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## Citation

Mayo, Sue. 2020. The gratitude enquiry: investigating reciprocity in three community projects. In: Tim Prenti and Nicola Abrahams, eds. *The Applied Theatre Reader (2nd Edition)*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 175-180. ISBN 9780367376291 [Book Section]

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## The Gratitude Enquiry: Investigating reciprocity in three community projects

In 2016 I led three pilot projects, in three London locations, using dance, visual practice, baking and storytelling, to investigate the theme of gratitude with community participants. Here I will describe the thinking that led me to the theme and practice, and consider moments from each of the projects, with a particular focus on those that reflect the centrality of relationality within participatory arts.

In all of my community performance practice, over thirty years, I had become fascinated by the small and large transactions between participants; the ways in which people made connections, by helping one another, challenging one another, by swapping skills and stories. I could see that there were two main provocations to engagement going on in the project space. One provocation is offered by the artists, engaging the participants in particular artistic activity, and guiding and supporting them towards the creation of art objects or performances. The other provocation comes from the desire for interaction between participants, both within the art making and in the informal, undirected times. Using the metaphor of traditional weaving, where the *warp* refers to the threads that are strung vertically on a loom, and the *weft* are the threads that are woven in and out of the warp, horizontally, I understood the project and the artist's offer as providing the *warp*, and the lateral communication and activity to be the *weft*. Both are needed to create the fabric.

My interest in the detail of what was going on in the room during participatory and collaborative arts practice was fuelled by two important and growing understandings. Firstly, that the group of participants in any project is profoundly involved in issues of participation and inclusion. This is not solely the responsibility of the facilitator, even where they are actively committed to both. The participants themselves can and will contribute to one another's involvement through their enactments of connectivity, and through their curiosity about one another. This active connection-forming will be both enabled and challenged by all that participants bring into a project with them; experience, identity, fears, hopes and preferences.

Secondly, I could see that different art forms and different facilitation styles encouraged different ways of being together. A previous research project (in 2012) in which I reflected on a series of projects using photography, dance, song, instrumental music and puppetry<sup>i</sup> made clear that each art form encouraged different spatial relationships, opportunities for conversation, skill levels and relationship building. For example, the photography project foregrounded technical skills and looking, as an individual, to create images. The artists running this project added drama games and group work to their sessions to build in more opportunities for relationships to form in what was a dominantly individually based activity. The puppet making brought people into small groups, where the act of making, and getting messy together, coincidentally created opportunities for informal and far-ranging conversations. Learning to manipulate the giant puppet together brought new modes of being together, highly focussed and without any talking, but still connected, and built on the informal (the weft) as well as on the structured skills-based work, (the warp). The opportunity to analyse these art forms in practice led me to want to explore further how the warp and weft interact in creative projects, and how the opportunities within these activities can be harnessed to make space for relationship-building for all the people in the space, artists and participants.

Searching for ways to read these interactions, I looked into research by social psychologists into gratitude, a pro-social, other-focussed emotion. Tiffany Watt Smith (2015: 116-118) describes the progression from Adam Smith's understanding of gratitude as an emotion that engenders response, and therefore reciprocity, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, through to American Psychologist William McDougall, writing in the late 1920s. McDougall saw gratitude as an emotion that could provoke complex and contradictory feelings, especially when operating within fixed hierarchies, which it could be used to reinforce. Watt Smith points to reciprocity in terms of rewarding good deeds, (ibid); the thankfulness being expressed in a material way, but there is also evidence of a much simpler, affective movement, unencumbered by grades of reward. Monica Bartlett and David DeSteno (2004: 2) write about 'the reciprocal, prosocial behaviour between a benefactor and a recipient', and Jo-Ann Stang (2006:13) points to the fact that the one experiencing gratitude feels 'positive about the benefit and the benefactor'. Notwithstanding the complexity of this trait or emotion, the aspect that most forcibly struck me was that the feeling and the expression of gratitude, when

authentic and not imposed, reflect a recognition that all of us need something from others. This, and its corresponding movement, that we all have something to offer others, seems to me to be at the heart of relationship-building in the making of art together.

I then set up *The Gratitude Enquiry* projects, to both explicitly and implicitly investigate gratitude in participatory arts work, and to test some of the understandings suggested by the social scientists. Each project explored the theme in different ways; *I live in it* investigating the question of whether and how women feel grateful to their bodies; *Bread* exploring baking together and for one another, and the stories that result from this exchange; *Fanmail* inviting participants to write public and private thank you messages on beautiful fans which they made, and choosing whether or not to deliver them.<sup>ii</sup> I hoped that the projects would both explore and reveal the reciprocal gestures of give and take, in the warp and the weft of the collaborations. I brought together a team of seven artists to work with me<sup>iii</sup>, and we met together regularly to reflect, to interrogate and to question our overarching theme. Our intention was not only to reflect on how the theme worked for the participants, but also to be alert to all the interactions that the group created themselves, and how these might tell us something about reciprocity. All three projects were rich and full of discovery. In this case study I will focus on how, in each one, the theme of gratitude was threaded through both the warp and the weft.

