

Toward a Methodology of Arts- Based Participatory Action Research: Evaluating a Theatre of the Oppressed Classroom Site

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Participatory Action Research has emerged as a new method in the academy, largely in response to positivist approaches that fail to acknowledge the responsibility of academic scholarship to the communities they study. The researchers behind the push for this approach, hailing from the fields of liberation psychology, trauma studies and communication fields (Dura and Singhal; Kim, Young-Chan, and Ball-Rokeach; Watkins and Shulman), argue that by

becoming actively involved in their research projects and interventions, research participants—the ‘subjects’—can be re-framed as partners in scholarly inquiry (Ledwith and Springett; Watkins and Shulman). Much as in Practice-Based Research (Barrett; Bolt; Beck; Piccini; Rye), the re-positioned researcher is able to build ‘tacit knowledge’ through direct experience rather than distanced abstraction. Similarly, by being uniquely ‘situated’ (Haraway) in relation to their subjects, researchers are able to privilege perspectives that are both ‘particular’ and idiosyncratic, and through which unrecognized social realities may be brought to the fore (p. 4).

With this unique ‘situation’ comes great responsibility. Practitioners of Participatory Action Research, calling upon precepts of community-building and social activism, generally use the removal of distance between researcher and subject as an opportunity to contribute to the needs of the community they are studying in practical ways. As such, they place ethics at the forefront of academic research.

While a promising methodological approach with potential application in fields employing creative practice, the relative newness of Participatory Action Research means that there has been limited attention to evaluation of efficacy, particularly with regard to arts-based endeavors—the subject of this study. Scholars continue to debate over how best to measure the effectiveness of a method in which participants have a vested interest in the outcomes of the research (Krimerman; Parks, Gray-Felder, Hunt & Byrne). Part of the challenge may be that much of the data generated hinges on the relationship and interaction between

researcher and subject. For those grounded in more positivist approaches, the inability of practitioners to quantify their data, replicate the results, or predict outcomes (Barrett 2) undercuts the potential value of the insights gained from the approach.

There is a need, therefore, for the efficacy and value of Participatory Action Research projects to be more thoroughly assessed, in order to build a stronger foundation for the approach and to be taken more seriously in the field. For this reason, the present study offers a validity analysis of a participatory community-based project. Using a Theatre of the Oppressed class at an American university as a case study, I draw on measures of contextual, interpretive and psychopolitical validity to assess issues related to: voice, silencing and agreement; the creation of antagonists versus the dissolution of difference; and the role of student practitioners to assess the potential impact of the class on members of two community-based organizations.

FRAMING PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Participatory Action Research involves creating a space in which researchers and members of marginalized communities seek to gain a deeper understanding of the community members' experiences (Smith). This is achieved by encouraging and empowering members of marginalized communities to articulate their own circumstances self-reflectively and critically. Because of the ideally horizontal relationship between researcher and subject in this approach, however, it can often be difficult to discern whether the full range of

goals of Participatory Action Research projects are being met. Thus, I suggest that researchers look to the field of liberation psychology in order to develop a more robust set of practices and standards against which to assess the effectiveness and validity of their approach.

Liberation psychology draws on participatory approaches to help subjects deal with 'collective trauma,' a phenomenon in which the 'the victim is not a sole individual but a whole group' (Watkins and Shulman 14). Since such forms of trauma are understood as being rooted in social processes and not merely individual suffering, practitioners argue that they can only be remedied by 'psychological practices that can repair the bonds among people as well as the narrative threads of an individual life history' (Watkins and Shulman 14). People living in poverty or other marginalized conditions are often labeled as 'resistant' or 'unsuitable' for psychotherapy, as Smith notes. For these individuals, engagement through participatory approaches focused on the social processes that define their circumstances and their place within them provides vital possibilities for collective healing and social change (Smith 22; Martin-Baro 37). Accepting the limits of traditional psychotherapy, says Smith, is akin to accepting the conditions of oppression (23).

