Playback Theatre, Communication Pedagogy, and Community Engagement: Improvising Third Space and Mutable Selves Through Narrative Performance

By Linda M. Park-Fuller, Ph.D

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies in communication reveal a growing interest in community engaged learning projects which propose to benefit both students and the community served. This essay draws upon poststructural perspectives in service learning, performance theory, narrative pedagogy, and improvisation practice to introduce Playback Theatre as a uniquely communicative educational tool for constructive community engagement. Following a discussion of background and philosophy, it identifies five educational benefits of using Playback Theatre to create a "site of possibility." It includes a report of an eight-week collaboration presented twice over two semesters, involving upper-division communication students with selected at-risk students at a (then) under-performing middle school in a western city. The descriptive report grounds, in a community enagaged context, the educational benefits revealed.

> *We are only going to be able to feel comfortable in this world of*
> *multiculturalism, in this world where we struggle to sustain joint performances*
> *with disparate codes, if we combine with the improvisation that has to go on a*
> *sense of the aesthetic values involved in the process: the sense that the*
> *traditional*
> *frameworks within which individuals carry on their improvisations are*
> *themselves*
> *works of high art and of improvisation as an art form. (Bateson, 1993, pp. 119-*
> *120)*

Recent studies in communication reveal a growing interest in community engaged

pedagogy at the university level. Addressed under various rubrics as "social justice

curriculum" (Frey, Pierce, Pollock, Artz, & Murphy, 1996; Pollock, Artz, Frey, Pierce, &

Murphy 1996), "expanded classrooms" (Katula & Threnhauser, 1999), or "service

learning" (Conville, 2001; Novek, 1999; Droge & Murphy, 1999; Crabtree, 1998),

community engaged learning offers opportunities for students to participate in activities

that address community needs while reflecting upon related classroom theoretical and

practical knowledge. Such activities propose to offer benefits not only to the student but

also to the community served. This essay introduces Playback Theatre as a uniquely

communicative approach to learning through service. Following a section on background

and philosophy, it identifies five pedagogic benefits of using Playback Theatre. A report

follows describing an eight week project presented twice over two semesters where

upper-division communication students in a performance studies course collaborated

with selected at-risk students at a (then) under-performing middle school.

Situating my work on the borders of poststructuralist community service

pedagogy as a starting point, this study draws from a broad spectrum of influences

including performance theory, improvisation practice, and narrative pedagogy to explore

the potentials and problems of improvising spaces and selves through the joint

performance of personal narratives in a community service learning project.   Moreover, I situate this effort squarely within the boundaries of communication and performance pedagogy—specifically, *embodied* communication pedagogy—which offers students opportunities to interact in meaningful and challenging communication encounters, to engage in ethically rich communication situations and discussions, to develop and deploy appropriate communication strategies and practices, and to sharpen a host of communication skills in contexts that matter.

<div align="center">Background and Philosophy</div>

In the 1980s, under the rubric of *performance in social contexts*, performance studies led the way in what is sometimes called the community-embeddedness or community-engagement movement through a myriad of educational-community activities addressing a variety of social issues that continue through today (Capo, 1983; Valentine & Valentine, 1983; Mann, Hecht, & Valentine, 1988; Rassulo & Hecht, 1988; Corey, 1993; 1996; Valentine, 1999; Rich, A. 2000; Rich, M., Rodrequez, J. L., Page, J. L., & Hastings, R. N. 2004). That performance tradition linking classroom pedagogy to community outreach dovetails with education-based studies in service learning though they come from differing streams of practice. A look at service learning reveals some similarities and differences.

In a recent essay, Butin (2003) offers a typology of service learning conceptualizations that provides a useful frame in which to discuss projects, problems and potentials of pedagogy in the community. His typology consists of four philosophical perspectives. The first, a technical perspective, focuses on the educational innovation itself. That is the perspective most often associated with education-based

service learning where emphasis is given to the techniques of service learning, the setting

of objectives, gathering of data, scheduling of meetings. Second, a cultural perspective

focuses on giving back to the community and on the sense of community engendered by

the project. The third, a political perspective associated with critical pedagogy,

interrogates the power relations of service learning. The fourth is a poststructural

perspective that disrupts the presumptions upon which *service* and *learning* are based,

making service learning "a site of identity construction, deconstruction, and

reconstruction with profound consequences of how we view the definitions and

boundaries of the teaching process" (Butin, 2003, p. 1684).   While none of these

perspectives is mutually exclusive, and while acts of community engagement vary widely

in their philosophical bases, I suggest that performance projects which emphasize artistic

service to the community most often share characteristics with cultural service learning

philosophies. Those which encourage audiences to actively engage social issues through

triggered discussions, enacted and transformed scenes, or shared narratives also share

characteristics with poststructural perspectives. Here, I discuss one form which shares

those traits.

