

DR. STIRLING MCDOWELL
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FOR
RESEARCH INTO TEACHING



**TEACHING AND LEARNING
RESEARCH EXCHANGE**

**Exploring
Identity and
Social Justice
through
Drama in
Schools**

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for Multicultural Education

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About “Exploring Identity and Social Justice through Drama in Schools”

A PROJECT OF SAME WITH WARREN LINDS

The purpose of this project was to make available a series of workshops that involved a group of teachers in learning to use dramatic forms to investigate social concerns with students and find actions to deal with them. The workshop was aimed at teachers from many communities working with high school students, and was open to professionals from around the province. The workshop facilitator was Warren Linds, an experienced educator and theatre-in-education facilitator working towards a doctorate in education at the University of British Columbia.

The Saskatchewan Association for Multicultural Education (SAME) is a provincial organization that promotes intercultural communication in educational contexts. Diversity on the Board of SAME is sought actively, both in terms of attracting members in schools and universities and being inclusive of Saskatchewan’s diverse population. SAME members have an awareness and knowledge of social justice issues and display an activist orientation in their personal and professional lives.

This project was developed because many teachers feel ill equipped to deal with controversial issues in the school with students. It was designed to enhance the educational opportunities available in Saskatchewan schools as well as provide a rigorous development of teachers’ facilitation skills. Although the teachers involved benefit most directly from the project, their students also benefit from the teachers’ increased skills. In addition, school staffs have additional resources available through the teacher participants in this project.

The project uses dramatic forms and processes to investigate a way to talk about and teach and deal with social concerns of students. Teachers determined areas of concern to students through learning and practising facilitation and improvisational teaching skills. These skills were discussed and applied in the context of specific subject areas. The teachers continue to work with students in addressing social issues, such as racism, that have been identified in their schools.

The project provided a series of workshops to learn transformative drama facilitation, with the workshop facilitator working alongside the teacher researchers to develop their drama facilitation skills. Participants were involved in three interrelated workshops that explored the theatre process through themes based on the lives of the participants. They were provided with drama facilitation skills and an opportunity to do research using drama in their own working contexts and develop an ongoing process to continue the development of their drama/theatre facilitation skills. The eight teacher-researchers participating in the project

worked in the areas (among others) of social studies, drama and life transitions and explored themes based on the living experiences of students in three interrelated steps:

1. **Skills Exchange:** This step consisted of two initial two-day intensive skills workshops in which the facilitator led participants in transformative drama processes. Through an immersion in the process, a learning community of support was built that identified and explored themes of concern in the educational practices of participants as techniques, skills and strategies were learned. Issues surrounding the use of drama in schools were identified. Themes emerged from the participants' interests. From the research processes used with participants during the workshops, a set of themes emerged to be explored in their schools over the spring/fall period.
2. **Developing Capacities-in-Action:** Alongside a facilitator, the participants worked to lead students in the dramatic process in their own schools between the skills workshops and also after their conclusion. Their skills in using drama as a research tool were developed. Social issues were investigated with the students and short interactive plays produced.
3. **Follow-up Workshop:** In this step, participants shared what was learned, discussing and using drama to reflect on their experiences and develop strategies for continuing to use the approaches. Teachers dealing with social issues have to react "in the moment" and always making choices. Often they are not sure whether they made the right ones. Popular Theatre was used as a process for inquiring into and debriefing experiences as practitioners. For example, this workshop gave participants a chance to use the methods developed to enable them to reflect on the research (both content and process). It also gave them an opportunity to discuss, adapt and apply skills. An ongoing support system was created and methods were developed to disseminate findings.

The Final Report

1. THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Many teachers feel ill equipped to deal with controversial issues in school with students. As we considered addressing social concerns and social justice issues in school, many questions arise:

- How might drama assist in teaching/learning about social justice and multiculturalism issues and diversity in the classroom?
- What are the felt issues of students?
- How can drama help these issues emerge for discussion and resolution?
- How can teachers develop skills in facilitation that will carry across subject areas?
- How can drama contribute to educators engaging in a process of critical reflection-in-action?

