Privileging Aboriginal Voices.

Applied theatre as a transformative process for Aboriginal Australian youth.

Biography

Rosemary has extensive experience designing and implementing innovative applied theatre programs for culturally diverse participants in a range of educational and community settings. She teaches in the Bachelor of Arts Extended degree for Indigenous students and in Trinity College Foundation Studies Program for international students, Melbourne University. Rosemary works as a consultant for The Australasian Centre for Human Rights and Health, Yalari and Murrup Barak. Rosemary has conducted workshops and delivered presentations in the field of applied theatre nationally and internationally. Previously, she participated in national Arts Council tours presenting shows in schools, theatres and in non-mainstream settings.

Abstract

Poor rates of school completion combined with high rate of imprisonment means that at least half the Indigenous young people in Australia are underachieving, and are at risk of a future characterized by extreme disadvantage and disconnection from mainstream. This research stemmed from an invitation from Indigenous elders to a non-Indigenous teaching artist experienced in intercultural drama and theatre and began as a broad concern with how to reconnect disaffected Indigenous youth with education. Immersed in a new and unfamiliar cultural, social, political and environmental context, the practitioner developed a deeper understanding of Indigenous perspectives on partnerships, relationships, and cultural safety facilitated by the young people’s participation and the involvement of elders in three applied theatre projects. The practitioner found it necessary to adapt her approach to incorporate the making of short films as a medium of storytelling and as an initiative of the young people.

Introduction

This article provides insight into the nature and ways in which an applied theatre project meaningfully engaged with an experimental Youth Program at Nungalinya College in Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia. Originally introduced as a creative arts project within the Creating Indigenous Futures Youth Program, the importance of the work led to the development of major research and became the practitioner’s PhD study. For this article the specific focus is on the impact of context within an Indigenous community setting and the ways applied theatre can be used as a means for a two-way dialogue and to provide a creative participatory space, co constructed by the practitioner, the partners and the participants so that the Indigenous voices are heard.

Central to understanding and responding to the context, is the importance of developing relationships, being integral to the process. Tuihawai Smith claims “research ethics for Indigenous communities is at a very basic level about establishing, maintaining, and nurturing reciprocal and respectful relationships” (2005, p. 97). In this case it is an ongoing process which began with an invitation to participate in the 2006 Pilot Project, which was an experiment and the beginning of understanding of the context, and
developed further through two subsequent research phases 2007-2008. There was a core group of 10 or more participants engaged in each project, with a turnover of about 50 young people. The participants were aged 13-20 years; the majority was virtually homeless and had dropped out of school. The young people came from a variety of places including alternative education programs and outreach centres, YMCA, Mission Australia, Criminal Justice and word-of-mouth.

The building of trust and understanding within the partnership required to work in the context developed through relationships, which were tested to the limit across the three projects. During this time there was significant upheaval caused by issues such as: loss of funding, critical staff changes, temporary closure of the Program, the unexpected inclusion of outside groups, political interventions and loss of participants. Staying committed to the projects required extraordinary belief in the elders’ vision and trust in their capacity to manage in the circumstances. This meant adopting a position of acceptance of the realities of the context, forgoing control of the drama space and developing an ability to commit to something that seemed impossible. In the article I have included a range of reflections by my Indigenous partners and participants engaged in the projects.

*Beginnings: an invitation*

In 2005, the Principal and leading elder established a Youth Program in a corner of Nungalinya College to address the disengagement and alienation of their youth who lived on the fringes of Darwin. In particular, the focus was on supporting young women. An Indigenous youth coordinator was appointed to develop the program assisted by Indigenous youth workers and teachers. I was invited as a practitioner experienced in intercultural drama and theatre at Trinity College, the University of Melbourne, to conduct a series of drama workshops to build confidence and communication skills. It was hoped that the participants would re-engage with education and that the drama workshops would draw the young women to the Program as it was “something different”. However, soon after my arrival, I realised that accepting the invitation had inherent expectations, responsibilities and obligations in this context that went beyond my previous experience as a practitioner.