Based upon Lyotard's (1984) notion of incredulity of metanarratives and

Foucault's (1983) subjectification of self, a poststruralist view questions the truth claims

of service learning and recognizes the performative aspects of service learning activities

in providing opportunities to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct or, simply, to

replicate status quo power structures and presumed identities. The poststructural lens

allows us to see service learning as neither inherently positive nor negative,

transformative nor repressive, but rather as a site of possibility that will be what the

participants make of it. Rather than an act of transferring knowledge, aid, or power to the

marginalized or less fortunate in society (what some have called, *drive-by good deeds*), a

site of possibility is a *point of access to discovering and creating knowledge, resources,*

and power—one's own, and that of the communal group. It is a place where individuals

can learn to share power, channel it, as well as deploy it; a place of exchange where we

learn from one another and provide aid to one another. It is a site of *inter*dependence.

Given that perspective, then, no matter what the individual project may be, the

communication community service learning collaboration can be seen as a site of

rhetorical, interpersonal, intercultural, organizational *communication performance praxis*

where students, together with their community partners, design and build communication

experiences, which can be examined, dismantled, reassembled, reconstructed. Like an

artist's studio, engineer's laboratory, or builder's workshop, it is a place to experiment.

It is a place where experiments matter, but also, seen through the poststructural lens

where all reality is indeterminate, and tenuous, it is profitably seen as a place of serious

play.

According to Giroux (1996), "Indeterminacy, and not order, should become the

guiding principle of a pedagogy in which multiple views, possibilities, and difference are

opened up as part of an attempt to read the future contingently instead of from the

perspective of a master narrative that assumes rather than problematizes specific notions

of work, progress, and agency" (p. 67).   While I agree with his recognition of the need to

read the future contingently, I suggest that it is not always necessary to choose between

the binaries of indeterminacy and order. Indeed, in aesthetic expression, they are the

point and counterpoint that provide the stability and surprise necessary to entertain and in

turn, educate. Rather than selecting between indeterminacy and order, I suggest a third

space of performativity for pedagogy—a site where identities and social structures are

composed and re-constructed through joint performances of personal experience and

expression.

Understanding education, social structures, and community service as sites of

possibility is to use a metaphor familiar to performance scholars. Whether that site of

possibility is couched in Schechner's (1985) terms as a theoretical negotiation between

the *I* and the *not I*--that unique construction of self-in-role he calls the *not not I* (p. 4); or

as Turner's (1974) liminal space (p. 231) of betwixt and between; or Conquergood's

(1985) dialogic performance space suspended between the four ethical pitfalls of

performing the other; or Boal's (1995) notion of the human being as simultaneously actor

and spectator of one's life (p. 13); performance theory and practice both antecedes and

draws upon poststructuralism in focusing our attention on sites of possibility in ourselves

and in our worlds. Performance—the act of improvising a friendly greeting in the

hallway, standing in for a colleague in an unfamiliar situation, or playing a role on stage

always creates something (an act and identity) that did not exist before, always brings a

new possibility into manifestation—however normalized, awkward, stable or ephemeral

those performances might be. Reflection on these creative acts teaches us how they were

created, shaped, determined by culture, resisted, and how they and the discourses that

guided them, might be dismantled, reshaped, redesigned, reframed. Conceived of as a

performance site of possibility, the communication community-project has the potential

to reveal communication in all its dynamic potential, engaged, contingent,

unpredictable—a somewhat risky but richly exciting pedagogic complement to the equally important abstract theories and principles we showcase in textbooks.

Just as the perspectives of poststructuralism and performance theory support a view of community service learning as a site of possibility, so does the narrative modality that undergirds the Playback Theatre form.   Communication and performance scholars are familiar with the complex relationship between narrative and social/identity construction (Johnson, 2003, Brockmeier & Carlbaugh, 2001; Spry, 2001; Goodall, 2004, 2000; Alexander, 2000, Park-Fuller, 2000, Corey, 1998; Gingrich-Philbrook, 1997, Jones,1997; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Mumby, 1993). To tell one's story is both to remember a past event and to posit a fictive world, a tentative self (Allison, 1994). To alter the story or the telling of the story slightly alters the projected world, the self, and the relationship between them. Thus, narrative is a communicative mode of possibility, and to alter that narrative, by telling, enacting, and re-telling, further exposes its re-creative potential.

From education literature, the case for narrative's pedagogical power is perhaps best articulated by Hopkins (1994), a communication scholar who bases his theory of narrative schooling on Dewey's (1938/1963) experiential pedagogy and phenomenological psychology.   Hopkins urges a replacement of education's mechanistic root metaphor of "transferring knowledge" (similar to what Freire [1970/1994] refers to as "banking knowledge"), with a new root metaphor of narrative.   Using narrative as a root metaphor re-locates the focus to the student as agent and to their lived-experiences.

Having trained pre-service volunteers in the U.S. Peace Corps staff office, Hopkins discovered that academic training did not prepare the volunteers to work in an

ambiguous, changing environment where they were forced to rely on the authority of

their own experience for judgment. There, they were called upon to adapt to situations

and circumstances that were only broadly predictable. He points out, "The most

important thing [the volunteers] needed to learn was how to learn from their experience

of 'being there' and coping and adapting" (p. xv). Similarly, he argues, today's students

must learn how to cope with change and the unpredictable future.

