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## **Together I'm Someone: Drama, Community and Achievement in Urban Youth**

**Jonathan Neelands and Bethany Nelson**

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*In the last two days, the people or the person making the choices for me was myself... I would be directed to do something and would be like, "Okay, so how am I going to go about doing this?" instead of going "So what do you want me to do?"*

*Iris, age 16*

Foucault contends that power is always in and around classrooms (Foucault 1977). Power, and the reinforcement of White, middle-class power in particular, are apparent in curriculum, the racial and class make-up of staff, faculty, and administration of schools, and in the buildings themselves (Ladson-Billings 2009; Gallagher 2007; Fine and Weis 2003). Consequently, students of colour are often denied access to power in schools, and lack a sense of agency in settings when they "have little power over their learning, when learning has little relevance to their lives and aspirations, or when they are devalued or marginalized" (McInerney 2009, p.24). These are familiar dynamics in the hegemonic culture of public schools in the United States, in which the achievement of students of colour and the urban poor lags far behind that of their White, middle class counterparts (Ladson-Billings 2009; Fraser and Honneth 2003; Tatum 2003; Nieto 2002; Macedo and Bartolomé 1999).

The establishment of community in schools is a critical factor for facilitating school success for urban students of colour (Ladson-Billings 2009). Further, recent research points to the interaction of community and power for students of colour in urban settings, in which power is a consequence of classroom community and may result in improved academic outcomes (Nelson 2011). Creating drama curriculum that brings students' knowledge and capabilities into the classroom, gives them the opportunity to explore ideas about power, and practice the skills underlying the acquisition and exercise

of power in a supportive and reliable community are key to culturally relevant schooling in which students can develop a sense of agency.

### **Community, Agency and AT/D**

The fact that drama is an effective way to build community is nearly a truism in the field, and in previous research on the effects of drama on classroom community, there is compelling evidence that drama structures facilitate a sense of collaboration between teachers and students, and within the peer group (Neelands 2009a, 2009b; Nelson 2009; Gallagher 2007; Manley and O'Neill 1997). In particular, forms of Applied Theatre and Drama (AT/D) facilitate the development of community among participants (Neelands 2009; Prentki and Preston 2009; Gallagher 2007; Cahill 2002; Nelson, Colby & McIlrath 2001; Manley and O'Neill 1997). AT/D, defined by Nicholson (2005) as “dramatic activity that primarily exist outside conventional mainstream theatre institutions, and which are specifically intended to benefit individuals, communities and societies” (p.2) and characterized as “the relationship between theatre practice, social efficacy, and community building” (p.2) is a vehicle for building community among young people engaged in its practice. AT/D also provides the opportunity to introduce politicized curriculum which directly addresses questions of power and agency, and which, through active learning structures, encourages participants to explore and practice their application (Prendergast and Saxton 2009; Preston 2009; Ackroyd 2000).

The project discussed below builds on work by Jonothan Neelands (2011, 2010, 2009a), in which ensemble built through drama teaching is foundational to its effectiveness as a democratizing approach to working with complex cultural texts, Kathleen Gallagher's (2007) thesis on the effects, on urban students of colour, of various forms of drama teaching on the development of understandings of unequal power dynamics, and the work of Bethany Nelson (2009, 2011) on the role of both ensemble/community and understanding unequal power dynamics on improvement in achievement by students of colour in urban environments.

### **The Project**

This chapter reflects on the outcomes of a recent study conducted with urban students of colour in an under-resourced high school in Chelsea, Massachusetts. The primary focus of the study was a 9-week playmaking project, conducted by Bethany Nelson, considering the role of Applied Theatre and Drama (AT/D) in the development of community on the class of students who participated, as well as consideration of the effects of that community on the academic performance of the students. The study included a two-day (5 hour) workshop on Hamlet, conducted by Jonothan Neelands and utilizing the “rehearsal room” approach developed and widely utilized by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), which uses a variety of drama structures and strategies for teaching Shakespeare. This chapter will consider in detail the complex interaction of community, power and academic engagement/outcomes demonstrated by the students during the Hamlet drama work.