### The projects

The first project, which I led in partnership with intergenerational arts charity, Magic Me<sup>iv</sup>, was a dance project, *I live in it*, exploring the possibility of being thankful to one's own body. The participants were 16 women aged between 15 and 90, all from Tower Hamlets in East London. The project invited the women to think about their relationship to their own bodies. I called the project *I live in it* after hearing a young woman responding to the objectification of her body, by herself as much as by others. "It's me!" she exclaimed, "after all, I live in it".

We met weekly, after school, and worked towards a public performance, with original live music. Initially the women shared stories of marks on their bodies, scars, freckles, birthmarks. They discovered that one person liked to interlace her fingers with her toes in

the bath and that one of the girls had broken her arm boxing. A woman with years of nursing experience gave thanks for her liver, which powered her life, and another praised her flexible joints. Conversations took place across difference, of age, class, ethnicity and faith, but the shared territory, literally the territory where we all lived, our bodies, created a space of celebration and sometimes of sadness and anxiety. We created a giant figure of a woman on the floor, and placed our stories on her, either in words or in objects. At first all the markers ignored the area from neck to knees, but as the weeks progressed, and the group had both structured and unstructured conversations, but also as a much more non-verbal sharing of narratives entered the room, the body began to fill up with breasts and menstruation, a tummy and a womb. The room felt full of stories, swimming between people. Each belonged to one person, and because many were shared non verbally they weren't taken up by others and collectively owned. What was engendered was not commonality, but support and empathy. One woman remarked that she had never danced before, but now she felt safe to, because she was in the "the company of everybody".<sup>v</sup> Everyone was included through the offer and acceptance of all sorts of stories, with no hierarchy of age and experience or youth and health. Konstantina Werner, project volunteer, noted that the informal times also contributed:

As Project roles were suspended, there was no differentiation between facilitators, Project managers and participants, in this space everybody was met on a very personal level. This quickened the process of getting familiar with the people and with the relations between them, which evoked feelings of comfort and safety also inside the project space (Werner, 2016).

The second project, *Fanmail*, was run in partnership with Sydenham Garden, a therapeutic garden in South London, offering horticulture, art, singing and mindfulness to adults dealing with mental health and physical health issues.<sup>vi</sup> Meeting weekly, we learned how to make paper fans. We also thought about how to use the fans to carry a message, and in this project, I used a psychology experiment to help inform the way in which we worked. Philip C. Watkins et al (2003) were interested in the difference between thinking about and expressing gratitude. They conducted an experiment in which one group of participants thought about someone living to whom they were grateful; another wrote down their thoughts about a living person to whom they felt grateful, and another wrote a letter to

someone living to whom they were grateful which the researchers told them would definitely be sent. The researchers had expected this last exercise to be the one that produced the most positive affect, but in fact it was the thinking exercise that showed a stronger positive affect. The researchers' conclusion was that social anxiety and worry about how the letter would be received might account for this score. This research gave us a lot to think about as we approached a project where we were clearly suggesting that people write thank you letters, although we had planned from the start that they could write a message that was never sent. I remember that, some years ago, I wrote a long thank you letter to an ex-teacher of mine, who had died of Multiple Sclerosis. I knew she'd never see it, but I needed to write it. We therefore imagined, from the outset, that the writing of the thank you message was likely to be the most important part, not the delivery, but still wanted to offer the choice.

When the visual artists and I were experimenting with forms of fan, we discovered some interesting possibilities that afforded a variety of ways of expressing the thank yous, reflecting some of the elements of Watkins et al's experiment. Any writing needed to be done before the fan was fixed. The writing could be done so that it was a public message. In another version of the fan it could be written beneath a fold, hidden from the general viewer, but known to the recipient of the fan. If the writing was done at the bottom, it would be sealed into the handle of the fan and known only to the writer. In the first week we settled down to learn the skills. Fans are not easy, because you need to be very precise and take your time. In the second week we tentatively introduced the idea of the writing. Visual Artist Anna Sikorska commented on her own worry, before we started: *"Are people going to get this link between fans, fan mail and letters and these objects. Is it going to be forced? I shouldn't have doubted, people responded really well"* (Sikorska 2016). In the second workshop one participant without hesitation wrote to thank her Dad, Granny and two pets, all of whom had died, because *"You held me Hi"*. (Fanmail participant A) Another wrote to herself, in the section of the fan that would be completely sealed. She told us that she needed to remember to thank herself sometimes, especially when she felt down, and this fan would always stay in her bag and remind her to do that. Another woman hid her message behind the fold at the top of the fan, and then released it, tied to a helium balloon, while another created a network of numbers, in which she had hidden her bank pin number.