> Our institutions of all kinds are faced with the necessity of adaptation, self-
>
> invention, or extinction. Change—in technology, in mores, in values, in the
>
> conditions of work, in family life and relationships, in communication patterns, in
>
> the profoundest perspectives of living—is the dominant, if not the only, constant.
>
> It makes the future a foreign country and an intercultural experience. (xv-xvi)

In view of this urgent need for adaptation skills, another primary objective of today's

education may be to teach students how to improvise.

While not often specified in pedagogic approaches, improvisation is singled out

as an element of successful learning by anthropologist, Mary Catherine Bateson.

Bateson's life and work in numerous and contrasting cultures has given her insight into

how we construct meaning in our lives, identities, cultures, by making them up as we go

along. Far from suggesting that such pragmatism is insincere or solipsistic, she implies

that only by re-inventing ourselves and our world can we open ourselves to positive

change. In a pedagogic study (1994), Bateson identifies characteristics of improvisation

in relation to the learning process. These include a sense of the self as mutable; an

appreciation for spiral versus linear learning; the co-presence of continuity and disruption

in learning; the difference between attending and concentrating; the importance of ritual

and practice; the need for active participation; a recognition and valuing of differences; a philosophy of sharing knowledge and power as opposed to zero-sum, competitive learning; and a linking of the familiar with the strange.   In her opening essay, Bateson states:

> Living and learning are everywhere founded on an improvisational base. The discovery of new needs may be followed by adding units to the syllabus, but it can also lead to the discovery of how human beings make do with partial understandings, invent themselves as they go along, and combine in complex undertakings without full agreement about what they are doing. These skills also are learned. (p. 9)

Teaching students to engage in improvisational thought and practice may help them to better utilize their classroom knowledge and gain confidence in their abilities.

Whether approached through the poststructuralist lens, the lens of performance theory, of narrative pedagogy, or of improvisation practice, therefore, understanding community service pedagogy as a site of possibility provides unique opportunities for communication students. It allows the participants to question such notions as who serves and who is being served by the project? Who learns and who teaches? It also allows the participants to examine who they are, and who they are performing-into-being as they *act* in the world; what roles they are accepting and what roles they are rejecting; how they are composing themselves (Bateson, 1989), as they go about the activities of the project, through improvised performances of a self they may come to understand as mutable (Bateson, 1994, pp. 59-76). As corporations, international and governmental institutions, as well as community leaders increasingly come to rely on citizens trained to

communicate effectively in a rapidly changing world, our students will need more than

data, principles and theories to meet those needs. They will need grounded practice.

Playback Theatre: Improvising Acts of Service[1]

Developed in New York's Hudson River valley in the 1970s, Playback Theatre is

an improvisational performance form in which audience members are invited to share

feelings and tell stories from their lives which are reenacted on the spot. The ensemble

consists of a conductor, a musician, and actors who must be as skilled in listening as in

performing. Typically, a performance includes several forms of enactment. For

example, when the conductor (similar to an emcee), asks the audience to share a feeling

and an audience member volunteers that she is feeling relieved because she finally got

her car out of the repair shop, the ensemble plays back the audience member's relief, by

creating a multi-dimensional *fluid sculpture*—a moving statue made of the actors'

bodies—in which each actor portrays an individual expression of how the audience

member's relief looks and sounds. The individual portrayals are joyful, peaceful or funny

depending upon how the individual performer perceived the teller's experience, but the

cumulative effect of the total ensemble is surprising, complex, and often delightful or

poignant, depending upon the emotion. Following the enactment, the conductor checks

with the audience member to see if she is satisfied that the feeling was communicated. If

not, the group will reenact the performance in a *correction*. Then, other audience

members' feelings are shared and enacted. Additional short forms such as *pairs*, in

which audience members' contrasting emotions are enacted, or *tableaux* in which stories

are enacted in freeze frames are interspersed between or presented after stories. For the

short forms, audience members often stay seated in the audience.

In the portrayal of stories, the audience members who volunteer to share are invited to sit on stage in the teller's chair. Everyone listens as a story is told. The conductor becomes an interviewer, asking for details that help flesh out the scenario, inviting the teller to cast the story from the company of performers. Following a signal from the conductor, the actors move into the *set-up*, selecting boxes or fabrics that become props and arranging them on the stage. They do not confer with one another. During this time, the musician sets the mood of the story through music. Once the actors are in place, the enactment of the story begins, with music serving as improvised accompaniment.

Enactments vary in form and manner. Actors who have been cast will play those roles. Actors who have not been cast, may participate in uncast, minor roles such as a crowd member, or may help create the mood, the environment, or an inanimate character such as a toy that the children in the story are fighting over, a house that is being remodeled or the fear someone cannot get over whenever he boards an airplane. After the enactment, the teller is acknowledged, asked for a response, and thanked for sharing the story. That story is followed by others to comprise an evening of story sharing.

Some stories are funny; some stories are tragic; some stories are poignant; some are not really stories, but dreams remembered. Often, in retrospect, it is possible to discern a *red thread* (Hoesch, 1999) that connects one story to another as a counterpoint to or an amplification of an idea contained in a story told earlier. All stories are enacted as from the teller's point of view, with respect to and support of the teller. No audience members are coerced to share their stories.

