

TITLE: Bringing to the surface dormant prejudice:

Participatory Theatre for education & the necessary rifts of risks taking

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Abstract:

This article charts a recent conference training event for TENet hosted in Spetses. The article explores several techniques resulting from longitudinal PhD research studies considering means to increase possibilities for change and impact within educational settings with vulnerable young people. The article draws upon social psychological, social constructionism and educational rhetoric as a conceptual framework to explore strategies offered by participatory theatre to challenge dormant prejudice in light of the rise of Golden Dawn and blame culture results from the current economic crisis. The article proposes the need for changes in thinking and political motivation of theatre in education, most specifically exploring links between participatory theatre, witnessing and doubt as forms of action to awaken critical thought, shift social blame and thereby propose strategies to challenge detrimental constructs that lead to violence, aggression and prejudice. The paper explores two new strategies, which have been trialled and proven successful in deprived schools in inner city London, used as training tools as part of the conference/summer seminar series in July 2013.

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‘A Plea for Action...And then they came for me and there was no one left to speak up...’
(Niemoller in Malik & Prasad 2007:162).

At a time of neoliberal ideological domination with constant cuts imposed on public services, including educational provisions, it is now essential for the arts to step up and awaken critical thought in an increasingly disillusioned and desperate public. Harvey (2007) describes the economic situation of Europe as a result of the ‘anarchy of the market’ suggesting that continued transmission of neoliberal ideals will ‘generate a situation that becomes increasingly ungovernable. It may even lead to a breakdown of solidarity and a condition verging on social anarchy and nihilism’ (ibid. 2007:82). The lack of responsiveness from governments towards their people, and particularly their tactic to ignore protests, causes uprisings to fade into apathy and unrest which subsequently becomes resignation and disillusionment. This sense of upset breeds space for oppositional and active political extremism to infiltrate public consciousness, offering a rationale for the issues within the country, and offering a target to blame seeking resolution through the eradication of a particular group or people.

Within recent months, Greece, and specifically Athens has experienced such an oppositional group through the rise of neo-nazi party Golden Dawn. News reports echo their strategies to attack immigrant workers who they have named as the new ‘target’ to focus blame upon for economic injustice. Children in schools and kindergartens are also being targeted. In times of hardship and

economic collapse hope can arise when blame is designated to a particular sector of society. We need only reflect back to 1933-45 to recall the National Socialist party of Germany to note an escalation of blame and indoctrinated prejudice. The current economic crisis in Greece leaves an opportunity for historical repetition; a frightening but present threat to safety and wellbeing. But what can be done to affect change?

Theatre as an educational tool may present possibilities for change. This is a notion often discussed and expected within the broader field of Applied Theatre, an umbrella term for applied, community based theatre practices (see Nicholson 2005, Taylor 2004 and Prentki & Preston 2009 &). We often discuss and boast about the possibilities for change that drama can deliver. Impact assessment is a means by which practitioners and academics alike account for the value laden within applied theatre practice (see Belfiore & Bennett 2004, Matarasso 1997, Merli 2002, Etherton 2006, Prentki 2006), though the concept of impact had become increasingly commoditised over recent years with impact assessment indicators categorising and limiting the inherent values, and outputs that claim to demonstrate change. The high level of accountability placed upon applied theatre practice, has resulted in a 'watering down' effect. By this I mean that applied theatre practice started to limit itself in terms of the focus placed on the output and end products of the process as opposed to the value inherent in the process itself. It is the aim of this paper to return applied practice to its roots, by renegotiating ideas the concept of change and impact on the potential of the practice to affect current and present political challenges and extremes. It is important to note that this practice was designed and implemented in the UK, in inner-city London with vulnerable youth, and the transferability of the practice is discussed in a recent project in Spetses, Greece as part of the annual TENet conference. It is the concern of this paper to outline possibilities for change through the implementation participatory theatre practice. In order to explore this, I will draw upon examples of practice from the conference in connection with my doctoral research study findings. The conceptual framework of this paper will consider Laub and Felman's (1992) theories of witnessing, taking a social psychological stance on the concept of prejudice. This will be investigated in relation to participatory theatre strategies that aim to provoke change through challenging social constructs, or as Kelly (1963) suggests in a deliberate attempt to challenge social ideas by putting them in the state of doubt.

bell hooks (1994) outlines possibilities presented by critical pedagogy:

'When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow... that empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks' (hooks 1994:21).