Given the important conceptual links between Participatory Action Research and liberation psychology, I argue that a robust validity analysis of Participatory Action Research should incorporate liberation psychology as its framework. According to Mary Brydon-Miller and Deborah Tolman, a

project's validity should be based on the recognition of 'multiple, contradictory realities' within field sites (qtd. in Watkins and Shulman 294) and ascertained through an analysis of various phases of the research process (Watkins and Shulman 295), something that liberation psychology balances very well. In line with the suggestions of Brydon-Miller and Tolman, I argue that the participatory approach could benefit from integrating aspects of contextual (Sung; Tandon), interpretive (McTaggart) and psychopolitical validity (Prilleltensky) into its methodology. Contextual validity concerns the relevancy of the research effort and data-collection process to the participants of the study, interpretive validity involves the use of dialogue between researchers to assess different interpretations of data, and psychopolitical validity addresses whether or not the research educates participants on how to take steps toward overcoming oppression (Watkins and Shulman).

CONCEPTUALIZING THE VALIDITY OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

To test both the effectiveness of Participatory Action Research and these criteria as measures of validity, I assessed the degree to which the activities, practices, and outcomes in a Theatre of the Oppressed class were congruent with the intentions of the practitioners using the above criteria as a guide. Having been asked to conduct an analysis of the Theatre of the Oppressed class by the instructor of another class at the university (described below), my goal was to simultaneously evaluate the methods being employed by the student practitioners,

as well as their potential impact on community members. The Theatre of the Oppressed class offered a perfect opportunity because of its unique participatory approach and larger goals of social activism.

Theatre of the Oppressed is a technique that integrates theater exercises and rituals designed to foster agency and consciousness on the part of audiences, creators and performers. It also aims to engage participants in constructing narratives about the oppressive conditions that affect their lives. Developed in the 1970s by Augusto Boal, it offers an alternative approach to the Aristotelian form of drama, upon which the foundations of Western theater have been built. Aristotelian tragedy, Boal asserts, offers narratives that show society 'as it is.' As Larry Gross explained in a lecture at the university, such narratives elicit audience reactions of 'pity and fear,' often serving as a kind of 'social warning' for audiences to avoid engaging in the behavior that the narrative illustrates. According to Boal, these warnings pacify rather than empower audiences (45) because audience members are largely unaware that they are experiencing a passive political relationship. To counter this, Boal developed participatory theater techniques that sought to re-position the political relationship between audience and actors and place the primary emphasis on the active agency of the audience.

The class in which I participated, entitled *Liberation Arts and Community Engagement*, drew heavily on these techniques and was part of an Applied Theater Arts Masters program at an

American university in Los Angeles, California. The class required student practitioners to conduct field analyses of community organizations throughout the city through leading Theatre of the Oppressed exercises on these organizations' sites. As part of this process, members of two of those organizations were brought in to participate in classroom activities. These community members lived in circumstances of economic hardship and social stigma due to illiteracy, racial discrimination, poverty and homelessness. Some of the community members had criminal backgrounds, which created barriers to their social mobility. Each individual, at one time or another, attested to the importance of the community organization as a basis of support in their lives.

The classroom was comprised of approximately 15 Masters students, all who shared an interest in theater and social justice. The class was taught by the head of the Masters program, 'Karl,' a Theatre of the Oppressed expert, who served as the 'joker,' or leader of the techniques. The classroom functioned both as a learning opportunity in which students received degree credit for their participation as well as a site dedicated to fostering social activism. Students participated in the exercises along with community members, in order to build horizontal relationships with them and gain a first-hand understanding of the Theatre of the Oppressed praxis.

This research is intended as a starting point to a longer project evaluating Theatre of the Oppressed implementation. For the purposes of anonymity, all names of students, instructors, institutions and community participants have been changed.

ABOUT THE THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED CLASSROOM SITE

The objectives of the classroom site were to use Boal's techniques to raise awareness about and address the collective trauma of the participating community-based organizations in Los Angeles (hereafter referred to as Organization 1 and Organization 2). The techniques involved playing theater games with the participants and conducting theatrical exercises designed to engage participants in a self-assessment of their community, as well as their position within the social fabric of greater Los Angeles. Community members were encouraged to construct scenes about the conditions of their lives—scenes that often included experiences with poverty, violence, isolation, racism and classism. Community members were also encouraged to identify 'protagonists' and 'antagonists' in various life situations and scenarios as a way of situating themselves within a larger 'drama' of their subjective experiences. Students were asked to act as both researchers and practitioners of the techniques, practicing the techniques alongside their community partners while also analyzing the activities with a critical eye.