For general audiences, Playback Theatre fosters a sense of community. It allows participants to see themselves in their neighbors' stories, and to share each others' joys and trials. It also allows audience members to tell stories from differing points of view, or stories that carry different messages. Since everyone's story is important, Playback Theatre disrupts our notions of whose stories are worth telling and worth hearing (Salas, 1993, 7-8). Playback Theatre can be a redressive experience, validating tellers' emotions as they see their stories played back to them with sympathy and understanding. It also allows tellers to distance themselves from their experience so that they can gain a broader perspective on an intimate conflict or issue. Moreover, because the playback is never a perfectly precise replication of the teller's story or feeling, the teller may see something in a performer's portrayal that sparks a new insight so that the sharing which occurs in a performance has the potential to be more than entertainment, but also shared wisdom.

<center>Pedagogic Objectives</center>

I find the Playback Theatre form especially useful in accomplishing several pedagogic objectives. It allows me and my students to explore: 1) non-competitive, interactive performance forms; 2) narrative performance and narrative communication; 3) improvisation; 4) human-centered pedagogy; 5) community-engagement.

First, Playback Theatre is open to actors and non-actors. While it requires commitment, concentration, listening skills, social awareness, ensemble skills, and spontaneity, it is an egalitarian form of performance—an art for citizen actors, according to founder, Jonathan Fox (1986, p. 214). Moreover, in Playback Theatre, the company members address the audience as themselves and then take on roles as cast, allowing students to see that performing is not an alien act but a communication process of

dialogic, empathetic engagement. (Conquergood, 1985; Pelias, 1991). Similarly, as an

audience-interactive form, Playback Theatre reveals the full multi-dimensional, multi-

directional communication act where audience members become performers and

performers become audience members as they take their turns in the storytelling, story-

listening ritual where no one knows how the performance will ultimately end (Park-

Fuller, 2003, p. 293). These disruptions of speaker/performer-centered power relations

reflect parallel disruptions in other aspects of this educational endeavor.

Second, Playback Theatre's emphasis on narrative allows us to examine how

stories develop, how to listen in order to catch the heart of the story (Salas, 1996, p. 23).

Audiences are often surprised that actors may improvise conversation remarkably like the

original encounter, so that tellers often respond, "how did you know those were my exact

words"? Such seemingly magical effects prompt discussions about how common the

everyday vocabularies and narrative structures by which we organize our lives.

Through Playback Theatre we study what it means to approach education,

communication in an improvisational manner. Improvisation exercises are the most

difficult initial hurdle for many students according to their end-of-semester advice to

future students where they often caution: "don't be afraid of the improv exercises"

(Advice to future students, December 15, 2002). Given traditional educational methods

that evaluate product with scant attention to process, such fear is justified. Students are

wary of exercises where they cannot clearly and immediately control the outcome.

Moreover, because improvisation and spontaneity exercises appear (and are) playful, they

disrupt the authority of the classroom as a site of *serious* learning.   Similarly, since in

Western culture, children play and adults work, improvisation exercises may also appear

to be childish to some students; and if a teacher encourages play as well as work,

disorientation can cause some to seek safer, more predictable ground than risk making a

fool of oneself or failing to please a teacher with unusual techniques.

Yet, in my experience, the majority of students remain. We struggle in this site of

possibility—occasionally, to see that while we play games, that is not all we do; often, to

remember not to block ourselves with fear of judgment; but eventually to recognize that

the *practice* of spontaneity through improvisation, is very serious learning. It requires

vigilance, attendance, quick wit, and deep reservoirs of knowledge. As Fox puts it,

"spontaneity demands a full commitment, no matter what the test. It quickly vanishes in

the face of dogmatic ideas, fixed roles, rigid discipline, or a structure of authority that

discourages the unexpected" (1986, p. 85).   The discipline or practice of spontaneity is

not rigid but ritualistic—not rote but rite. Spontaneity, according to Fox, not only

involves "'not thinking.'. . . [but] also involves thinking of the highest order, where the

nonrational and the rational are comprehended in an understanding which surpasses the

limitations of each" (1986, p. 90). It is indeterminacy in order; risk in a safe space.

Learning to be spontaneous through artistic improvisation may be the most important

communication education opportunity we can offer students as they look to a future

where only change is certain.

Fourth, Playback Theatre allows us to engage in holistic, human-centered

teaching and learning. Through our studies of Playback Theatre, students participate in

each of the three learning domains in Bloom, Mesia and Krathwohl's (1964) taxonomy:

cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. In the cognitive area, participants must be able to

recall the details of stories told, the names of audience participants, and they must

remember them after one hearing because the actors cannot ask questions of the teller. They must apply the formula of the presentational form and modify plans as necessary, so that the story can be enacted without conferring. They must analyze a story as it is told, decide which details are crucial, what can be cut or merged with another detail without doing disservice to the spirit of the teller's tale. They must be able to synthesize. Often the brilliance of a playback enactment occurs through physical metaphor. For example, Day tells of a story where low-ranked staff members were harassed by oblivious executives. Searching for a way to express the oppression, an actor portraying an executive simply *sat on* the performers playing workers while she spoke bland, patronizing words to them (Day, 1999, p. 87).   Such inventive synthesis brings visual and tactile impact to a re-enactment that goes far beyond language.