2. THE METHODS AND ACTIVITIES USED IN GATHERING AND ANALYZING DATA

Dramatic forms and processes were used to investigate a way to talk about, teach and deal with students' social concerns. Teachers determined areas in which students had concerns through learning and practising facilitation and improvisational teaching skills. They discussed and applied these skills in their specific subject areas (vocational education, cross-cultural education, psychology, ESL, social studies). Finally, they worked with students in addressing the social issues identified, such as racism.

The study was a form of action research with drama being both the medium and subject of inquiry.

3. RATIONALE: THE RELEVANCE OF THE RESEARCH TO TEACHING AND LEARNING

Students have to deal with a wide variety of issues in their lives. Often they are not able to articulate the issues they are experiencing in traditional forms or through curriculum subjects. Through the dramatic process, students become experienced in sharing their stories as well as seeing others' common or parallel concerns. They thus become more confident.

Teachers, for their part, gain an expanded "tool box". They have explored new approaches and developed plans on how to use them in classroom and extra-curricular activities that link curriculum to student lives. As well, they have practice in facilitating learning in a form somewhat different from traditional teaching. The project included teachers from different schools who teach a variety of subjects and populations, including mainstream classes, vocational adaptation classes, ESL students, students from a rural context and pre-service teachers. By participating in the project, the teacher-

researchers were able to shape experiences that could be shared with others who wish to see students explore the challenges they face and find ways to act in their communities.

Finally, the Saskatchewan Association for Multicultural Education was assisted in its work with schools and pre-service teachers. The project provided a way for SAME to support the many educators who are aware of the necessity of dealing with social issues, such as racism, but struggle to find effective ways to address them.

4. INNOVATIVE POINTS IN THE RESEARCH

Ultimately, the test of research is whether it helps to improve practice by enabling reflection (Fay, 1987). Drama enables practitioners/researchers to share practical stories and develop holistic ways of relating to their work. It also helps them to look for patterns and discuss new methods that practitioners/researchers can try out. The literature indicates a need to incorporate arts-based methodologies in research processes (Barone and Eisner, 1997; Somers, 1996) as well as a need for drama educators to engage in research inquiry into their practice (Taylor, 1996, Grady, 1996, O'Toole, 1996).

The drama methodology used in the project is based on *Power Plays* (Diamond, 1991). *Power Plays* is a form of socially critical and transformative drama (Errington, 1992) that enables students to become aware of how their participation in society has an impact on it. All aspects of society are rendered “problematic” – that is, they are put within the scope of change by those who participate in them. In a keynote address (1992) to the (Australian) National Theatre in Education Conference, Errington outlined some of the features of this drama methodology:

- provision of a time and place to address specific matters of social justice;
- voluntary participation;
- a consciousness in creating texts and consequent ownership of that text;
- an objective of creating active citizens;
- an emphasis on reflective action on the stories that are told; and
- a goal of enacting alternatives and possibilities.

Power Plays investigates issues and relationships through a series of theatre games and exercises exploring common concerns of the group. The process begins from participants’ own experiences, shared collectively so that people learn from each other. Dialogue comes from the body as participants are helped to make the body expressive so that talk is not privileged as the basis of storytelling.

Trust-building exercises are used to build community and safety. The theatrical process then explores themes such as racism, gender, family, peer relationships, violence, harassment or other human rights issues. It is up to the students to decide for themselves what the theme means and how to express it. They are guided through an exploration of an issue and asked to draw from their own lives. The exercises are, to a large extent, non-verbal, using theatrical images to explore personal experiences and issues. The story moves from the individual to the general as the process develops. There is an

emphasis on the actions of the individual, both in the workshop and in the participation of the audience, but the play that is ultimately developed becomes a “microcosm” of the whole of society under examination, thus enabling participants to gain an understanding of larger issues.

In this way an understanding of the complexity of the theme is used to create a play to be performed for participants’ peers. Plays are performed as Forum Theatre, in which audience members attempt to provide alternative ways of dealing with the problem portrayed by replacing characters in the play. New information about the issue in question emerges in the interactions of the characters. However, participating in the workshop and transforming the play through the Forum event is not enough; participants are also encouraged to reflect on how the knowledge that has emerged can be taken back into the real situations of their lives.