My methods of analysis included participating in three class sessions as an active observer. In addition, I was also enrolled in another course exploring the theoretical foundations of Participatory Action Research and liberation psychology. As the classroom was to be my site of evaluation, and as this evaluation was intended to be a form of Participatory Action Research in itself, I quickly realized that it would be important for me to engage

in the classroom exercises. Hence, I did not take notes directly during the research process but rather, experienced the class and made mental notes of my observations and responses while doing the work. I later wrote up my experiences as field notes. In addition to participating in the classroom activities, I conducted interviews with several students.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

1. CONTEXTUAL VALIDITY

The first standard of validity that I sought to analyze—contextual validity—addressed the way in which a research agenda and questions were identified, and whether they engaged with issues faced by ‘subjects’ in the context of their realities. These questions were introduced into the Theatre of the Oppressed classroom by Karl in the form of theater exercises. The activities were designed to speak to the experiences of the participating community partners and engage community members in giving voice and theatrical life to issues that arose in their daily lives. The community partners reported that they found the activities and aspects of their realities introduced by Karl to be honest representations of their experiences, thereby confirming that the program successfully met with the standards of contextual validity.

This was no easy task, given the complexity of the conditions faced by participants. For example, in narrating the experience of the community members from Organization 2, one student, Danny, was able to describe the ‘struggle’ inherent in the community members’ attempts to

develop solidarity and self-analysis ‘...because they’re dealing with non-citizenship issues, and lack of access to political structures. No legal status’ (‘Danny’). In the case of Organization 1, student-practitioner Lisa was able to understand that

The powers that be are always trying to come up with new ways to get them out of the buildings [where they live] because of gentrification. There’s a city battle over rent increases... a twenty-eight day shuffle where there was a law in the books that said that a landlord could kick the person out of their rooms before the one month point to avoid them becoming legal ‘tenants’ and receiving certain rights under state law. (‘Lisa’)

In short, the community members of Organization 1 and Organization 2 struggle under what globalization scholar David Harvey would suggest are the oppressive conditions of hegemonic neoliberalism. Members of the impoverished classes who are not able to conform to its marketization and commodification standards are often blamed for their poverty and their inability to ‘do-it-themselves.’ The policies that reinforce class stratification and the status quo are often overlooked. According to Helene Shulman, for example, the community members belonging to Organization 2 were embedded in a ‘zone of exclusion’: that is, a physical area within which policy makers have determined that residents will have fewer rights than those living in other geographical areas. Within such zones, banks may refuse to make loans to potential homeowners or gang injunctions may prevent young men from gathering with their friends in public spaces, harming the self-esteem and cohesiveness

of a community. More worrisome, suggests Harvey, is that with a neoliberal model comes the criminalization of the poor: 'The rise of surveillance and policing and, in the case of the US, incarceration of recalcitrant elements in the population indicates a more sinister turn towards intense social control' (165). These circumstances mirrored the realities of many participants in Organizations 1 and 2, who consistently faced social stigma, racism and class discrimination that was closely tied to the conditions of the neighborhoods in which they lived.

Through theatrical scene work, improvisation and character building exercises that depicted circumstances such as those described above, community members were able to creatively express the conditions of their oppression. Interestingly, while the exercises designed to mirror the experiences of community members did meet with the standards of contextual validity in numerous ways, issues still arose around aspects of agreement about expressions of subjective experience. While the exercises employed in the class were designed to give voice to the lived experiences of the members of community organizations, they did not reflect the lived realities of the student practitioners in the class. In the following section, I will describe the Theatre of the Oppressed practices and show how contextual validity was realized as well as challenged.

1.1 VOICE, SILENCING AND AGREEMENT

In a lecture at the university, Shulman reminded students that liberation psychology is different from community

building in that it allows for heterogeneity. 'You can't demand agreement,' she explained, 'you have to do what you can. Listening to pluralistic voices might be enough—it might cultivate a hopeful path for building alliances.' Shulman's lecture emphasized that a practitioner (it was unclear whether she was referring to a practitioner of liberation psychology or of Theatre of the Oppressed) should never suppress minority views, never silence them, but instead, try to find a path forward after airing contradictory points of view.

