative inquiry to begin. Central to the work is the relationships and the learning that occurs through and among bodies interacting – something Freire (1994; 1996) describes as needing to be filled with love and hope. To be a friend and facilitator. But rather than guide the group through content as Pratt suggests, I guide the cast through process. The language we use is the language from where the various members come from – language of mental disorder alongside the dialect of youth.

Our work takes place outside of institutional structures so power is one more of egalitarianism rather than hierarchy. Any person's idea is as good as any other's, including my own. Shared existence that is valued by all is quite therapeutic for some who are used to being told what they can and cannot do. Here, in this space, they do the telling as well as share in the listening. Counselling and teaching become rolled into one as facilitator. The issue is how to work with the power dynamics within the group – and avoiding the potential to further exploit and manipulate based on relationships (Giroux 1992; 1997). All of this is true as described by Pratt, but what I found also is that nurturing can reform worlds and unify community. The nurturing perspective influences how people think and interact with others and serves as a model for others as to how to be. One of Pratt's key pieces to his conceptualization is content indicating that his is a very goal-oriented approach.

Performative inquiry, a relatively new *process* to arts-based research and teaching, has come about through the work of Fels (1995; 1998), Snowber, and others. This approach involves focusing on a theme and using the collective memories and bodyminds of participants to explore existential issues and problems shared by all. Relating. Relationships. The content comes from the learners and evolves and unfolds over time. The group of learners initially play for long periods to break down inhibitions while increasing comfort with being physically, emotionally, and thoughtfully expressive. Much of the work begins very randomly. Beginning with either sharing stories or thinking on one's feet the key is to start expressing ideas through bodies. Playing with images such as through tableaux of various types the group moves from individual static images to joining depictions, to responding through sculptures until a dialogic exploration of a topic emerges through the chaos and randomness. Periodically someone yells out *WAIT!* Everything freezes. Everyone looks. Ponders. Moves to different angles. Ponders some more. *WAIT!*

A brief instant of clarity, of insight emerges...only to disappear in the quickly shifting space-moments of our interactivity. What was that? Let's dig further. So more images sparked from the AHA moment allows the group to go farther beneath surface relationships and appearances. Humanity is made up of complex interrelationships that require a constant unraveling to make clearer sense. The teasing apart are acts of knowledge, of insights in action. As new connections arise, the group begins to slowly see what needs to be included as part of the performance for the community.

"Jimmi," our musician writes his own lyrics that are accompanied by his trademark discordant music. His "research" takes the form of putting aspects of his story of drug taking into song. Several original musical pieces are created that unfold his emergent and ongoing story of drugs and mental health. Four songs are used to chronicle his story: *Funny Head; Teenaged Nightmare; Realistic; The Awakening*. The cast further makes sense of themes through a weekend painting session involving large canvases. These large (6' X 4') paintings are used as the backdrop for the audience space. Through the very physical and silent act of painting such large canvases, bodies begin to enact remembrances of emotions, memories, and past experiences so that individually characters started to take shape in the minds of cast members.

Controversies

The controversies when working in the borders between marginalized and more mainstreamed lives are several. The key ones are presented here in summary form.

1. Working with youth who have never engaged in drug-taking but are shown how to act as though they have experienced at it.
2. The school responses of, "Great show, but you've got to clean up the language." Sanitizing middle school youth's culture is in tension with getting the message out through terms/experiences to which both parents and teenagers can relate.
3. Dealing with the fear among a few youth as to working with specific adults with mental disorders.
4. Informing adults about an issue that they see as largely an urban reality rather than a rural one.

Results

After several months the following emerged as our (this version is highly abridged) scenography and play, or 60 minute “lesson plan” for educating community:

SCENE	SCENE DESCRIPTION
<i>PROLOGUE</i>	As the audience arrives there is a party in full swing on the stage and with the spectators – Jimmi sings <i>Funny Head</i>
<i>JOKER INTRODUCTIONS</i>	Narrator introduces the nature of the play, that it will be interactive, the source of the material, and the structure
<i>TEENAGE NIGHTMARE</i>	Jimmi sings <i>Teenaged Nightmare</i> to set the tone; cast slides off stage, revealing floor covered in glowing body outlines
<i>FAMILIES: WELL AND NOT SO WELL</i>	Narrator discusses the breakdown in families through the ritual of family portraits: tableaux of the “functional” family, and the dysfunctional version
<i>PEER PRESSURE</i>	Movement piece that depicts the strata of school cliques at lunchtime
<i>JULIE EXPERIMENTING</i>	The beginning of one year of a fictional character’s life from before crystal meth to 12 months later. This is a stop-action narrative where the joker discusses directly with the audience aspects of the action being played out.
<i>LOSS OF FRIENDS</i>	Second movement piece that depicts the strata of school cliques- that people can move among the levels – and can be kicked out of the system completely as with Julie.
<i>DEATH OF NORMALCY</i>	Ritual that involves the audience that describes whenever someone is born into difference, s/he experiences death of normalcy
<i>JULIE’S FLIP OUT</i>	A vignette of Julie’s flipping out on crystal meth
<i>JULIE’S TWEAK</i>	Which leads to Julie’s violent tweaking
<i>JULIE’S WITHDRAWAL</i>	And her first entry into the mental health system for treatment relating to chemically induced schizophrenia and addiction
<i>DETOX/OLD HABITS</i>	At a group session meets up with her old drug friends and is triggered back into a party for “old time’s sake”
<i>THE PARTY/OVERDOSE</i>	Her final kick at her habit leads to an overdose (we leave it open as to whether intentional or accidental)
<i>FUNERAL FOR A FRIEND</i>	The audience becomes spectators at Julie’s funeral, with full ritual ending with her mother’s rant....
<i>DEBRIEF</i>	After the play the audience and cast come back together to dialogue about the play, the process, and the topic, steps.

Discussion and Implications for Adult Education

Analysis is carried out by the cast as it plays with and teases out emergent themes relating to normalcy/difference, peer/parental power, self esteem and awareness, seeking community unity, understanding, and alliance, and dealing with a local social problem. The process of performatively inquiring is the result as can be seen by the performance,

which is an ongoing community dialogue through feeding back to the cast, for the cast to incorporate new awareness in future presentations of *Crystal Diagnosis*.

The power of members of the margins informing mainstream folks about a social issue cannot be over-stated. The act of having parents, regardless of social location, bringing their teenagers to the play and then discussing with neighbors and friends around the stage about something common to all present is a small, but powerful piece to uniting community. Often sensitive and/or marginal issues become ignored with thinking of “*that happens to folks like those people.*” Those who have seen our shows, based upon social issues, are now looking forward to the next piece, the next topic, and the next opportunity to engage in community dialogue.

Some implications for adult education include extending the conceptualization of teaching envisioned by Pratt into learning that focuses first upon process and relationships rather than content. The anti-oppressive dynamics of bridging across differences in order to build dialogue and community unity as sparked from sources of marginality strengthens conviviality (Illich, 1975) within adult education that takes place within rural community (and possibility urban). This groundedness brings adult education’s aims back to its roots of working non-formally and informally and outside the direction of institutions. Disability is raised as a legitimate starting point for a community education project. Finally, this research works from within the intentional centrality of using body to communicate and educate through/within all its corporeality.

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