According to Taylor (2003), flexibility and responding to the context are central features of applied theatre and these elements were crucial to each phase of the research and applied theatre project. The research became a catalyst for taking an alternative look at my practice, and it developed space for meaningful dialogue with my partners, the young people, and myself. Physically living in the College while conducting the research was significant, as it meant I spent “extensive time in the field” (Creswell, 1998, p. 16). Staying there was a kind of separation from the way I usually lived, which meant I was both open to and challenged by the experience. A significant feature of my early field trips was an overwhelming culture shock from immersing myself into a different world.

Acceptance of the initial invitation was the beginning of a process that extended to three years and beyond. My partners were co collaborators in the research and gave me access to alternative perspectives through their
roles as key informants. In this discussion my focus centres on the influence and central importance of context and its multiple meanings: the place where we worked and lived, the partners with whom I shared the decisions, and the young people who came to be involved; all of which heightened the understandings that took place. I liken the complicated and changeable experience of research in Indigenous contexts to the act of stepping into water. Even if you're only ankle deep, you get wet and you are conscious of the mass of water stretching to the horizon. You are connected to the whole ocean and diminished by the immensity of it.

Nungalinya College, named by the Larrakia people meaning “Old Man Rock” or “Big Rock” was established as an Indigenous Christian college for leadership formation and community development and accommodated people from around Australia. The Youth Program was a radical proposal as it was a departure from their core business. My key partners for each project were three Indigenous women (elders) who were in charge and who facilitated daily activities for the young people in the Youth Program, including correspondence courses, literacy and numeracy tasks, information technology and art.

For the research and each applied theatre project the women and I had a joint partnership that triggered a meaningful process of accountability and obligation that required me to be more flexible personally and professionally. According to Tuhiwai Smith, Indigenous communities hold an “alternative way of knowing about themselves and the environment that has managed to survive assaults of colonisation and its impacts” (2005, p. 101). I was in an unfamiliar environment and had little control over the public space where we worked. My project partners observed every workshop and informed me of their observations. My discussion focuses on the significance of context; its impact on an applied theatre project and the non-Indigenous teaching artist, and in particular, its significance in privileging Indigenous voices. There are three distinct phases of our partnership: when the project began: The two-week Pilot Project; the first phase six-week project - Adaptation, development and understanding and the second phase two-week project - Autobiographical voices. Maintaining continual communication with partners and participants by phone, email and personal visits throughout the three-year period was a priority for me to develop our relationship, and to be relevant to their context.

My understanding of the real world context of the young people was framed by my role as the practitioner and by learning about relationships and partnerships in their context. Initially arriving with a suitcase of props and ideas developed in Melbourne, I began directing the project as if I had authority and a dominant influence over the workshops. My partners and I had planned a week with a morning and afternoon workshop amongst other activities, culminating with a small performance. The young people were not receptive to adopting the model I introduced, but rather engaged all day every day with me and chose to make a film instead. Thus began a spontaneous and progressive process of the dismantling of my assumptions and beliefs about my applied theatre practice.
I had not expected to feel so overwhelmed by the context, the impoverished state of the facilities and my accommodation, the oppressive tropical, but most of all being confronted with the shocking disadvantage of the young people's lives. It was hard for me to imagine how the applied theatre project could have an impact. I felt challenged by my own whiteness. I was face to face with my prejudices and difference.

Central to my practice early on was the decision to commit to being directly involved with the Youth Program beyond the Pilot Program. My practice was an instinctive, creative means to focus energy and to relate to the young people that began with a series of workshops and finished with the production of a film for each phase – we made 4 films. Key features of my practice included the use of games and team activities, open ended improvisations and story-making opportunities, and a willingness to change plans without notice. Through a process of mutual respect and understanding, the young people helped us establish the space they needed to tell their stories and for their voices to be heard.

