

Forum Theatre: Fishbowl of the Oppressed?

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Introduction

Forum Theatre as a technique is increasingly being drawn upon within research with marginalised groups (Garbutt, 2009; Low, 2010; Proctor et al, 2008; Sliep et al, 2004, Sullivan and Parras, 2008). However the degree to which its underlying philosophical approach, aligned with Friere's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, has made this transition is debatable (Meisiek and Barry, 2007; Thompson, 2000; Tofteng, et al 2011). First developed by Boal (1979), Forum Theatre, sometimes referred to as Popular Theatre (Prentki and Selman, 2003), uses drama techniques to draw a group into discussion and reflection about embodied and structural dynamics that otherwise may go unarticulated. As such it is a process that explores the inter-relations of [language, materiality, silence, and speaking](#).

This article reflects on a research process that sought to gain the views of people with complex needs about new protection policy in Scotland, namely, The Adult Support and Protection Act (Scotland) 2007 (Scottish Government, 2007). The act guarantees that all reports of harm to adults deemed to be 'less able to safeguard their wellbeing' will be investigated by the local authority, but disabled people fear that the legislation could claw back important gains in rights, recognition and freedoms won over many years of campaigning. From the outset the research identified itself as not emancipatory research but as research that strove to work collaboratively with service users to draw on the strengths of all those involved. This article examines the decisions made over the course of the research about:

- how forum theatre was used,
- who took what roles in devising and acting in the forum theatre activities, and
- how these activities were used to widen the scope for discussion with important policy makers and implementers.

The consequences of these decisions in terms of the power dynamics both within the group and beyond the group merits close attention as they hold important lessons for what kind of community it is that service users, social science researchers and social workers can be said to share. Service users pushed the boundaries of the content of the research findings and the form in which they were disseminated. However, they had much less influence on the arenas of dissemination accessed and the degree to which they directly participated in them.

Participatory Inquiry's Circumventions

Learning, it has been said, is a cyclical process with aspirations towards spiralling in a productive direction rather than going round the same positions. However, in preparing this article I find myself revisiting earlier deliberations about competing theories and wondering in what ways have I made progress as a community education practitioner. How do these deliberations apply to current contexts I find myself within, and in what ways do I and the other stakeholders concerned make progress from here?

As part of my PhD research I had to reviewed critical literature on literacy and the social construction of literacy as a form of alienation (Cambourne 1988). The role of education and of print literacy in particular in the grand narrative of industrialisation and its imposition across the globe through capital's colonisation of cultures, peoples and environments can be subject to critique on a number of grounds. However the basic premise, that print literacy frees a society and individuals within it to engage in more analytic and systemic thought and enables higher order thinking and thus forms of societal organisation, has substantial evidence to support it. As the need to reassess precisely what progress we are making towards what ends grows ever more urgent, this premise comes under more intense scrutiny. More hierarchical, more extensive systems (Castells 2009, Dorling 2014, Briant et al 2013) are proliferating in ever tighter networks - based on what criteria of legitimacy? And at whose expense?

Many of those involved in implementing the participation agenda within UK social policy, as this applies to groups marginalised by virtue of age, disabling constructs or

economic conditions, are often unaware that participation methods and rationale were largely forged in the Global South in resistance to the imposition of modernist development agendas. Chalmers (1995) broadly documents the overturning of development inquiry practices from being external consultant and print centred to becoming community centred and grounded in visual and embodied methods. Within this overall inversion of practice, the didactic practice of Theatre for Development was critiqued and converted into a dialogic process drawing on Boal and other popular culture forms across the Global South (Pretki and Selman, 2003; Barber 1997). By the turn of the century, participatory inquiry's most experienced practitioners were questioning whether these methodologies had become in some respects, tyrannical (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Despite changes in inquiry facilitation, the printed document retained the last word, the final say and is still a crucial gatekeeper at the pinnacle of policy formation where feed up becomes cascade down. Those with a long view of participatory appraisal were increasingly concerned that tools were producing a simulacrum of participation, the appearance of it with some participants in some contexts, that did not effectively perturb power relations and thus failed to empower or facilitate more equitable distribution of goods, services, and rights.