Michael Boyd (2009), Artistic Director of the RSC, identifies 13 values and behaviours required for and enabled by their ensemble working style. These foster community and creativity among the diverse artists with whom they work, and provide a foundation for artistic and intellectual achievement through drama. In considering the working dynamics and outcomes of the Hamlet drama work conducted with the Chelsea students, and those of the playmaking project within which it was embedded, 4 of these behaviours emerged as central to the success of both components. They are (as defined by Boyd): 1) Cooperation: the intense, unobstructed traffic between artists at play and the surrender of the self to a connection with others, even while making demands on ourselves; 2) Altruism: the moral imagination and the social perception to realise that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The stronger help the weaker, rather than choreographing the weak to make the strong look good; 3) Trust: the ability to be appallingly honest and to experiment without fear; and 4) Empathy: caring for others with a forensic curiosity that constantly seeks new ways of being together and creating together.

In this chapter, we will discuss the ways in which AT/D, both the ensemble-based rehearsal room approach of RSC and the playmaking process, fosters these values and behaviours. Both drama approaches offer a heterotopic environment that is culturally

relevant for low-income students of colour in an urban environment, resulting in improved academic risk-taking, creative thinking and problem solving.

## **Methods**

The playmaking project was designed to explore the role of community in fostering the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills of academic risk-taking, creative thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and communication with under-resourced urban students of colour, guided by the following research questions:

- What are the effects of using playmaking structures to facilitate students' exploration of the obstacles they face in their lives?
- What are the effects of using playmaking structures to facilitate students' identity formation as change agents in the issues that affect their lives?
- In what ways does the community established in the drama classroom affect students' engagement and facility with the material?

(In this case, playmaking refers to the use of a variety of drama/theatre techniques to develop original performance work with students which emphasizes the exploration of their ideas with the goal of developing their voices and visions of the world and bringing them to a broader audience.)

This was a qualitative study using participant ethnography as a primary form of data collection followed by participant interviews. This structure generated information rich case studies in a social constructivist frame, with the goal of “deeply understanding specific cases within a particular context” (Patton 2002, p. 546). Triangulation was provided by the presence of an outside ethnographer familiar with AT/D.

The 2-day workshop on Hamlet, while initially intended as a stand alone experience unconnected to the larger study, employed AT/D structures which built on ensemble skills developed during the first half of the playmaking experience, generated surprising academic outcomes for the students, and positively affected the subsequent devising process. Consequently, it provides the opportunity for a concise and intensive consideration of the interaction of the dynamics observed throughout the project.

Ethnography of the first day of the workshop was provided by the outside ethnographer; the second day was videotaped. A post-workshop discussion was conducted with the entire group, and 4 students of various ages were interviewed at length.

### **The Hamlet Workshop**

The workshop was conducted with a Drama 2 class of 18 students at Chelsea High School, an urban high school outside of Boston, Massachusetts, USA. The group was equally divided by gender but mixed by age (ranging from 14-19 years) and race/ethnicity (1 Black student, 13 Latino/a students from a variety of cultures, and 4 White students). A third of the students had Individualized Education Plans, indicating a range of (primarily language-based) learning issues for which specific accommodations must be made.

The workshop was conducted one month into the 9-week playmaking project. In the first 4 weeks of the project, we had used a variety of strategies, including improvisation, tableau, scene work, movement, and games, to begin development of an original performance piece about the obstacles the students face in their lives and their resources for dealing with those obstacles. The Hamlet workshop also utilized a series of games, improvisations, tableaux, and movement, first to introduce the students to the setting, plot, and characters in Hamlet, then subsequently to explore the interpersonal and political dynamics of the piece through the Shakespearean text. Discussion includes outcomes for the entire group of participants, with particular focus on three students, William, Khiana, and Kadiatu, who engaged in surprising ways during the experience. (Kadiatu's academic prowess allowed her to more fully engage in the community of the class; William and Khiana, already integrated members of the classroom community, took increased intellectual and academic risks.)