Improvised dramatic creation becomes a research vehicle when it embraces and recognizes the knowledge emerging in the theatre development process. Theatre provides an opportunity for individuals in community to develop and use the language of the theatre to express themselves.

Action research processes are based on the knowledge and experiences of the participants. Similarly, this dramatic exploration is based on the premise that participants know what the issues in their lives are better than anyone else. The facilitator doesn’t “teach” the students about the particular issue, but rather asks the questions that will help individuals in the group discuss it. The students make images, thus learning from each other about their assumptions and a myriad of emotions/conditions attached to the particular issue. Their dramatic work also facilitates an investigation of the respect, pride, sharing and understanding that grow from working together in a safe environment.

The Power Plays process has been used in schools across Canada. In particular, through the sponsorship of the Regina Public School Board, Regina high school students participated in two workshops in the early 1990s and the process was introduced to teachers in several conference workshops and an intensive training session.

This effectiveness of the process is illustrated by one Forum Theatre play developed by a high school student group in a Power Plays workshop in Regina. The drama work was carried out in one-hour language arts classes, in which students created full-fledged plays, incorporating writing and dramatic activities. Implemented twice a week for an hour at a time, the process involved introducing the students to warm-up activities, the investigation of issues of concern through image and tableaux, and the development of a short interactive play on these themes. The culminating activity was a Forum Theatre presentation of *Gossip*, a play exploring how gossip affected interpersonal relationships and led to violence. The play was performed for other special education classes. This fun group to work with was able to work through the whole process from introductory exercises, through the identification of themes, and thence to the development of a short play for performance. It was a valuable experience for all concerned. Another issue that emerged with this particular group was how they saw themselves as students, particularly as special education students in relationship to regular stream students. The teacher aides became very involved in the process and one other teacher was highly excited about the possibilities she saw. In the following year, the teacher involved in the project worked alongside another colleague and engaged her students in a similar process.

5. LIMITATIONS AND PROBLEMS

The major limitation is time. Time is needed to get people together for the workshops and the teachers involved have to find time in their busy days to try out their skills.

Another limitation concerns the process of sharing the learning and transferring it to others who were not involved in the workshop. Although this has happened with teachers who work closely together, sharing is limited by the degree of opportunity, time and funding available for building on the work done to date.

6. SUMMARY OF DATA

There were several themes running through the reflections from teacher-researchers. These themes emerged from both the teacher workshops and the classroom work. They reflect both the strengths and the challenges of using these theatre techniques in schools. (Some of the full reflections are included in the appendix.)

- This is a powerful process. It lets participants access feelings and issues through movement and image that they would not be able to access through discussion.
- The process helps to develop community in a group.
- The process links subject areas to students' own experiences.
- It helps people see alternate ways to deal with problematic situations.
- Engaging students requires patience.
- These theatre techniques are not a "make and take" learning experience. They require improvisation and adaptation to the skills, needs and context of the class. There are always risks involved for students and teachers.
- The process reframes common experiences so that they can be closely examined.

7. RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Participants arrived at conclusions that fell into three areas: teachers, students and drama facilitation.

Teachers

- Teachers involved in the use of drama as a social justice tool need to be committed to the process. The process and the people involved let us access, express and explore our issues as teachers.
- We gained skills and tools to further explore this process with other teachers and our students.
- The process enabled us as facilitators to see instantly the effect of the techniques we use in both the content of the dramatic exploration and the

methods students use to develop that content (which is the issues in their lives as re-presented through drama).

- We gained skills in reflecting on our own drama facilitation abilities, including the documentation of our observations and reflections.

Students

- The transformational drama work helped students in the vocational education program identify the problems they were facing in the school and see different ways of dealing with these problems. They need more opportunities and more time to get more out of the process.