What all the participants told us, was that the activity prompted them to think about what they were grateful for. This provoked some sense of the pro-social and the other-focussed, but also some pretty salty conversations about the need to cut people out of your life if they bring you down, and a wonderful, provisional love letter: “*Darling, you make my heart sing..... Occasionally*” (Fanmail participant D 2016). Sikorska’s question, prior to the project, was a good one. Because we, the artists, are interested in a theme, why should it interest the participants? The majority of the group who came told us that they came because they wanted to learn to make fans. Our first session was dedicated to this skill. In the second week, when we opened up the theme many of the group were surprised that they would be allowed to talk. In another art group that they went to there was no talking. The conversation about thanking others then became quite fluid. Sometimes we were talking together, as a group, sometimes pairs chatted quietly, and once a participant wanted more time and went to a separate room to process difficult emotions with one of the artists. Individuals made choices – to share or not share what they wrote, to write to themselves, or to people who had passed on. The research theme became a malleable, dynamic element in the room, rather than a set of questions requiring answers. Through what the group told me and put into their fans, I was struck by how unsaid thankyou could cause hurt, and also by the strong relationship between a beautiful aesthetic and a sincere, authentic expression of gratitude. Most of the fans were exhibited in an installation, hanging down from the trees in Sydenham Garden where they could be read by pulling on the elasticated strings before letting them bounce back upwards. But afterwards many of them were gifts, gifts to children and parents and friends, a thank you for which people were warmly thanked in return.

The third project, *BREAD*, took place at Ovalhouse in South London<sup>vii</sup>, where we worked with young emerging artists, in training with Ovalhouse, and older people from Stockwell Good Neighbours, a weekly club for African Caribbean Seniors. We had a plan that was in some ways very clear, and in others very sketchy. We knew that we were going to make bread together. Bread making in a group is absolutely saturated with reciprocal gesture. One person holds the bowl for you while you mix the sticky dough; someone passes you the salt or helps you scrape dough off your fingers. When we all learned to pull the dough thin and see if it was the right consistency to have a ‘window’ everyone came to check. When

there was silence it was very companionable, but often there was lots of chat. There were a great many stories of mothers, and, alongside an appreciation for home-made bread and organic flour there was also an obsession with white sliced bread, hot and toasted. I remembered that many of the women in Stockwell Good Neighbours had been nurses at St Thomas's hospital, and they had told me about that first cup of tea and piece of toast in the canteen when they arrived at work at 5 am, and how they made toast for women who had just given birth. In a drama session we created scenes where bread was central, saving a life or a friendship, revealing an enmity or abandoned because of a breakdown in relationships. The sessions also brought up difficult feelings. For older people living alone there was the sense of having no-one to feed. Everyone said they kept bread in the house in case a visitor called, but then often had to throw it out. One young woman thought about the kind of bread they ate at home and went home to her parents insisting that they taught her how to cook instead the breads from their different cultures of origin, which they did.

In the last baking session, everyone made six rolls for someone else. This meant asking what they liked and trying to follow their requests. Once the bread came out of the oven and was packaged up, people made short speeches when they handed over the bread. These were thank-yous, thank you for being such a lovely partner, thank you because I never would have met you otherwise and now my life feels different because I know you. I was surprised. We hadn't done ice breakers or name games or getting to know you exercises. But we had made stuff together, we had helped each other, we had fed each other. There was no hierarchy of gratefulness; everyone was saying thank you and being thanked. This was the shortest project, just four half-day sessions, and there was no outcome planned. But as musician Jamie McCarthy reflected: *"Focussing on gratitude as a subject did something about upping the awareness of interrelations and empathy and care. This as a subject matter infected the process in a really good way"* (McCarthy, 2016).

Looking back over these projects, I particularly like McCarthy's sense that the research question 'infected' the process. Preparing and framing the projects according to an investigation of gratitude, and then living them with a heightened sensitivity to this aspect of human interaction made me even more interested in paying attention to the group's connections with one another in the participatory work. The social scientists whose work I



read had turned to a study of gratitude with a strong sense of its importance in the building of relationship on a micro and a macro level. Making space for one another, in all our differences and disagreements is crucial in work that is relational. In creative projects we can see the grittiness of these exchanges, when we like the gift but not the giver, when we might feel patronized or pushed, and also when we feel ourselves grow, in the knowledge that we have much to offer as well as much to gain. The small, dyadic moments of being thanked and being thankful, as well as the larger moments of thankfulness to the group, to the community, to the music or the dancing, can be a fundamental part of the delicate building blocks of human relations.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://magicme.co.uk/resource/detail-and-daring/>

<sup>ii</sup> Funded by Arts Council England

<sup>iii</sup> Mia Harris, Mike Knowlden, Chuck Blue Lowry, Jamie McCartney, Surya Turner, Eleanor Sikorski, Anna Sikorska. Project Manager Sabrina Smith-Noble

<sup>iv</sup> <https://magicme.co.uk/>

<sup>v</sup> Participant S. *I live in it* (Author's journal 2016)  
Accessed 29/4/2019

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<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.sydenhamgarden.org.uk/>  
<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.ovalhouse.com/>