Note: At the request of the students, we've used their real names in this chapter.

### **Community and Playmaking**

The students in the Drama 2 class demonstrated a pronounced degree of community from the start of the project, partly as the result of 3 weeks (15 classes) of

community building work with which Amy, the drama teacher, always begins the semester. In the initial observation of the class, students touched in non-sexual ways, regardless of gender. Their comfort with and physical support of one another was demonstrated repeatedly in games, improvisation and scene work. For example, during an extended exploration of obstacles, in which a student, with eyes closed, was verbally guided across a multilayer obstacle by a partner, it became a tradition to catch the blind student in a big hug when s/he made it over the obstacle safely. The students' trust in each other caused them to "experiment without fear" and their empathy was apparent when, as a group, they carefully spotted others climbing over high obstacles. Further, they demonstrated empathy and altruism during games, voluntarily taking the role of "It" for slower or less adept class members, or giving up their place in a group for a peer who needed a spot.

The students themselves repeatedly identified the importance of their community, and in an early exploration of obstacles they face in their lives, 4 of the 5 scenes depicted the loss of relationship with family/community members to substance abuse or death. The growth of trust among the students through their shared experiences in the playmaking structures fostered a Sense of Community (SOC), described in psychological literature as the feeling that one is part of a readily available and supportive structure characterized by belonging, connectedness, influence, and fulfillment of needs (Sarason 1986; McMillan and Chavis 1986), characteristics which closely reflect the trust, empathy, cooperation, and altruism identified by Boyd. As the sense of community among the students grew, their risk-taking in sharing personal stories did as well. Students cautiously introduced stories of family conflict, peer pressure to do drugs, and hinted at physical abuse.

### **Community and Hamlet**

*I was proudest of the group was how well we got to know each other and how well we worked together... it felt good because everyone put in an effort to get through. When you came, everything started getting serious and we started thinking. Iris, age 16*

The students' sense of community was equally apparent during the Hamlet workshop. In "huggies," a grouping warm-up, boys and girls embraced with equal abandon, and the community of students made certain that every member was included. In an early exercise, 4 boys were charged with creating a scene in which Claudius and Gertrude are wed, and they touched, held hands, and looked lovingly at one another without embarrassment. During a 'speed through' of the plot of the play, boys and girls jumped in to play a variety of male and female roles, irrespective of gender and without any apparent self-consciousness, embodying the 'disinterested actor' that Neelands, in a line with Hannah Arendt, Amartya Sen and John Rawls amongst others, claims is essential to citizen identity and participation in democracy (Neelands 2011).

This familiar community dynamic served as a foundation for the introduction of unfamiliar and challenging material and allowed the students to take risks in engaging with it. In an atmosphere of trust, empathy, cooperation and altruism, embodied by the students and supported by the workshop leader, the students were eager participants, in spite of the "intimidating" topic and complex language. This stands in stark contrast to the students' self-reports on earlier experiences in studying Shakespeare. As one student put it:

This summer...in this program you have to read a Shakespeare book and it was so hard for me to read it ... and I'd find myself staying up until like 3:00 trying to figure out certain words and ... when we had a quiz, or we had to act a scene out, I found myself lost.

Kadiatu, 18

The entire group took risks in reading aloud and using the language of the play, and they shared talk time and leadership in the development of various pieces. For example, in creating a "scary" interpretation of a segment of the Ghost's speech, one group with three strong leaders traded leadership of the various components of the task, cleanly and without discussion or negotiation. However even the quietest members of the group contributed ideas which were enacted in the final presentation.