University education now, as at the time of Bloom et al. (1964), offers little attention to psychomotor learning modalities—even in communication. Active learning advocates offer many useful ideas but rarely condone anything more active than lifting a pencil, posting a message, or moving desks together. Playback Theatre affords opportunity to develop psychomotor skills at sophisticated levels. Conductor, musician(s) and performers must be constantly ready to act, must learn how to take focus, how to give focus to someone else, when to build intensity, and when to finalize a scene. The performers must know through *somatic thinking*, through their bodies, where they can move, what they might grasp when they need to create a set, who is standing behind them, and when they can speak, without calling every detail to conscious decision. Such non-verbal, psychomotor skills have great value to interpersonal, group, cultural and rhetorical communication, and they cannot be learned by operating a keyboard.

Studies in embodied learning (Pineau, 1998; Alexander, 1998), show promise in integrating learning domains on both theoretical and practical levels. And while most performance study which also includes performance practice allows for such integration, I have found that, for me, Playback theatre permits a deeper alignment of learning domains and a better balancing of the affective domain with the cognitive and psychomotor than most forms—perhaps because the form depends upon autobiographical stories—those signatures of our evolving values and identities. Aspects of affective learning in Playback Theatre are abundant. Subtle aspects of identities and values come out in story after story, as students listen to one another and try to play back emotions, experiences, perspectives with compassion and integrity. Lori Wynters (1996) identifies these efforts as the third space in holistic education:

> The third space is the place of overlap where education in the classroom, becomes therapeutic without becoming therapy. It is the place where learning can occur using our emotional selves and our physical selves, where we can begin to construct knowledge and make meaning out of our individual and collective experiences and the discussions and readings. . . . Central to this place of overlap . . . is the emergence of acceptance and care. (pp. 114-115).

Like Wynters, I find Playback Theatre a useful tool in creating that space.

Fifth, Playback Theatre offers rich opportunities for community building and cultural exchange. Playback functions as community engagement in two ways, allowing us to celebrate common cultural experiences in the way that storytelling and performance have always done and, when practiced with co-cultural awareness and critical sensitivity, its ritual structure can make a space to honor diversity within and between groups.

When people share personal stories they feel more acquainted. The stories students share are not necessarily intimate, at least at first. They may involve problems of getting into classes or a sick child, or the excitement of an engagement or a job. Moreover, the ritual of calling for stories provides opportunity for greater inclusivity as a conductor might say, for example, "Okay, we've heard stories by two white guys so far, so let's hear from someone from a different group" Or, "does anyone have a story about a different kind of experience related to child-parent conflicts? Those stories and ritual forms provide communal structures on which they will rely as they expand their community and, together, build their communication performances.

In 2002, I invited to my class the County Deputy Chief of Juvenile Probations. She spoke eloquently about the wonderful and talented youth in our community who need positive role models, and of the need for increased awareness of and access to education. Through her, I contacted the drug prevention coordinator of the Osborn School District, Anne Marie Cardinal.   In the fall, we began our community partnership.

<div align="center">The Project</div>

During the fall of 2002 and the fall of 2003, the students of my class collaborated with selected at-risk students from Osborn Middle School, an ethnically diverse, inner city school that, in 2002, was evaluated by the state Department of Education as underperforming (____ Department of Education, 2002). Both the university and the middle school provided some resources for the collaboration. Arthur Melle, a social worker for the school and Anne Marie Cardinal deserve much credit for the project.

For the first eight weeks of the semester, the university students worked independently of the middle school children, learning to improvise, studying Playback

techniques, and researching the needs of at-risk middle school children. The class met

once a week for three hours at a renovated performance space under the auspices of the

performance studies area in the university's communication school. With the consent of

the OMS administration, the university students made at least one visit to the middle

school to observe students in their school environment. Additionally, students

considered their cultural roles and communication strategies in teaching and learning

situations.   The first year, we hoped that the OMS students would gain artistic and

communication skills and, in working with university students, begin to see advanced

education as a possible future goal. In the second year of the project, Cardinal, Melle,

and I added a content theme to the project, inviting stories about negative aspects of

adolescent cliques, including bullying, manipulation, alienation, and peer pressure. We

were interested in Playback as a site where students might generate healthy alternatives

to hurtful behavior or to painful acquiescence. During that semester, the university

students also studied cliques and did additional research on adolescent group

communication.

During the second eight weeks of the course, the university students met with and

workshopped Playback with the middle school students. Cardinal and Melle transported

the OMS students (approximately 10-14) to the university so that the students could

become exposed to the university and feel comfortable on campus. When class time

began, they met with their assigned small groups of university students. Small groups

consisted of five to nine individuals, typically including more university students than

middle school students, a situation brought on by space limitations. [2]   The ethnic mix of

the group includes approximately 75-85% white university students, and approximately

80-90% middle school students of color. The middle school students range in age from

12-14 years, and the university students have been dominantly in their late teens or

twenties with approximately one or two older than average students per class.