I think I have here only a similar tale to tell, and am unclear what its significant contribution to academic debate may be, except that carefully detailing the limits of action may open up space for further exploration and the sense that contributions that fight a rear guard action against more hegemonic narratives is itself a contribution.

Examining what's at risk: negotiated moments in a forum theatre journey

Joining a research project to examine new risk policy in Scotland after it had been framed, awarded funding, and embedded within the host organisation's funding and development strategy, I was tasked with working with a group of service users to develop a series of workshops with other service users across a network of organisations. These organisations had varying understandings of, and commitment to a personalisation of care and citizenship agenda for those they were funded to, support.

The contextual frame that participants drew on to make sense of the workshops within the research was that of training. Within the first session of the research programme they attended, they voiced a belief that they would learn more about how they could manage risk better by coming to the sessions. That the purpose of the meeting was actually the inverse of that; that we were there to consult them and learn about their expertise not dispense our own, that this expertise would be valued by professionals and policy makers, beggared belief for many of them. To what degree the unfamiliarity of this frame for discussion made communication difficult, as opposed to any other cognitive or communication barrier, was difficult to assess in the moment-by-moment engagement that all too fleetingly occurred and was over. The ways in which people signalled the degree of disadvantage or disempowerment they had to overcome to take up the invited role in the activity were muted. Viewing videos of the sessions either in close frame or wide angle did not lend that much more insight into the vague, nagging inklings I carried away from each session. This nagging impression spurred on revisions to what activities we attempted and how we conducted them. However the major challenge remained the same: Getting to the point where people understood enough about the policy structures and given the amount and complexity of information that involved conveying, we constantly struggled to inform and be informed in a way that didn't reconfirm disempowerment. Each participants' service history, and the myriad ways those with power over services had interacted with them meant trust had to be built anew in each encounter in order to convince participants that their views on adult protection were wanted and would not prejudice their support package. And yet people created powerful moments of theatre that conveyed uncomfortable messages.

One group of men were reluctant to speak and had developed strategies with their support staff for doing this in tangential ways, at a pace that did not mesh well with the format of a short play in which actors speak lines that succinctly convey their positions. And yet they had views about what engaging with policy and planning processes about their care (and surveillance) felt like. Within the space of ten minutes working with one of the disabled researchers and the FT facilitator they developed a depiction of not being fully informed that centred upon an image suggested by one of

the men. This one word suggestion became the basis of a short piece of drama in which all participants quickly took a role and played it out before others. It is important to see the sketch and discussion at this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHeMy1iH0Kw> as a transcript cannot convey the shift in participants' stance from one of hesitancy to assertiveness.

In the scene a man, James, in a wheelchair opens an envelope and looks at an official piece of communication, and then rolls towards the other actors in the scene who represent the authority figure who sent the letter. They have formed a huddle with their backs to him. He jerks one way to attempt to find a gap to enter the circle, they jiggle around to prevent this. He tries another way, they move to guard that space muttering 'sorry James not that way, not that way'. He cajoles them, 'come on guys'. After this tussle continues, with reluctance the group separates from the huddle, sits down in a line of chairs facing James and folds their arms, some barely containing their indifference towards him.

There was an immediate sense of recognition from those of us watching, and vividly reminded me of some of my own experiences as a service user. The embodied nature of communication focussed participants' attention and moved forward everyone's understanding of what would be permitted to be expressed. It acted as a gateway to a series of verbal questions that until this point there had been a pressing sense of importance to ask, but not the space to ask them in.

Sensing the increased confidence this scene has injected into the group, I felt this was the time to raise some questions that until this point would have received very guarded, hesitant responses. It did place me in a difficult situation. Having spoken with professionals involved in the delivery of adult support and protection, and aware of the several pressures that constrain the service, I was aware of factors that meant service users may not receive vital information. I could seek to paraphrase the issues, but I knew it would be better if those who work under the constraints had watched the scene and could explain reasons and inquire about their impact for themselves.