Privileging Aboriginal Voices

Historical influences on contemporary Indigenous lives

In 1788 the British invaded the continent of Australia. This historical event marked the beginning of an incremental breakdown of culture, language, lifestyle, connection with land and sense of identity for many of Australia's Indigenous peoples. Their culture was devalued, families were separated, communities were dispossessed and their traditional food base was all but destroyed in most parts of the country (Butlin, 1983 & 1993). Losing their autonomy as people undermined social vitality for the Indigenous population, which affected their capacity to meet challenges. A cycle of dispossession, demoralisation and poor health was thus perpetuated (Thomson, MacRae, Brankovich, Burns, Catto, Gray, Levitan, Maling, Potter, Ride, Stumpers & Urquhart, 2012). The European perspective had neither connection to the land, water, climate, flora or fauna of the country where the Aboriginal Australians had lived for thousands of years, nor understanding of the belief systems within their culture.

The negative effects of colonization are still evident in the Indigenous Australian communities today, and is the reason for programs like Creating Indigenous Futures, which aim to promote positive change in the lives of young Indigenous Australians. Mick Gooda, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner said:

You can't work on Aboriginal issues without being a human rights activist. All the issues being dealt with in Indigenous affairs – effective engagement, poverty, education, health, protection of culture and languages, incarceration rates, protection of women and children, all of these are human rights issues.

Gooda, 2010

The Indigenous population of Australia is about half a million people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background making up 2.5% of the total population. With 70% of the Indigenous population under 30 years
and 40% under 15 and the median age is 21, there is an urgency to address the needs of their youth. The school retention rate to final year is 47% compared with non-Indigenous rate of 79%, which stands out as a huge gap to overcome to achieve any kind of parity.

Indigenous people of all ages are more likely to be imprisoned than non-Indigenous people to such an extent, that imprisonment is so common that it has become normalized. Indigenous 10-17 year olds in jail stands at 52% nationally. The overrepresentation of Indigenous young people in the Criminal Justice System is “one of Australia’s most significant social problems” (Snowball, 2008, p. 3). The link between disadvantage, crime and poor educational achievement for Indigenous Australian young people is clearly evident (Thomson et al. 2012).

Aboriginal peoples in Australia are in the process of reclaiming their place and taking ownership of their “lived experiences” (Rigney, 1997, p. 119). In the past research had been conducted on or about Aboriginal peoples without consultation or permission, rather than in partnership with, or at the instigation of Aboriginal communities (Blight, 2012, p. 73). Now there is an expectation by Aboriginal people of a high level of engagement by the researcher and participation and involvement by the community throughout the process. Western knowledge constructs are seen to limit, restrict and colonise Aboriginal peoples through imposed relationships and structures (Rigney, 2001; Martin, 2003). Research and projects with Indigenous people are therefore “tricky” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2005) and need to adhere to strict protocols that invite collaboration, dialogue, and accountability and give agency to Indigenous communities. As a partnership we maintained these principles throughout as our projects, which were initiated and driven by Aboriginal people.

**The Pilot project**

Understanding the significance of relationships and partnerships in the context began with the Pilot Project. The Youth Program leader (Pat) and I planned a project exclusively for young women, as it was the basis of their funding. Our communication was tentative as it was an experiment, a project designed by strangers via phone and email from opposite sides of Australia. We asked a series of questions: How would we work together? Would young woman want to come along? If they came one day would they return the next? How many would come and what if they didn’t like the drama? Despite the differences in worldviews between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, Tuhiwai Smith argues a blending of the two perspectives offers “the best possibility for a transformative agenda that moves Indigenous communities to someplace better than where they are now” (2005, p. 88).