Drama Facilitation

- It is much easier to keep students focused when there is more than one facilitator. Teachers, if they are going to use transformational drama in their classes, need to explore the idea of team facilitation with other teachers. Working with our peers (other teachers) will also enable us to try new things that go beyond our comfort zone. Working together will help us to feel like part of an ongoing process and less alone as we try out new strategies.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There is a desire to continue this work and to keep in contact as a group, in order to share our experiences. We would like to go forward with plans to do intensive workshops with students from several schools already identified.
2. The McDowell Foundation needs to continue to invest in helping teachers work together in innovative ways. This investment should involve not only initial projects that are based on teamwork but also follow-up projects that look at the effectiveness of teamwork in specific pedagogical areas.
3. School administrators need to recognize the time and commitment necessary for innovation in teaching.
4. A short course on this process could be offered in the summer as well as full-day introductory sessions at in-services at high schools. Interest in this kind of opportunity was expressed by teachers participating in the McDowell Foundation's Learning from Practice conference in November.
5. The Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation should be made aware of the value of transformational drama as a way for teachers to look at their own issues and should consider using such creative processes in exploring teacher issues.

9. AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The following areas were identified for further investigation:

- long-term research into the acquisition of facilitation and improvisation skills, and the adaptation and application of these skills in other teaching opportunities;
- investigation into how to write about the transformational drama experience and communicate it to others; and
- an exploration of how to train others using a process developed for the teachers who have received training to train others.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A: DATA AND OBSERVATIONS

HARMONY 2000 SATURDAY DRAMA REFLECTIONS – RHONDA AND WENDY

We expected a large group from many communities in Saskatchewan, but unexpected scheduling changes resulted in a Regina group, mostly one collegiate's Harmony organizing committee. There were also a number of younger people in grades seven and eight.

Many participants opted to observe some of the time. That felt like it worked OK. We needed to reassure them that this drama was not about performing. Indeed, many were concerned that they would HAVE TO SPEAK IN FRONT OF OTHERS!!! Once they realized just how the collective activity works, they seemed really relieved.

We had one younger boy who was not comfortable following directions and made games (Blind Walk, etc.) dangerous. He was inappropriate and not ready to look at issues. Moreover, when the activities were conducted at the Collegiate on the 21st, the majority of students were from grades 11 and 12; the younger ones of that group were more mature. I really think that it is important to not go too young, and if one were to do so, to work first to incorporate fun activities and topics for their "being" there.

Many youth really enjoyed Complete the Image. They had some difficulty coming up with stories of racism that were really their own, but did access them eventually. This makes me often ponder HOW MANY young people go about each day with an actual awareness of or concern for the presence of racism in the community. I think that we need to give really real and simple definitions and examples to them, and then to allow them to create the images and metaphors.

The two scenes they created were of a swimming pool with one person being teased, laughed at and ignored and of a scene of one person being beaten by a group. They chose the second as the stronger expression, but added the inactive bystander and the laughing bystander. BEATEN BY A GROUP is a very popular, recurring image... I think that this should be considered. It is simple and accessible. And yes, it is common. I would like to see the kids explore the feelings and inner biases and perceptions inside themselves that lead up to this kid BEING BEATEN. I think that they get a list of biases and stereotypes built inside their personalities, and then feel they are almost expected to act on them.

They created an ideal image that was not very strong visually of each person in a pose with their hands partially in front of their face, so that they are looking outward and inward. When they took the problem image forward, however, they came to a much stronger image of a friendly group supporting and welcoming

the girl who had been the victim. The support shown was something we could have looked at and taken further in terms of how that can play out in real life, if we were together again.

It felt good to use the techniques with real kids. I was impressed that the initial games did not take too long and worked quite well. I needed to refer to the guide a few times to remember what activities were. One hour is short. I liked seeing kids reenter as participants as they felt comfortable. I think that the kids really liked the hour, but that they were pooped due to the rigorous morning activities. This really goes well in the morning. I would love to get a dedicated group together at the Collegiate, and to find a “mission” under which to carry it around to the schools; I’d also like to get it into the rural areas – Milestone, Lumsden, Fort Qu’Appelle, etc.

HARMONY 2000 DRAMA REFLECTIONS – WARREN, RHONDA, CHRIS AND WENDY

We worked with a group of 20 self-selected students in the morning. It was evident from the Blind Walk that this group was ready to leap into the activities we had planned. They were composed from a wide variety of students in the school, mostly at the grade 11 and 12 levels. About one-third of them were ESL students, the others were from the mainstream classes. The mix made a very interesting group, who were more than ready to listen to and learn from each other.