Inherent in the stance that hooks takes, is a key concern that has arisen within my research, the question of sustainability when working with vulnerable youth or in volatile situations. If we are to create a practice of freedom, should we not implement approaches to practice that enable change and impact to transition beyond workshop space into the world beyond? hooks' idea of a holistic model of practice, relates strongly with current debates in the field about the potential of applied theatre practice.

During the summer conference 2013, I provided a week-long intensive training course for teachers from all over Greece. Attendees were both primary and secondary school teachers and a mixture of

related professionals, the workshops took place over five days, and involved a series of activities and training exercises to allow teachers to gain new skills and insights into the possibilities that theatre in education can offer in these difficult times. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus upon one particular workshop that aimed to deliberately challenge, provoke, and expose social constructs as a means to placing stereotypical ideas in a state of doubt.

The workshop can be broken down into six key stages:

1. Participants are asked to write down their initial uncensored responses to a series of photographs of different people.
2. Participants are asked to bring characters to life thinking specifically about vocal traits, posture, costume, and attitudes that may evolve from their initial uncensored responses.
3. Actors are nominated to play the roles of the five characters.
4. The lead facilitator asks characters a series of questions and invites the audience to ask questions too. The only condition placed upon actors is that they must respond in role, depending on the details they have been given from their group members.
5. Finally, the lead facilitator reveals secret pieces of information about each character. These are deliberately designed to contradict stereotypical views of the five photographs depicting characters from different social and racial backgrounds.
6. Actors are asked to respond in role, stating their reactions to the stereotypical information that was constructed by participants in relation to their first response to the photographs. (If needed, the lead facilitator will prompt performers to think about the impact of this information on the emotional well-being of the characters they are playing.)

Image 1.: Photographs are provided (five characters stage 1)



Photographer: Nicola Abraham (2013)

Image 2.: Characters brought to life (exercise stage 4)



Photographer: Valia Gkotsi (2013)

What is significant in this exercise is the shift of construct that occurs. The function of this exercise is to expose constructs and the impact they may have upon people as the first part of a longitudinal approach to practice that involves challenging social constructs in order to provoke and create sustainable change. The stereotypical responses outlined by participants, even an adult group, demonstrated the harmful initial constructs that may be projected, transferred and acted upon. This is a sign of dormant prejudice, unleashed through words and social interactions, which starts to determine and reinforce self-expectations and self-construction. In the current political climate, with the rise of the extremist party Golden Dawn, it is easy to see how manipulation, exposure to prejudice, and systems of blame can infiltrate our thoughts and begin to appear in our interactions with one another. This exercise is a simplistic demonstration of how that process can begin to affect people, it is a non-violent and non-extreme version of injustice.

Dorling (2011) discusses the inherent readiness and racism that function within society, particularly within institutions:

‘It is a sign of the duplicity of our times that institutions which often say they are against elitism do most to promote it; that governments which say they aim to reduce social exclusion actually create it; that movements which pretend not to be prejudiced foster hate; that academic disciplines where the orthodoxy is to advocate greed cannot say so explicitly; and that many experts argue that the best that most can hope for is a life of which they themselves would despair. They do not say this explicitly, but it is implied in their accusation that those who argue against them are being utopian’ (ibid 2011:4).