When I began the cramped space in the Youth Program building was uninspiring and unsuited to drama workshops with tables and chairs, old couches and rows of computers. I changed the room’s configuration to create an open area for drama activities which felt intrusive. We began with 2 young women as participants, however the arrival of youth workers
and 8 young men and women from elsewhere interrupted us. In the first hour of the first workshop young men were invited into the project.

Readily accepting young men into a project for young women indicated an adherence to a broader picture. The principle that no young person is turned away took priority, which was one of the “myriad agendas” (Preston, 2009) that I had to learn; it was part of the loss of control I felt in the context. It meant my partners could change plans in an instant to suit their context, whether or not our agreement. Similarly, the planned schedule of a session in the morning and in the afternoon also disappeared, as the young people wanted to work on the project the whole time. We were caught up in the young people’s unexpected enthusiasm and followed their lead.

I began to appreciate that ‘participation’ for Pat meant something different from my own assumptions. For her, getting the young people physically there, off the streets, being included in the action was more important than sticking to the plan. The fearless willingness to change initiated by my partners in response to the context happened frequently across the three projects. They were building a community not just for the workshops, but also beyond the workshop space and this did not end when the workshops finished.

During workshops the young men would run around, leaping over the furniture; their behavior was erratic so that they seemed out of control and at other times there was complete focus. The excitement and responses in the room to the warm up activities were overwhelming, oscillating between total focus and sudden abandonment; this occurred without warning mid game, mid activity several times.

I didn’t like it when them mob wasn’t listening. It was annoying when they just wanted to play on the computers and that.

I was struck by the young people’s energy and commitment. The group returned each day and stayed until it was finished.

They were keen to come; we didn’t have to force anyone. They looked happy and walked taller.

When the young people participated, they did more than attempt the activities; the workshops became an opportunity for them to lead the rest of us in the directions they wanted to go. To this extent they were never really mere participants but strong-willed partners in an experimental, two-way learning process. According to Indigenous Australian researchers Marika, Yunupingu, Marika-Mununggiritj and Muller (2009), “issues of visibility and voice are fundamental to challenging colonial power” and to give opportunities to Indigenous peoples to participate in dialogue to manage their own circumstances. I was being led in their context.

I remember doing the little game thing where we chased someone and then writing down a movie script and doing some of the acts, getting dressed up for it. Make it longer next time. It was fun.
The video camera on the tripod in the corner of the room to record the workshops for my research drew their attention. Suddenly one of the young women approached me and said she wanted to write about teenage gangs and make a film. I changed direction in the workshops to give the young people a chance to voice their ideas on their terms.

Sitting on the floor writing the script on butcher's paper, discussing camera angles, travelling to find locations to film, the young people showed me where they spent their time. They talked about their lives through the creation of their film that became a tangible representation of their input. Their film depicted a gang wandering aimlessly in the streets and parks, drinking and looking for something to do. Interaction with a young “white woman” leads to horrific consequences and police involvement. The gang members show no respect to the legal process and deny everything. When collected from the lock up the next day the comment is made that it was “just another Friday night”. Indigenous academic, Professor Judy Atkinson writes about the need of the child to tell their story and that no one hears it, as “parents are in crisis themselves” (2007, p. 119). For Kelman (2008) when young people explore or frame their stories for an audience it reveals “aspects of their society that they wished might be different” and the young people see themselves as “agents of social change” (p. 106).

It was different like, acting and trying to make um, I can't think of that word. It was just a different thing to do. Normally it's just work, standing around. What I liked about it was all of us getting together and making a change. When I watched the video I thought we shouldn't have had that much swearing in it. It kind of made it look a bit silly, but it was ok. We didn't read the script as we wrote it, we just said what we thought cause everyone was excited.

The Principal sent me a letter when I was back in Melbourne.

On viewing the DVD I was overwhelmed by the lifestyle our youth live in our local area. It was full of emotion, despair and a real cry for help. It showed a real need in caring for our youth. I feel this experience has given the young women and men a sense of achievement and pride in who they are without being judged.