### **Community, Power and Achievement**



The literature detailing studies of power in the field of psychology tells us that power has profound effects on all aspects of human functioning, and is a tool for personal growth and social transformation (Keltner, Anderson, and Gruenfeld 2003). Power stimulates action, and communal power orientation characterizes individuals who use their power for the communal good rather than their personal good (Chen, Lee-Chai and Bargh 2001), which describes the community function of the students in the Drama 2 class. These constructs provide a foundation for considering the effect of community and power on the improved academic functioning of the students who participated in the Hamlet workshop relative to their performance as students in other contexts.

The work the students engaged in during the Hamlet workshop both benefited from the emerging community of the group and fostered its growth, resulting in academic engagement, risk-taking, and comprehension of the play by all of the students. The students articulated sophisticated understandings of the play's themes, which were built socially through sustained dialogue and tolerance for diverse ideas and reactions. In so doing they were rehearsing how the political participation, dialogue and social interaction associated with ensemble based theatre making and learning becomes in Rawls's (2001) definition of democracy - 'the exercise of public reason.'

From the first day of the workshop the Chelsea students participated fully, though they were initially cautious about the Shakespearean language. Their engagement was fostered in part by the approach to the material, which initially used game structures, tableau and movement, capturing the interest of this kinesthetic group. Their facility with tableau and image work was apparent during an early task, in which they were prompted to create 5 tableaux, entitled Spying, Romance, Madness, A funeral which becomes a wedding, and Rejection. The workshop leader's open appreciation of their work fostered increased risk-taking in subsequent pieces, as when they were asked to incorporate 'scraps' of text into the images. The students' sense of pride at having been selected to participate in the workshop, and the on-going positive feedback on their work, generated escalating returns. As one student put it:

Melly: “Some teachers have high expectations in a negative manner. They (the workshop leaders) had high expectations for us too, but...gave us the high expectation that we *can*.”

In return, the workshop leader sought permission to build ‘earned authority’ with the group by encouraging them to exercise their right to establish and negotiate rules for the engagement that were freely accepted rather than fearfully followed. This ‘uncrowning of power’ which is associated with the particular social dynamic required for participatory forms of drama and democracy, allowed the group to play with their own individual relationships to power, collective deliberation and knowledge.

There were three sequences of process work which particularly demonstrated the complex interaction between community, power, and academic engagement for the Chelsea students in the medium of drama. First, towards the end of day one, the students were charged with visualizing the castle of Elsinore. Half of the group, in role as soldiers, imagined the exterior, and the other half, as servants, the interior. Each ‘servant’ was then paired with a ‘soldier,’ and they toured one another by turns through ‘their’ part of the castle. The student being toured was required to keep his/her eyes closed, and the commitment of both the tour guide and the toured during this experience was substantial. They described the castle, adding appropriate detail well beyond that provided in the images they’d seen, and spoke in serious tones throughout. Allowing themselves to be led with eyes closed built on trust and cooperation established in the obstacle work during the playmaking project, but the ease with which the students followed their tour guides stood in contrast to the giggly nervousness which often accompanied ‘blind’ exercises with this group, and their serious attention to the content of the tour was marked. Of particular note: Kadiatu, who had been generally reticent and somewhat withdrawn during the playmaking structures on which the group had been working for the previous month, was visibly engaged. She was descriptive and detailed as she toured her partner through the imaginary castle, gesturing expansively with her hands and speaking with energy and enthusiasm. Her obvious engagement and willingness to guide her partner physically stood in stark contrast to her previous behaviour.

Day 2 of the workshop built on Day 1, and the students were able to recall both the story and plot elements introduced the first day and reconstruct the physical scene of the king's death and the queen's marriage. Further, they were able to extrapolate from the story and infer themes and character motivations. When asked, they identified the themes of the play as murder, love, trickery, betrayal, madness, and being spied on, and, in answer to the question of why the ghost of the dead king might come back, chorused, "Revenge!" The students later reflected on the dynamics of the workshop which facilitated this academic outcome.

Monica: "Instead of just being in a classroom...we get to act out the words and *feel* them..."

Abel: "...we actually lived it, we became part of it and that just helps overall."