In contrast to this ethic, within the Theatre of the Oppressed classroom setting, agreement and consensus were sometimes reached through inadvertent practices of silencing that occurred in the context of creating a vehicle for expression on the part of the community partners. In one exercise focused on constructing the antagonist, for example, Karl raised the issue of 'agreement' around identifying this character. The concept was to use the exercise to help the group collectively identify a character that the group agreed represented conditions of oppression within the community. While agreement among the community members was easily reached, extending this agreement to the student practitioners (and vice versa) was not always easy. The problematics of agreement are exemplified in the following field notes:

When we started creating antagonists, I noticed something more pronounced occurring: while the [Organization 1] and [Organization 2] members were very vocal and adding lots of opinions about who the character was, what he'd say, etc., the rest of the class—that is, the students—felt silent to me. When I expressed my version of what a landlord would say ("Tom

Gilmore,' I was thinking to myself—my landlord and one of the primary culprits of gentrification of downtown Los Angeles), I offered what I saw as being a more complex version of a landlord: a person who, out of one side of his mouth would say, 'Where's My Rent?' while on the other side, pretended to be your best friend. Contrary to the reaction to the community member's example (a dominant, one-dimensional landlord who stomped his foot and demanded, 'Where's my rent?'), my example was rejected as a clear antagonist. The group expressed that they didn't recognize my landlord. In that moment, I realized that the exercise wasn't really about expressing all of our experiences. Rather, it was geared toward the experiences of the 'oppressed' people in the room. This must have been why the student practitioners remained silent for this portion of the exercise—they weren't experiencing landlord problems, because they are in the economic position of being able to pay their rents. I began to feel a subtle divide taking place in the class, which lasted throughout the rest of the night. The content of the work was about fostering the voices and experiences of the 'oppressed' community members, but not of the student practitioners. The others—we—remained silent. (Field Notes, 2011)

The dilemma I encountered speaks to issues of voice and silencing, and the role of the student-practitioners in the classroom setting. Such a dilemma also raises questions of interpersonal trust building between members of the group. While all members of the class adopted a positive, supportive attitude toward the work—imperative in Participatory Action Research practice—I noticed that the student practitioners appeared to be inhibited, reluctant to express their opinions. Their

body language and quiet observation indicted feelings of caution, almost detachment. It is likely that in their detachment, they were attempting to allow the voices of the community members to come through. In other words, we were helping *the others* perform their experiences.

While the performance of experience is at the heart of Theatre of the Oppressed praxis, the pervasive sense that community members had 'legitimate' things to say while the student-practitioners did not only reinforced the class and social divides between these two groups. By not being allowed to voice their own experience, the student-practitioners were, in effect, silenced. This silence, I argue, poses a problem for the work as a whole—disabling the student practitioners from being fully present in the room; allowing them to avoid having to express vulnerability, or risk having their life situations questioned, evaluated, challenged. As I noted later in my field notes, 'If every scenario we act out is merely about the problems faced by community members, *rather than about the intersections between our worlds*, then how are any of us to undergo change?' The questions raised here point to possible obstacles in contextual validity; that is, a portrayal of issues that are relevant to all the participants in the room. By negating *any* expression of their experience, the subject positions of the student practitioners were homogenized and 'flattened' (Parrenas).

As Watkins and Shulman explain:

Martin-Baro envisioned a psychology that would acknowledge the psychological wounding caused by war, racism, poverty, and violence; a psychology that would

support historical memory and critical reflection; a psychology that would aid the emergence of the sorts of subjectivity through which people felt they could creatively make sense of and respond to the world. (25)

Central to this vision was the idea that psychologists are not ‘experts,’ but rather, ‘experience’ is democratized. To acquire new psychological knowledge, Martin-Baro argues, we must actively ‘place ourselves’ in the perspectives of others (29). It is important for all subjective experiences to be acknowledged in a Theatre of the Oppressed exercise, in order for the exercise to be successful.