During an evening session, the small groups worked for approximately forty-five

minutes, taking a ten-minute socializing break and then worked together for another

thirty-forty minutes. Following the middle school students' departure, the university

students met in a large group to debrief, and then met in their small groups to plan for the

next meeting. During the week, we used an on-line course website to consider questions

that time did not allow for, plan exercises, and share strategies.

At the end of the semester, a performance was given for the parents of the middle

school students, administrators, and other invited guests. The 2002 performance was

presented at the university performance space but because few parents were able to make

the journey, the 2003 performance was held locally, at the middle school. Each group

chose one or two forms with which they felt most confident (stories, pairs, tableaux, or

fluid sculptures), and the performance was composed from those choices. Middle school

and university students performed side by side to an appreciative audience. Following the

performances, the university students have chosen to give a remembrance of some sort to

the middle school students: university trinkets, crafted items, a certificate of achievement.

The middle school students brought gifts of food for a reception afterward.

Reflections

In keeping with the post-stucturalist philosophy and the improvisational practices

of the class, I chose to evaluate students largely on participation and reflection/research

papers in addition to quizzes over readings in Playback Theatre. An examination of

forty-two final papers drawn from both semesters in addition to my own class notes and on-line discussions, reveals some interesting reflections on the project and method.

First, student responses show a breakdown into three primary categories including information about and reflection on: 1) Playback Theatre; 2) issues surrounding at-risk students and cliques; 3) the intercultural communicative experience of teaching and performing with the OMS students. These categories are not mutually exclusive but they help to organize this discussion.

University student comments on the Playback Theatre techniques centered on improvisation. The following observation is typical: "I noticed that the students from our class and [OMS] all had problems with being critical and worrying about being judged and this affected their spontaneity at first, but as the semester went on and we all had time to work on this, the problem decreased and our spontaneity increased." (NM December 17, 2002, p.5). In terms of Playback's many functions, the students focused primarily on the effectiveness of the form to build community and to heal. Students spoke often of the importance of sharing stories in order to help the middle school students feel part of a larger community that includes but goes beyond their age-peer groups, and concluded that the round-robin techniques of Playback storytelling in workshop had the effect of bringing the group members into a unit or team very quickly. Many noted the effects of the project in terms of its healing, redressive function. A 2003 student put it well:

> The Empty Space Theatre provided a safe place for the OMS students, a place
> where they could explore their feelings and creativity without the fear of being
> ridiculed or judged. Through the Playback process the OMS students were

allowed to take risks. They learned the importance of listening and sharing, the

importance of empathy and compassion, and the importance of teamwork. They

learned to make choices and decisions and they learned the importance and value

of sharing their stories. They learned that they are not the only ones who

experience pain or humiliation or embarrassment or cruelty. Hopefully, through

this experience, we have all learned more about ourselves. (SL December 15,

2003, p. 7)

Frequently, students spoke of the potentials of Playback Theatre to bring out latent

artistic talents and as a means of strengthening communication skills and insights.

Students also recognized potential problems.

One student, fearing that expressions of vulnerability might encourage violence,

mentioned that telling stories of bullying might give bullies more ammunition (LH,

December 16, 2003, p. 3). Many students voiced initial concerns that students might

disclose personal information that they might regret disclosing later. Such concerns are

valid, and well-founded. To deflect problems, all efforts were made to create

emotionally and physically safe spaces to share, and participants were told not to share

stories if they were not confident in sharing with this group. Two situations were

problematic.

An OMS student shared in her small group an emotional story of an attempt to

harm herself which had occurred in the previous week. The university students handled

the situation well, comforting and supporting the student. Later, they informed Cardinal

and Melle, who were aware of the incident and assured them that the student was being

monitored. The university students remained concerned but recognized that they would

not be able to help beyond letting the student know they cared, and were there if needed.

And, while that seemed a small gift to give the student, it was appreciated. [3]

The second problem was not so easily resolved. During the first evening with the

OMS students in the 2002 semester, the university students presented a Playback

performance, inviting the OMS students to provide stories and feelings. I served as

conductor. The first story seemed to me to be about an argument ending a friendship,

and the university students tried to enact it with concern for both parties, but the teller

was not very satisfied with that. Only later did I realize that it was a story about

excluding someone from a clique; and that the teller told it to demonstrate dominance.