Kristie: "I just liked that we got to act it out, like, ourselves and interpret it...and I like the fact that we got into a deeper level of it."

The second component of the structure that demonstrates the interaction between community, power, and academic engagement occurred in the middle of Day 2. During an extended sequence exploring Hamlet's reactions to the betrayal of his mother and uncle, his father's death, and his loss of the crown, the students demonstrated substantial engagement and insight, as well as the ability to grapple successfully with the text. The first surprise occurred when William volunteered to portray Hamlet during this sequence. William's literacy is six years below expected competencies for his grade level, and at the first meeting of the playmaking project, he placed himself on the far end of a continuum regarding unwillingness to speak in public. He explained, "I meet people, I get scared." Though he was an integrated member of the classroom community, he had rarely volunteered during playmaking when discussing complex topics, so his offer to portray Hamlet was unexpected. This is a good reminder that finding empathy with characters and lives that are different is more than the hug of sympathy; it's a call to action and is essential to a healthy polity.

The students then discussed where Hamlet might go to be alone and think. The suggestions were creative and built on the understandings of the castle and the time

period the students had explored the previous day, as well as drawing connections to their own lives. From a range of options which included a crypt, the battlements, his room, to see a friend, or to see his girlfriend, William selected the crypt. The group was then charged with positioning Hamlet in a way that would communicate his emotional state. The first position, sitting with head down, arm resting on knee, invited the following interpretations, which drew on their own experiences of the emotions Hamlet was feeling and demonstrated understanding of the character:

Cody: He's confused.

Melly: "My dad can't be dead. He's in a denial state."

Luis: "He's anxious."

Francisco: "If he's against the wall, to make himself feel safe. Even in kindergarten, you get sent into the corner, you push back against the wall."

Kadiatu then volunteered to shape Hamlet into an alternative position, and offered an insightful, complex explanation of Hamlet's thinking in this moment, integrating his anger at the murder, confusion at his mother's betrayal, sense that he should do something about it, anger at being robbed of the throne, and the fact that he had no one to turn to. In interview, Kadiatu was able to make explicit the connections between the situation in Hamlet's life and her own experiences.

Kadiatu: "...stuff like that happens every day; kids find themselves getting new parents after a father dies, or the mom getting married too fast because they're vulnerable and don't want to be alone... so I finally got to understanding Hamlet... I see this happening within my family..."

Kadiatu is reflecting on the 'inside-out' learning associated with playful learning. Rather than passively obeying imposed interpretations and choices of meaning, she is bringing and trusting in what she knows about the world to the old play. In so doing, she discovers what Walter Benjamin called the 'traces' of the original play that find resonances in her lived experience now.

The final component of the structure which merits separate discussion for its demonstration of the effect of cooperation, altruism, trust and empathy on academic risk-taking and skills development is a sequence in which students read aloud Hamlet's soliloquy, interpreted its meaning, and created movements which physicalized words selected from the text. This was followed by more complex physicalizations of two sections of text from the Ghost. In this sequence, every student in the group, rather than self-selected volunteers, was responsible for speaking from the text and conveying its meaning. In a group with widely divergent reading levels and facility with English, this was a challenging task. However, the students, standing in a circle, read the text without hesitation, looking up periodically for reassurance from workshop leader and peers as they struggled with unfamiliar vocabulary. Even the most challenged readers addressed the task vigorously, speaking clearly and with volume. While reading aloud can be a simple thing, for students for whom English is an additional language (EAL) and for those with language-based learning disabilities, it can be a public display of incompetence which carries the potential for substantial social stigma (Tatum 2003; Alatis and Tan 2001). Further, when asked to name any words they didn't understand, the students, even the most academically successful of the group, were willing to acknowledge the vocabulary with which they were unfamiliar. Students and workshop leader then worked in concert to decode and clarify the meaning and pronunciation of the language. We were reminded of some of Jerome Bruner's propositions about playfulness and playful learners; that in play there is a reduction in the consequences of error and failure. Playful learners are less easily frustrated and treat their failures not as daunting or humiliating but as informative (1983).