While the visions of Watkins and Shulman and Martin-Baro speak to the need to recognize a more holistic approach to trauma—one in which otherwise marginalized voices are heard as ‘experts’ in their own lives—the practical application of this model warrants clarification in the context of Theatre of the Oppressed praxis. I caution practitioners against the danger of treating ‘experience’ democratically and instead ask: Why not approach the concept of ‘experience’ subjectively? Why not allow for diversity in voice, for dissolution of ‘othering’ in the acceptance of disparate points of view and for multiple shades in understanding the conditions of oppression? A need exists for a more ‘situated’ approach to oppression, in part because of the ironic fact that in democratizing such experiences, we inadvertently render them subject to hierarchy and expertise. In other words, many viewpoints and experiences are buried and disallowed even in the process of democratization. The real nexus-point worth examining is the place where contrasting experiences and subjectivities

(even radically different ones) intersect, collide and merge. A truly revolutionary vision of liberation psychology—and corresponding Theatre of the Oppressed praxis—would allow for divergent interpretations of suffering to come to the fore.

2 INTERPRETIVE VALIDITY

Interpretive validity engages a dialogic approach in which researcher and community members ‘experience themselves as free to discuss possible meanings of narratives and to propose alternate interpretations to one another’ (Watkins and Shulman 296). Applied to the context of the Theatre of the Oppressed classroom site, interpretive validity involves community members and student practitioners formulating a dynamic analysis of each others’ experiences as a way to achieve a more engaged research process.

Interpretive validity was well demonstrated in several of the Theatre of the Oppressed techniques and exercises. Of particular relevance was the exercise of forming scenes and having other members of the community (as well as students) ‘step into’ the scene to offer even more detailed and accurate approaches to the character of the antagonist. In one such scene, student-practitioner Danny and Organization 1 community member Jake, played out a scenario about the abuse of women. Danny took on the role of the antagonist, playing the role of the ‘wife beater,’ while Jake played the protagonist, arguing for an end to violence against women.

Mid-way through the scene, Karl stopped the actors, and asked the audience

to make suggestions as to how the antagonist could be ‘improved.’ In other words, how could the antagonist become an even more formidable obstacle for the protagonist? Adolpho, another student practitioner, got up from the audience and stepped into the scene, offering a suggestion. Playing the role of ‘wife beater,’ Adolpho toughened the character up, made him even more of a challenge to argue against. Once Adolpho had demonstrated this change, Danny re-entered the scene and mirrored the same actions and lines that Adolpho had dramatized. The same process was repeated with Gloria (a community member) and Anita (a student-practitioner). The ability of diverse members of the class to step into the scene and re-dramatize the characters demonstrated that an authentic sense of trust was being built in the room. In this instance, interpretive validity—the dialogic approach to the experiences of all participants—was achieved.

2.1 CONSTRUCTING ANTAGONISTS OR DISSOLVING DIFFERENCE? CLARIFYING THE GOALS OF THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED

The dialogic approach to the work was problematized, however, in an important question raised earlier in the evening by Greg, a member of Organization 1. In the context of a discussion as to what the ‘final’ performance piece would consist of, Greg raised his hand and said that in addition to the stories of the community members being dramatized in the final piece, he would like to see the stories of the *students* reflected as well. According to Greg, ‘The system affects all of us, whether we’re part of [Organization 1’s] community or part of

the [university] community. I’m sure many of these students have gotten a ticket before. I’d like to see the play reflect their stories and show how the system is at fault.’

Here, Greg expressed an interest in showing how all members of the community were being oppressed by a system in which we all participate. Greg was attempting to see the group of students and community members as *partners in the process of creating a theatrical work*. In contrast to much of the apparent purpose of the Theatre of the Oppressed praxis, he did not simply want the final piece to reflect ‘his’ community’s interests, problems and concerns. Instead, Greg requested unification. He sought to take a truly interpretive, dialogic approach to Theatre of the Oppressed.