The next story (told by the first teller's seat mate and at her prompting), quickly turned to

gossip about a classmate's sexual orientation. At that point, the performance was paused,

while Cardinal spoke to the middle school students about what kinds of stories were

appropriate for performance. We then performed some Pairs and took a break, where I

learned what my students already guessed. The girl who had been referenced in both

stories—the one who had been excluded from the clique and who was the object of the

gossip—was present in the room. In the wink of an eye, the healing form of Playback

had become weapon of destruction. I was stunned—at once shocked at the teller's cruelty

and amazed at her creativity. She had never seen Playback, but she apprehended and

appropriated it to her purposes quick as a flash. Fortunately, the injured student did not

leave the group. In fact, the next week she and her oppressor came to class arm-in-arm,

good friends once more, but the changeable nature of middle school relationships did not

excuse our ignorance in preparation. By the following semester, the scheduling changed

so that the performance of stories did not occur until after the OMS and university

students had been working together for a few weeks, and had begun to share norms about

group work. Now, all university students in the class are made aware of the potential

dangers of using PT as a weapon. One student argued that danger might be a reason to

use Playback only with students of high school age (LR, December 16, 2003, p. 6).

Another observed that the tendency to become a perpetrator or victim of negative clique

behavior continues throughout one's school years, and urged the disruption of such

identify formation in early years though activities such as Playback (PA, December 15,

2003, p.4).

     Several students noticed other types of identity disruption and reconstruction

within the confines of the PT workshops. There are numerous references to shy students

who blossom, students who demonstrated a talent in acting or music, who learned to

speak above a whisper, or who learned to focus on one thing at a time. On the other

hand, some students mentioned one middle school student whom they could not reach,

whose resistance took the form of constant distraction, boredom, or acting-out. Two

thoughtful university student reflections deserve consideration. I have shortened the

OMS students' names to an initial, and then changed the initial.

> There was only one occasion that led me to believe that our efforts of
>
> implementing self-disclosure and proper respect for the members involved in
>
> Playback Theatre were not successful. On the night of our performance, I [had]
>
> an encounter with an Osborn student named, T. Our lighting director had brought
>
> out water for the students before the performance, and T. received his with
>
> discontent. He had mentioned that he did not know whether or not the water
>
> was safe to drink. . . . His exact words were, 'that Afgani n[—] probably spit in

my water, I ain't gonna drink it.' With that, T. threw the water and the cup

holding the water out onto the basketball court. I do not believe that I

handled the situation properly, as I raised my voice in disgust, and told him

that those words and actions were not appropriate. . . Although I spoke my

mind, and told him my difference of opinion, it was not proper of me to raise

my voice. T. walked away and refused to speak to me for the rest of the

evening. I was discouraged that our acquaintance had ended on such a bad

note" (NB December 17, 2002, p.5).

While the student voices her understandable discouragement that T. had not internalized

the groups' non-racist values, her reflection also shows that she is scrutinizing her own

communicative behavior as she examines, dismantles, re-performs-herself-into-being.

Another courageous and poignant comment came from a student who had

developed a good relationship with G., a girl who had participated in both years' classes.

She writes about saying goodbye to G. after the performance:

I proceeded to grab her by the hand and give her my phone number. Anytime

you need anything G., give me a call. We hugged and she left.

I believe G. won't call. She has friends and her crazy social life. But

I do believe that one day she will think back and remember me and the time we

spent together and be thankful about it.

I am sad to say that I don't think the kids from OMS will really use

Playback to say no to peer pressure or brag to their friends that they know how to

do a Fluid [sculpture]. I don't believe that Playback holds the answers to all of

lives [sic] problems or questions, but I do believe that Playback is a way to

communicate and grow together as a community in dire need (CR, December

16, 2003, pp. 4-5).

I believe these students are right. Playback Theatre is only one fragment of a very large

and complex intercultural communication performance process.

In the third category of community engagement, these students' statements

underscore the ambiguities of the project as a site of possibility. Its disruptions and

reconstructions are subtle. Dominating the changes that university students cite are re-

conceived roles and expectations. They often claim to have misjudged the capabilities of

the middle school students: "They are much older and wiser beyond their years when

telling their stories" (EE December 17, 2002 p. 1). Some noted that the middle school

students grasp techniques more quickly than the teachers, and aren't afraid to correct

them—suggesting that teacher-learner assumptions become compromised: "if the story

was not acted out perfectly, they never hesitated to tell us what we did wrong" (EE p. 2).

Several students expressed surprise that such gifted students could be labeled *at-risk*. One

student mentioned the awkwardness resulting from an ice-breaker where group members

shared what movie stars they would like to marry, and where it was quickly apparent that

neither group knew the same movie stars as the other group (IH, December 17, 2002, pp.

1-2). The recognition of these disparate codes and vocabularies became necessary to

negotiate when working to create a joint performance across cultures. Moreover, once

the university students got to know the OMS students in their small group, they found

that a general lesson plan could not satisfy both the task-related and interpersonal aspects

(program and mood, Fox, 1986, pp. 91-93), of their time together. Such disruptions of

expectations prompted the university students to re-group, re-organize, to improvise their

methods according to the specific needs of the middle school students.   The service

project, then, became more human-centered—less focused on pre-expectations, and more

focused on the human interaction process wherein the middle school students gained

voice, dimension, agency and the university students improvised to keep up with them.

Amidst this indeterminacy within the structured ritual of the Playback project, these joint

performances created a sense of bonding that was observable in almost every paper.