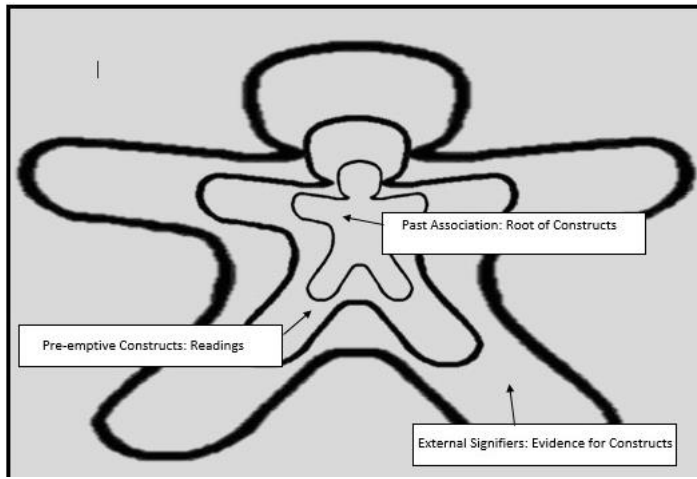
Here Dorling has exposed the hypocrisy of institutional elitism. He argues that injustice is inherent within many systems in society, not just political campaigns, but more intrinsically included in education systems, political rhetoric, particularly, though not exclusively, the far right and within ourselves. Allport (1981) presents a social psychological model prejudice. When explaining the concept of extropunitiveness as a personality trait, this accounts for the lack of social responsibility taken, increasing blame culture that allows and enables citizens in countries of increasing economic difficulty to place blame upon others, predominantly outsiders, immigrants, and the Other, whoever that may be. Accounting for this situation in recent history Allport outlines the following example demonstrating extropunitiveness and the link this has two neo-fascism:

‘Some people look to alibis. Hitler was such a person. He blamed the bad world, a bad school, fate, for his many failures in early life. When he did not pass in school, he blamed illness. For his political reverses, he blamed others. For the defeat at Stalingrad, his generals. For starting the war, he blamed Churchill, Roosevelt, the Jews. This seems to be no record of his blaming himself for any missteps or failures’ (ibid 1981:383).

Taking a social psychological perspective, is not intended to create an essentialist view of blame culture. It is often the case that institutional violence takes place through the lack of social mobility within schools and education systems designed to maintain class divisions and implement neoliberal ideology is securing a future the few and constructing social constructs that maintain low-expectations for the majority (Willis 1977, MacLeod 1987, Hill, 2007, Osler & Starkey 2005). In this sense the importance of deconstructing social constructs is of paramount importance if we are to provoke any type of meaningful change. Using strategies such as the exercise outlined above and elements of risk-taking pedagogical approaches, which I will offer in the next section of this paper, it is possible to provoke thought, open critical thinking, or as Freire (1996) terms ‘*critical consciousness*’. This presents opportunities for young people and adults alike to challenge what appear to be embedded knowledges of social constructs that are detrimental to social mobility and instrumental to maintaining prejudice.

Risk-taking is an important part of the exposure of social constructs in the process of change. In addition to the exercise outlined above, it is important that the facilitator places themselves, as an instrument of the process, in a position of risk: As an additional demonstration and example of social constructs the facilitator becomes the subject of deconstruction. For this exercise, participants are asked to work in groups using a diagram similar to the role-on-wall diagram used for character development and analysis (see Figure 1.). They are asked to write in the centre of the image a list of thoughts and reactions they had upon first meeting with the facilitator. When facilitating this exercise it is important to advocate truthful reactions and honesty. You may wish to emphasise that you are aware this exercise may feel awkward, may implicate participant feelings and reactions, and may cause upset: You must reassure participants that the purpose of this exercise, you will not be offended by their ideas and reactions. The second stage of the exercise requests participants to trace a line from their suggestions to the next layer of the body outline, this time you will ask participants to write down a description of signs or signifies that led them to their initial reactions, this requires participants to think critically about the reasons why and how their initial thoughts and reactions towards the facilitator were formed. This involves a level of critical enquiry. The final stage of the exercise asks participants to trace the line one step further into the outer layer of the body outline this time you will ask them to track their reaction to a previous incident, event or encounter where they may have been put in a similar situation or had a similar reaction to another person. At this point, participants are asked to share back their findings with examples of their choosing. It is important to note that this point in the exercise holds a lot of tension and may lead to hesitation, encouragement and intrigue are arguably the most efficacious means of countering this reaction. Participants are then asked if the construct they have given i.e. their initial reaction, is a true depiction of you, as facilitator. It is important to question and prompt participants to think critically about the answers, questioning what is meant by ‘truthful’; it is within this exercise that you can create a sense of doubt over the ownership of social constructs.