Greg’s request speaks to the question of ‘othering’ and difference within the praxis of Theatre of the Oppressed. Is there productive utility in creating the protagonist/antagonist binary? Do the goals of Theatre of the Oppressed seek to dissolve difference between practitioners and community members, and between ‘joker’ and student? Or is the dissolution of difference secondary to the goal of identifying and dramatizing oppression within the confines of the target community being ‘researched?’ Does the inability to dissolve difference in Theatre of the Oppressed praxis conform to the ethics of Participatory Action Research? And, perhaps most importantly, do these practices correlate, or are they fundamentally opposed? These and other questions remained unanswered.

Other examples of the Theatre of the Oppressed work reinforced these questions. Several of the exercises were geared toward helping the community partners identify the antagonist, or ‘oppressor’ in their daily lives. This is described in the following field notes:

Tonight, Karl talked about what we’re learning in the class currently—the idea of Logos, the expression of an opinion. He explained that we’re constructing the ‘antagonist.’ one person went into the middle of the room and was the antagonist (‘Jan Perry,’ a politician). Kayoko was first. She went into the center and said one line, as the character of Jan. Then we all repeated it. Then another person went into the center and said another line, as Jan. Kayoko repeated that line, then hers and theirs together. Then we all repeated both lines. This continued for about 4-5 lines, until as a group, we had many lines as the character of Jan, and we were all saying them together. Then Karl asked Kayoko to use the lines as a jumping off point, and construct a monologue as Jan in her own words. So she did—and instantly, the character’s authoritarianism, political savvy and other aspects of sliminess came out. Throughout the exercise Karl asked the group: ‘Do we all recognize this character? Do we agree that these are things she might say?’ Generally there was consensus, but sometimes opinions differed. When they did, Karl invited another member of the group into the middle to play Jan. We repeated this exercise with three or four versions of Jan. Then we repeated the same character developing exercise with another antagonist—a landlord. (Field Notes, 2011)

The exaggerated characters that participants generated through the exercise

are part of a Theatre of the Oppressed technique which involves the construction of a ‘stock’ antagonist. Drawing a heightened contrast between the participants and the antagonist is a useful strategy in building conditions for progress. For there to be clear victors in the kind of dramas that play out in the street, argues George Lakey, author of *Strategizing for a Living Revolution*, it is important that the ‘simplicity of contrast between the protestor’s behavior and that of the police be apparent’ (149). Similarly, the technique used in the classroom was intended to clarify the specific dynamics of oppression for the community members. The antagonist constructed in the sketches by participants gave the oppressive conditions a ‘face.’ That face was not meant to be a fully fleshed-out character but rather a caricature of the embodied practices and conditions of the community’s oppression.

While seemingly an important starting point for raising consciousness about the conditions of oppression that underlie a specific situation or cultural pattern, this technique in itself contradicts liberation psychology’s theory of collective trauma, as well as the deeper theory of ‘bystanding.’ Bystanders, according to Watkins and Shulman, are members of society who have normalized pathologies of colonialism and globalization, and profited from these pathologies (64). ‘Bystanding’ is enacted by ‘taking retreat in a focus on the personal and a pursuit of happiness carried out within a very narrow range of life with families and friends’ (65). Liberation psychology, which calls for a complex understanding of *all* conditions of a community’s oppression, seeks to

problematize the oppression of everyone in the drama, not just a select few. Its focus on bystanders offers a more holistic way of approaching trauma in that it accepts that trauma underlies not only the experiences of those being overtly oppressed, but also the experiences of those ‘inadvertently’ acting as oppressors.

The issue of inclusivity was, I believe, what Greg was trying to express in his attempt to bring the students’ stories into the theater piece. A piece unifying the group would convey the idea that, collectively, the students and the community members make up a larger community of LA residents, Americans, and citizens; each affected in different ways by the same hegemonic structures which inform our environment. In requesting that students’ stories and experience be exemplified in the work, Greg addressed a larger need for inclusivity in Theatre of the Oppressed praxis—perhaps even one which acknowledges the conditions of ‘bystanding’ described by Watkins and Shulman. However, such inclusivity potentially conflicts with the objective of the Theatre of the Oppressed exercise designed to identify the ‘antagonist,’ or ‘oppressor.’ The danger of such a stark construction of an antagonist is the potential for disengagement from liberation psychology’s holistic approach to collective trauma. In fact, by separating the experiences of one segment of the community from another, this exercise may have reinforced differences between these actors, reinscribed static, or ‘fixed’ subject positions of community members, and also potentially risked their ‘re-objectification’

rather than addressing larger aspects of collective trauma.