Conclusions

        In the project, community assessment tools consisted primarily of interaction with

the OMS personnel, Cardinal and Melle, who have contributed throughout its duration.

They attended one class session early in the semester where they shared insights about

the students who would attend and gave helpful suggestions about working with them.

They made themselves available by phone and email so that the university students could

contact them with questions or concerns throughout the semester. When the groups met,

both Cardinal and Melle they were present for the entire period, each period. They did

not interfere or try to control how the work progressed, but they were available to answer

questions, to take care of the students should anyone or anything come into harm's way,

and to step in if problems arose. They gave suggestions for improving the project in

order to better serve the community including changing the site of the final performance

and including more middle school students, and their suggestions have been

incorporated.

        Having piloted the project over two semesters, the university-middle school

partners hope to develop the program further. Staffing limitations prohibit a 2004

extension but we hope to resume the project in 2005. During the interim, we plan to

assess the potentials of the project, make changes, and put into place an action research

plan. Specifically, I want to assess the effectiveness of the project from the middle

school students' points of view. Currently, the data from their perspectives is limited to

anecdotes from the university students, some data that OMS collected as part of their

evaluation of the external grant which allows them to participate in the project, and the

phenomenological evidence of pleasure, pride, and joy captured on the videotapes of the

students' final performances. To augment that information in a systematic fashion

requires a rigorous but also flexible design. Saldana's (2003) longitudinal qualitative

research offers one approach that promises potential for tracking the traces of intention,

influence, and alternatives that I wish to monitor over time.

As a site of possibility that is neither inherently positive nor inherently negative,

those two eight-week projects became a space in which university and middle school

students, for however brief a time, came together, collaborated, and, jointly produced a

creative team that honored their communities by performing the feelings and stories of

their audience. The resulting performance did not win an academy award nor is it likely

to spur an actor to stardom. But it might. It may not prompt a student to say "no" to

negative peer pressure, but it may have provided a new technique to side-step peer

pressure—one that will come in handy someday. It will not, of itself, heal a child who

has suffered pain, neglect, sorrow. It will not "rain down a revolution" (Madison, 1998,

pp. 280). Instead, it provided, for both university and middle school students, a site to

improvise something into being, a new experience, a new connection, a new glimmer of

identity, a new idiom, demeanor, frame of reference, manner of being in the world—any

of which can be remembered, rehearsed and reassembled to fit new situations that

students will face in the future, like the *drift* that Edwards (2003) calls the relics of

intention that we discard and later retrieve and reconfigure into new artful endeavors.

And it is this habit of improvisation, this linking of spontaneous action with deep

wells of knowledge, active participation, a valuing of differences, a philosophy of sharing

knowledge and power, which may, in time, inspire great art, prompt significant ethical

choices, form healthy identities, heal wounds, and rouse us to political action. This

willingness to make something out of what we have *at hand*, without pre-judgment,

coupled with the aesthetic ability to recognize the possibilities inherent in our mutual

endeavors allows us to move past the binaries of *I* and *not I, here* and *there*, *us* and *them*,

service and *learning* and focus instead on meaningful engagement, meaningful dialogue.

In the closing of his book, Fox (1986) speaks of the challenges facing a theatre of

service, and his insights could speak for a pedagogy of engagement as well:

> a theatre of service will always be pulled down by the grubby realities of
>
> everyday life (the hall will be cold, the crowd unruly, the host frazzled); as
>
> performers we will always fail, trapped by our own anxieties and imperfection. It
>
> is not understanding alone that can help us cope with these imperfections—or
>
> better organization or even higher performance standards. We must also believe
>
> in grace. (pp. 214-215)

A pedagogy of community engagement also requires a belief in grace. While good

planning, solid action-research, careful student preparation, projects extended over

semesters, and expanded projects that involve entire departments can help us to develop

better (if not best) practices, there will always be cold classrooms, frazzled hosts, some

participants who fail to commit, limited hours to give to the project. A pedagogy of

engagement, especially multicultural engagement, will always be imperfect, as we

struggle to improvise third spaces and mutable selves out of the disparate codes we bring

to these sites of possibility. But improvisation (and communication) cannot thrive in a

context that assumes a belief in perfection, and we will need both freedom and grace to

improvise a more just world for all. The act of improvisation, itself, is a demonstration of

grace. As one student said, the most important thing she learned during the semester was

to *trust* (OB, December 15, 2002, p. 6). It is, I think, not a small accomplishment.

<div align="center">Notes</div>

[1] For more information about Playback Theatre, see the International Playback Theatre Network website: http://www.playbacknet.org/iptn/index.htm

[2] The structure is under reconsideration. As often happens, university-community projects tend to favor the university—the learners over those served. To combat that institutional imbalance, we could move to the middle school, but the exposure to the university area would be lost. Another option is to lower the class enrollment ceiling to fifteen so that the group would be better balanced. We continue to consider options.

[3] The telling of sensitive stories is a part of Playback Theatre that can be risky, or rewarding. The chance that someone in the group might use the self-disclosure to harm the teller must be minimized as much as possible. In this case, the communication climate of the group was highly supportive and no known damage has occurred due to the disclosure.

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