I first ask what if you don't know what you don't know? What if you just have the vague feeling you are out of the loop? This is an important aspect of the less than optimal communication dilemma that is all too common. Participants quickly identify they would like to know why information is not being shared, which provides the impetus to explore some of crucial reasons. Over the course of the conversation, participants' responses become much more assertive and direct as transcription of the discussion indicates:

B: What if people said, the reason is we don't think you would understand?

L: That's for me to decide

B: What if they say we don't have enough time to include you in everything

M: They have to make time to include you in it

P: It's not fair

B: So not having enough time isn't a good enough excuse?

P: They can make time.

B: What if they need to protect someone else's privacy?

L: They should tell us that.

What is troubling is that this enabling process of discussion is one that the more powerful community members in this sector find ways not to participate in. Aware that forum theatre allowed service users to gain confidence to discuss issues with social workers that they may not otherwise have, we made the decision to develop videos along with the report we were commissioned to write in order to include an embodied element to dissemination that would open up further discussion with key policy implementers across local authorities. We asked social workers to join us in developing the sketches for the video resources. Some professional workers were willing to role play, but this was the exception rather than the rule. However, they were willing to participate in discussing role plays with the service users who had developed them and to be filmed doing so as illustrated here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=352&v=FkVUe9T9iCo>.

In the videos professionals perform a role they often assumed, but did not use the technique to take a role that would give them insight into what others might feel like.

We were able to push the forum theatre process and the advantages it opened up to a certain degree, but not further.

One telling moment in dissemination came when a service user, the chair of the local authority oversight committee for adult protection and lead officer for adult protection viewed the video example above. In the scene the sister of a service user tells the service user to be quiet and let her handle it in a meeting where moving the service user to avoid problems with a neighbour is being discussed. In the scene, the service user lets his sister talk over him, at which point the scene ends. Some social workers saw it as poor practice that a competent social worker would never allow to occur. Others chuckled ruefully at how realistic we were being. At the open day when service users, chair of committee and lead officer viewed the scene, the chair turned to the service user and asked how realistic it was. His response was to say, *'it's very realistic, we depend so much on our relatives, they are going to be there when you are long gone, we can't risk crossing them'*. The Chair was visibly moved by the service user's response and commented that he really hadn't realised how important this dynamic was and how prohibitive it might be for service users at meetings where their related carers are present. In this moment the embodied gained direct access to the management level of policy implementation. Yet it was a fleeting moment about one aspect of policy that cut across the normal barriers that preclude a depth of exchange between those holding very different positions of power and authority in the community—and that is as far as we got. Not really much further than the dilemmas Cooke and Kothari (2003) highlighted.

Kesby (2008) articulates that one of forum theatre's uses is to provide a 'safe' rehearsal space to practice a number of strategies that might shift power imbalances in the 'real' context. In the case he examines, forum theatre is offered as a space for women to rehearse strategies that could empower safer sex negotiations in the bedroom. In the context reflected upon here, I am drawn to ask did our teams' practice help members rehearse in a safe space strategies that would help them with real encounters with social workers. What evidence I have is not encouraging.

As we began speaking in front of large conferences, I noticed my co-presenters would say this was about their voice being heard. They shied away from saying we had views on how social workers should change practice, in fact they avoided the term social work altogether. This public space, it could be argued is not as directly confrontational nor as risky as the one to one encounters with social workers in case reviews that team members are most familiar with, in some cases being their only prior experience with social workers. After many times playing the social worker, playing how a service user and advocate could challenge, pose questions, make suggestions to a social worker, they still felt so uncomfortable directly challenging the social work sector, that they would not let the phrase 'social work' pass their lips when introducing our project. It took rehearsing planned presentations, freezing action, and interrogating what was happening within the rehearsal to uncover what contributed to this reluctance. Had social workers been willing and been given permission from their sector to participate in the forum theatre process, co-creating dilemmas and co-analysing them, this barrier to empowerment would have played out significantly differently.

I conclude that until those with more power within dilemmas that need to be examined are willing to take the risks of exploring them in embodied dynamic practices such as forum theatre, we are leaving those who have most at stake to swim alone in 'fishbowls of the oppressed'.

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