When students were then asked to choose a word they liked for the next task, many selected words which had previously been unknown to them. They were charged with creating action to communicate the feeling/meaning of the word in the context of the text. This level of abstraction with language is not always accessible for EAL and language challenged learners (Alatis and Tan 2001), however the students produced complex and moving images. Most notable in this section was the students' emphasis on working for a high-quality outcome, and their success at doing so. For example, Khiana, who is socially integrated but academically cautious due to a language processing delay,

pushed her partner, an academic and social leader, to reconsider the choice she had made and suggested a more complex and effective action. Kadiatu and Shanice, both normally reticent, committed fully to their large, open movements for ‘everlasting’ and ‘remember,’ and incorporated the use of multiple levels in their images. Skrappy, usually the comedian in the group, created creepy and memorable movements for ‘incestuous’ and ‘self-slaughter’ with his partner. When they repeated the gestures around the circle silently, the atmosphere created was eerie and touching by turns.

This success seemed to feed their risk-taking and engagement in the last two sequences of the day. Both integrated text and movement around two speeches of the Ghost. Several moments stood out in relation to community, trust, and learning. First, one student paraphrased a line from the previous soliloquy in discussing suicide as a possible option for Hamlet, referencing the ‘Everlasting canon against self-slaughter’ (three of these four words had been unfamiliar to him when the text was introduced). Second, Khiana risked translating a piece of text that no one else in the group would try (“make thy two eyes start from their spheres”), then later explained the story of the entire speech in her own words with clarity and insight. Finally, when assigned longer phrases from the text to physicalize through a series of gestures, several of the most cautious and quiet students, including Khiana and Kadiatu, pushed their groups to commit more fully to the language and bring the emotions of the speech into their actions, resulting in effective outcomes. These were the acts of players making their own interpretative choices from the old text based in their ‘exercise of public reason.’ Through shared dialogue charged with the vulnerability and tolerance that characterizes pro-social playful relationships, students found their own individual values changing and growing in the processes of deliberation and decision making. In developing their shared actions in this workshop, they were also nurturing a vital second order identity as a citizen, as an agent, in their own worlds of social and political choice.

## **Conclusion**

*Since freshman year I've been getting straight A's, but I never really felt like I understood the plays that we read in class. But by acting it out for these last two*

*days, it helped me get a different view on things, like my opinions did matter, and in my own way I can get to the themes that he wanted us to get, not just the way that someone told me that I should think.* Alfredo, age 18

*Complicated characters will only reach you if you are trying to reach them.* Iris, age 16

The cooperation, altruism, trust and empathy demonstrated in both the ensemble-building experience of the Hamlet drama work and the community-centered playmaking experience contributed to academic outcomes that were substantially stronger than expected, based on the students' range of literacy skills and analytical capabilities in other learning environments. Of particular interest is the circular nature of the interaction between community, power, and achievement through drama. The community demonstrated by the students seemed to generate a sense of power/agency fostering academic risk-taking, the success of which reinforced the students' sense of agency, elevating the status of the community and increasing its strength and importance. The impact of this growth was felt in the playmaking which followed, as student community and academic effort/achievement increased noticeably for all students. The students who were most changed during the workshop, William, Khiana, and Kadiatu, continued to demonstrate improved academic engagement and social risk-taking throughout the playmaking project.

Acts of theatre, socially made and shared as lived experience, offer a paradigm for engaging urban youth in explorations of power, agency and the distribution of economic and cultural capital. Further research is needed to explore the potential of these dynamics and their effects in different environments, including replication of this study with other urban populations, and consideration of other drama forms in generating community and achievement outcomes. Most important for these authors is further research into the value of theatre and drama for exploring unequal power dynamics and facilitating student understandings of the socio-cultural obstacles they face in their lives. For the urban young in particular, drama and theatre are concrete means for gaining what Freire called the *vital knowledge* which becomes solidarity.

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