It was clear that the young people were drawn to an opportunity to connect, to be included in a project with other young people, guided by adults who wanted to listen, to spend time in a place that was welcoming and safe. We took the young people to the movies and they exhibited wild behavior in the cinema, which was the opposite of what I was used to tolerating or understanding. I was face to face with my prejudices and difference.

When the recording device for my research, namely the camera, became a tool for the young people's ownership and involvement in the project, this act encapsulated the dynamic of our partnership. I developed a new understanding of ‘participation' and of artistic, social, community space, constructed through negotiation and agreement from within shifting relationships with the young people and my partners. My partners were the gatekeepers to the Youth Program, and as such were the arbiters of cultural safety. They privileged Indigenous knowledge, voices, experiences
and reflections (Rigney, 1999b, p. 17) throughout our partnership, which was pivotal to the young people’s participation and my understanding.

I found that participation for the young people was not just about what I introduced but how I introduced it. Sinclair (2005) describes the process of finding a way to communicate ideas between artist and stakeholders through creative theatre practice as building “a vocabulary of experience” (p. 327). The applied theatre project was the means through which my partners, the young people and I communicated and developed understanding from our different perspectives. “Over three years there was a need for continual re-negotiation and re-evaluation and reflection by all those involved, which sustained and deepened the communicative opportunities and built this shared vocabulary of experience” (Blight, 2012, p. 232).

The effect of the Pilot Project meant that I realized some key elements about working in the context. While being supportive of my work, the elders were not afraid to change plans without consultation. This was a signal that it was not my project to control, but to work within another framework. Daily I discussed any organizational details to gain a sense of control, without effect. These were tools from my world and I used them as props in more than one sense of the word.

I had not considered the consequences of building relationships with the young people and then leaving. It seemed unethical to be involved on a short-term basis. I had not understood the full extent of the young people’s responses to the project:

The kids were devastated when the program finished. They had all lifted so much by attending the drama, especially Dorak, who had not been engaged by anything else. He went downhill afterwards and got into some trouble.

There was greater significance for the community than I had understood, which meant over time I had to undertake additional levels of responsibility and obligation as part of our partnership. For example, after the Pilot I had to edit the footage and transfer it to DVD format and send multiple copies back to Nungalinya.

I discovered that in my usual practice I was used to exerting a lot of control over the workshop environment, which had contributed to my security as a practitioner. At Nungalinya I felt powerless when the young people did not stay still and when the schedule of neat workshop timeslots with breaks was abandoned; an unspoken group dynamic, not an imposed schedule, dictated the times for breaks. I realized through the Pilot Project that these individual young people had the capacity to do more with their lives. I felt a sense of responsibility beyond the project and committed to returning to the Youth Program and staying involved.

At the end of the Pilot I made a number of key decisions for my practice for our next project. I realized that planning was important but full control as a practitioner was illusory. I decided to be more flexible, reflexive and responsive to the context and the young people; to include making a short video as a factor to increase participation; to conduct a more sustained project where the young people would attend and focus
for lengthy periods; to include themes relevant to their lives and to work more closely with partners.

By the end of the first year of the Youth Program there was a high turnover of staff at Nungalinya, so it looked like the whole thing would end. However, the elders fought for more funding for the Youth Program and succeeded. They wanted bigger scale thinking for their youth and community.

*The First Phase:*

*Adaptation, development and understanding the context*

This 6-week project was the most difficult because there was a new coordinator (Naretha) in the Youth Program, a new Principal and new participants. Though we seemed to have good communication in our planning, unbeknownst to me, Naretha invited another organization, Seaview, to join our project, which created unforeseen problems. The main challenge was the differences between the Nungalinya group and the Seaview group. The Seaview group was reliable and ready to trust the process and themselves. The Nungalinya group was fraught with trust and attendance issues. As a result, I was asked to facilitate separate sessions for each group.