They went through a process of trust-building, moving towards an exploration of racism in their lives. I found the facilitation highly enjoyable with this group. Even when I forgot an instruction for one exercise, I found it easy to redirect while it was happening. I was aware of Warren’s experience and the number of tools he has at his disposal, as he was able to adapt our plans. It seems this comes from training, practice and a sense of “being in the moment” and feeling where the group needs to go.

The issues that arose from the groups were exclusion, isolation, jokes/teasing/being laughed at, and violence as depictions of racism. Their ideal images were welcoming, supporting, friendly and often playful. After creating a series of snapshots, moving from the problem to the ideal image, we discussed how they would perform the sequence for the grade eight classes coming from the feeder schools in the afternoon. The morning was energizing and fun for everyone. One of the most often expressed appreciations was the opportunity they had to really get to know peers they would not otherwise have associated with. It was a powerful expression of the need to breakdown social barriers in a safe environment.

They were then prepared to facilitate small groups of grade eight students to create images of racism and a world without racism. The images of racism were mostly of violence. I found this interesting, because they did not speak as strongly to me as those of exclusion. The images of a world without racism were frequently of children playing. I found it interesting that they looked back to childhood as ideal.

This was a difficult and draining process due to the number of students (two groups of approximately 120 for one hour each, broken into groups of six), the level of noise, the maturity level of the students, the amount of previous preparation,

the novelty of being in a high school, and the lack of time to build trust and context. The high school leaders did a remarkably good job helping the younger students create images given the array of challenges. It was difficult as overall facilitators to see how to make it better. I'm not sure there was a way. The day at the Collegiate was really a great learning opportunity for us because we saw just how the "leader" kids went about motivating the younger ones. I think that the young ones indeed need a "prep" for the activity. They have to have already thought about the issues, and identified that many or most of them have no way of knowing what the picked-on people are feeling or have felt. I'd like to take it into an intimate group, and to try to get the individuals to actually respond to their emotional discoveries.

We are planning to continue to work with this group of high school students on an extracurricular basis. They want to take the work further and as facilitators, we are excited with the possibilities!

TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES THROUGH DRAMA, MARCH 2000 – WARREN AND RICK

We met in a large multi-purpose space where the chairs were set up in a formal audience arrangement facing the front of the room. There was a table for the "presenter" at the front. As the 25 students entered the room they occupied seats in the audience much as a group of high school students would have with "boys" at the back and "girls" in the "middle zone". Very few students in this class took seats near the front and the presenter.

The arrangement seemed to represent a set of classroom politics in that the boys who disliked the entire class placed the most distance between them and the presenter. They set a tone with their body language, noisy kibitzing around and occupation of space that was, as Warren said, toxic.

Their expression of disapproval and distance influenced other students to the extent that they were put in positions of taking a side or being independent. They did not "settle down" when the session began with my introduction. I had to pause and use silence to bring their attention to the fact that we were going to start.

Warren then assumed leadership of the class as he spoke about his purpose in being there and the plan for the evening. The boys at the back maintained their closed and guarded demeanour as he spoke.

When we began to perform the warm-ups and sculpting images, students became more cooperative and involved. It was as if they were released from the bonds of constraints of the lock-down seating arrangement and the power relations the boys imposed on the group. The half-dozen or so boys were fragmented and no longer in a position to push the negative energy influence on the group.

It was a pleasure to participate in the activities and to observe Warren's facilitation of the group. His manner approached that of a thoughtful jazz artist. He used the theatre methods repertoire as a rhythmic structure in which to improvise and

experiment with whatever action/tactic worked best. The flow of action moved swiftly through whole group, small group and individual exercises and responses, with Warren fluidly adapting to the idiosyncrasies of students' responses and initiatives.

The dilemmas he created for individual and small groups were telling: I could observe certain students making choices about engaging – committing to, and inventing themselves honestly – in the activities. Some were taking risks and being authentic. Some, particularly some of the boys were cynically holding back, choosing disengagement, contesting the evening's curriculum and occasionally attempting to turn exercises into clowning around and the ridiculous.