Figure 1. Role-on-the Wall Facilitator Deconstruction Diagram



Photographer: Nicola Abraham (2013)

Kelly's (1963) theory of personality, personal construct theory, explains how constructs may be challenged and how they are secured. For example, he states that, in order for a perception/expectation to be confirmed, the student/participant/teacher/facilitator will have been witnessed behaving in a manner that supports the construct (Kelly 1963: 154). Kelly outlines five dimensions of constructs; two are of particular relevance here:

- *A Pre-emptive Construct is one which pre-empts its elements for membership in its own realm exclusively – for example, species names.*
- *A Constellatory Construct is one which fixes the realm of membership of its elements – for example, stereotypes.*

(Kelly 1963: 156)

Through exposing social constructs, it is possible to place ideas and reactions in a state of flux. It is within this state of flux that change may occur. The role of the witness is key here, and occurs on multiple levels simultaneously. The participants witness the facilitator and the facilitator may witness participants in an exchange that places the facilitator in a state of risk in order to demonstrate and expose potentially damaging constructs. Expanding this process to theatre in education within classroom settings presents further layers of witnessing between teachers, support staff, parents and peers. Once a construct is in a state of doubt, there is a possibility for change. The more witnesses taking part in the process, the more chance that change will be sustained through holistic interactions on multiple levels. Stepping out of conventional teacher/student roles requires a new form of witnessing to take place requiring both students and teacher to engage in critical dialogical exchange or as Chantel Mouffe (2004) terms, *agonistic confrontation*.

Witnessing as a process of recognition allows constructs to be confirmed or rejected. Witnessing also acts as a process of exchange in the sense of an auditory, visual and embodied encounter clearly present within the underlying philosophy of participatory theatre practice. The process of participation and exchange involved in creative collaborative explorations is informed by co-intentionality (Freire, 1996). Co-intentional pedagogy functions in opposition to banking models of education in favour of a collaborative process where equal emphasis and value is placed on the exchange of knowledge between student and teacher, as Freire states:

In humanising pedagogy the method ceases to be an instrument by which teachers... can manipulate the students... Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling reality, and

thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge' (ibid 1996:51).

Within this research co-intentionality, in terms of witnessing, can be said to account for a model of communication whereby both the teacher and student exist and provide a new place for knowledge to be both envisioned, and responded to, by those observing the retelling or acknowledgement of an event/change/experience. The co-intentional process recognises the equality of value placed upon the witnessed and the witnesses. There is no authoritative knowledge within this group dynamic, which allows witnesses to verify the testament whether spoken, or performed, of the witnessed and the witnessed to have his/her actions perceived, internalised, and understood by the witnesses. This process creates a cycle of witnessing and verification through active presence or as Salverson (2008) states, '*witnessing is an active and transitive encounter*' (ibid. 2008:254) i.e. a platform for change in thinking and construction to occur. This is a form that allows blame, and construction roots to be critically challenged in order to shift and place in doubt the sense of ownership that may be attributed to prejudice.

Laub & Felman (1992) attest the importance of *experiencing or living through* testimony, which can be applied to this research as a direct witnessing or response to shared experiences and playing with different performances of change. This process has been reciprocated in this research between participants and one another and the facilitator to verify acts or contributions to workshops that have exposed constructs and/or offered alternative ways of acting in the company of others. It is, in this sense, a process of understanding and recognition that constructs are not facts, but experience informed views and assumptions that are proven or challenged through interactions with people. Placing ideas in a state of doubt thereby allows space for change to transition. Perhaps we are at a point where impact and change should not be seen as a concrete capitalist notion or commodity to obtain but as a process of holistic witnessing. If we are to value impact for vulnerable groups, who are predominantly present within applied theatre practice, it is time to rethink value, and to shift constructs particularly in the current blame culture inherent in society where immigrant workers and young people have been targeted as a source of blame.

The workshop provided an opportunity for teachers to experience this process and in doing so hopes to have opened critical thinking. Changing the constructs held by different generations, though here I am referring specifically to young people, could potentially shift the mind set of this 'lost generation' or '*superpredators spiraling out of control*' (Giroux 2013), which has the potential to change the thinking, expectations and inherent prejudice in thought spread by politically fascist rhetoric spread by violence, media and blame cultures. What is the potential impact of this? Potentially a shift in acceptance of the ownership dormant prejudice and reactionary violence.

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