3 *PSYCHOPOLITICAL VALIDITY*

Prilleltensky discussed concepts of epistemic psychopolitical validity and transformative psychopolitical validity, suggesting a difference between our ‘understandings of the psychopolitical dynamics of oppression in the issue at hand,’ and ‘our interventions toward liberation’ (qtd. in Watkins and Shulman 296). The former asks us to engage with an understanding of the conditions that underlie oppression, while the latter addresses engagement with solutions.

Within the context of the Theater of the Oppressed classroom site, epistemic psychopolitical validity was demonstrated to a greater degree than transformative psychopolitical validity, in that the circumstances and experiences identified and dramatized focused on scenarios of oppression. Less evident was the use of transformative processes (indicators for how the situation could be changed). With so much emphasis placed on identifying oppression and giving voice to trauma, little attention was given to an analysis of how this trauma could be overcome in the world outside the classroom. Perhaps this limitation occurred as a result of the short amount of time in which the work took place. Meeting only two hours per week and often involving different community members in each session, the Theatre of the Oppressed class simply didn’t offer enough time or consistency to address aspects of psychopolitical literacy. This limitation speaks to the larger issue of project design

in Participatory Action Research, and the need to account for fluidity of participants and time constraints on meeting research goals.

3.1 ROLE AMBIGUITY OF STUDENT PRACTITIONERS

Finally, in relation to the overall validity of the Theatre of the Oppressed classroom as Participatory Action Research site, the ambiguous nature of the role of the student-practitioner posed difficulties for understanding the goals of the classroom site. The community partners were assigned clear objectives: to identify and locate the sources of their collective trauma through participating in the Theatre of the Oppressed games and techniques. The student-practitioners, however, were faced with balancing multiple roles and objectives. They were asked to participate in the games, exercises and praxis, involving themselves and (to an extent) their own experiences in the content of the Theatre of the Oppressed class. Simultaneously, the classroom was intended to serve as a learning tool for their own study of how to lead, or ‘joker,’ the Theatre of the Oppressed exercises and techniques. These dual goals would have been enough to occupy any student-practitioner. However, overlaid onto this agenda was a research agenda that involved analyzing the community partner organizations and what impact the Theatre of the Oppressed exercises were having (if any) on their experiences. While such a complex combination of agendas is ambitious, without a clear articulation of goals and strategies, the students may have been left feeling only vaguely confident about what they needed to accomplish. Such role ambiguity presents a further

caution to practitioners of both Participatory Action Research and Theatre of the Oppressed praxis.

LIMITATIONS

This study was affected by several noteworthy constraints. Foremost among the limitations were the organizational challenges of the program, some of which entailed issues of communication and coordination between the program facilitators, instructors, site coordinators and students. I was not brought into the classroom setting until well past the first half of the semester. This was mainly due to the difficulty in integrating auditors or ‘observers’ into a program that, in only its second year at the university, is just beginning to find its feet. Additionally, I was only able to attend three classroom sessions before the end of the semester. This qualitative assessment, therefore, is not lengthy. My observations were limited to a few short sessions—sessions that, while engaging and educational, were challenging for me to contextualize within the broader framework of a semester-long class. The challenges that I faced in conducting this research, merely from a logistical standpoint, provide important data-points in themselves. They demonstrate that in order to be effective, an organizational strategy should facilitate active communication at all levels—between students and faculty, between faculty and student evaluators, and across the board to members of the participating community organizations.

CONCLUSION

This article provides a basis for a broader discussion of the social value of community-based arts engagement. While the goal was to conduct a validity analysis of a participatory community-based approach using a Theatre of the Oppressed classroom site as a case study, such a study could prove useful for other areas of Creative Practice as Research. Despite the overall validity of the Theatre of the Oppressed classroom as a site for Participatory Action Research practice, I identified challenges of group agreement versus individual subjectivity, the construction of antagonists versus dissolution of difference, and the need for student practitioner role clarification. It is my hope that the tensions observed here may advance our understanding of Participatory Action Research and help shape the goals of this important new method.

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