Warren's response to the disengaged was where the jazzy nature of, and improvisational nature as, a facilitator were most valuable. He was able to move through and around the contestation and resistance offered by some characters while simultaneously being sensitive and responsive to the engaged students.

Without doubt, the most effective act of the evening that finally involved the whole group was the Game of Power. Perhaps it was the focus on the concept of power that finally drew the disengaged into the exercise.

During the following week, I touched base with several students and inquired about the session. All of the students, including two of the "difficult" boys replied that the class was one of the best they had experienced.

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION - ELEANOR AND WARREN

Classroom Reflections

- The majority of students responded positively.
- Gossip was more readily addressed and resolved for the remainder of the year.
- Students gained respect for their own drama abilities as well as the abilities of their peers.
- Students learned by experiencing different solutions to conflict.
- Language arts goals were met.
- Opportunities for dealing with controversial issues need to be ongoing in order for the students to transfer problem solving skills to real life.

Personal Reflections

- Powerful tool to connect with students and have fun.
- Guidelines need to be established.
- Safety: physical action is best done in slow motion.
- Trust: no one was asked to perform if it made them uncomfortable.

- Alternative assignment for non-participants.
- Students' issues were different from what I expected.
- Having two teachers helped to get all students involved, expand ideas and add depth to reflection.
- Opportunity for personal and professional exploration was a valuable experience.
- Activities can be used in a variety of situations.

GOSSIP (Warren wrote the following about an improvisation he did with the class)

Pssst ... did you hear?

What?

About him?

What are they saying about me?

A group of high school students with special needs (Special Education Students) – otherwise known by themselves and others as “Speds” – are developing a series of tableaux on gossip, a topic they had chosen the day before as one they would like to address in developing a play. This is a topic with many layers as there is a large number of aboriginal students in the class, making even more complex a complex situation between all teenagers and also between students in the regular stream and the “speds” stream.

In the play we go through several scenes of whispering, silent looks and pointing fingers as an Aboriginal girl who has an apparent physical disability, a learning disability and a speech impediment is talked about, double-crossed and ignored. I clap them through a series of snapshots to tell this simple story which is, as explained in a circle afterwards, an experience shared by almost everyone. At the end of the story, the gossipers go off to the audience, to students who haven't participated in the play except as silent witnesses, and begin whispering in their ears.

I want to stop the play but my voice doesn't seem to carry over the whispering hum. Suddenly I wonder if they are talking about me; about my inability to control them. I am swept up into the (inter) play of me and the group and the play. As a facilitator I try to move on the process but I also become engaged as an observer that the actors gossip to. Afterwards, the teacher commented that this had been an important moment as the students had not known what role I was playing and so they had been forced to improvise.

APPENDIX B: THE POWER PLAYS PROCESS

In the Power Play, we make images of the reality of people's stories. These images are not of fantasies but of real moments we want to investigate. Through the course of the workshop we use theatre to transform these images of reality. We activate them, look forward and backward in time, look inside the heads of both oppressor and oppressed, and investigate the relationships between different characters. Finally, once we have understood our common issues inside the workshop, we take our results to the community at large and through Forum Theatre have community members try to transform the images (now plays) by finding ways to break the oppression that is being portrayed.

The core of the workshop process is to use awareness of our body to examine and deal with issues we face in our lives. In a handout that I give to workshop participants the plan for transforming the spectator into actor is systematized in the following outline:

1. **Knowing the body:** a series of exercises by which one gets to know one's body, its limitations and possibilities, its social distortions and possibilities of rehabilitation.

Each exercise incorporates an introspective physical reflection on oneself.

2. **Making the body expressive:** a series of games by which one begins to express one's self through the body, abandoning other more common and habitual forms of expression.

These games deal with the expressiveness of the body as emitter and receiver of messages in dialogue with others.

These first two types of exercises/games are interrelated and preparatory, centering around the work of the participants with their own bodies. The following stages move into the idea of participation in interactive performance.

3. **The theatre as language:** one begins to practice theatre as a language that is living and present. Plays are developed expressing the issues of concern and the audience, through interaction, tries to come up with alternative methods of dealing with the problems shown. Through this interaction on stage, new understandings of the issue emerge.

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