Our children have a lot of issues that really affect their participation. I think it was too confronting dealing with another group when they weren't comfortable in their own.

This often meant that the Nungalinya group would refuse to participate and would sit on the sides of the room and watch the Seaview group. Sometimes they would join in the warm up activities and games, would call out suggestions for improvisations and generally make their presence felt without actually joining in. Nonetheless there were three participants from Nungalinya who became involved in the filmmaking and final screening. The young people wrote, acted and directed their own short films with participants playing roles from both groups.

Dependent on my partners and the participants' willingness to engage, our collaboration took more time and energy than I had anticipated. The disadvantages the young people experienced in their lives did not define these young people but sharpened their resilience and capacity to manage unfamiliar situations.

If I was ugly being here would make me feel like I'm beautiful.

My acceptance of the reality of their lives enabled the young people to lead the direction of the projects. I realised the behaviours, attitudes and understandings required for building a participatory creative space for Indigenous young people in an applied theatre project, paralleled cultural protocols.

You worked on who they are as individuals, but you put them together as a group. You listened to them, you asked them what their thoughts were on things and actually made them feel like they were important, and somebody was interested.
According to Martin (2008) participation for Indigenous people is linked to “agency” and the sense of empowerment that comes from belonging in a group and ownership of their ideas. The relational significance of my role in the Nungalinya project was as a partner where “relationships, practices and shared or negotiated understandings” which arose from working together develop and where “decision-making power is equitable”. This is represented as a circle, because “circles imply reciprocity” (Marika, 2009, p. 409). These principles aligned with the applied theatre elements in my practice which included: a flexible approach to conducting workshops, active building of relationships and community over a long period, providing opportunities for participants to create new narratives of self, offering film as a medium for storytelling and the achievement of tangible outcomes.

The young people responded to games in significant ways; they enjoyed the purposeful competitiveness as an opportunity to display physical skills. They never cheated, were always fair, trusted the format and accepted the rules. As a strategy for building confidence in the drama processes, games achieved several outcomes: the focus was on connection with the team; games were non-verbal, spontaneous, quick, with no time to dwell on inner thoughts; they involved risks; the physical and kinaesthetic engagement they required promoted confidence and relaxation.

I reckon playing with people I don’t really know was a lot of fun! Doing activities that include no shame and imagination is very cool!

Leading on from the games I found non-prescriptive and open-ended improvisations and story-making opportunities developed a sense of cooperation and shared meaning; they enabled the young people to explore meanings relevant to their own lives. The participants responded to a two-way learning process, and took the opportunity to teach me about their world through their stories. I found the young people were completely absorbed by developing their stories, engaging physically and mentally in the developing process. They were building representations of their world in taking on different roles, which they had created in their stories.

You’ve helped them find creative ways to tell personal stories. They’ve come in every day with respect. They learnt how to work in a team.

Having developed some understanding of teamwork and collaboration through the games and their early improvisations, the young people’s interest seemed to flow into the film work. The process of making a film promoted shared power relations with each person’s contribution being a form of personal agency powered by the group. Making a film relied on dialogue, teamwork, cooperation, collaboration, commitment, shared control, and confidence.

I liked the way you wanted to sit around and have conversations. You really wanted to bring things out of them. And another thing I liked was she’s listening to me, she’s interested in me – and nobody’s interested from their perspective, nobody’s interested in me, nobody listens to me.
The Nungalinya group needed to establish relationships and a place of safety before they could engage in the projects and in doing so they contributed to the construction of a participatory creative space on their terms.

It's about building their confidence and trying to work out where they fit and this is a way to express themselves. And there's no criticism on how they're doing it.

All the issues surrounding these young people makes it difficult to stay focused, I had to work against the idea it's impossible and hopeless. I saw my role as encouraging the telling of their stories and I honoured their artistic choices. This often meant that the participants chose a community narrative rather than an individual one. In the Nungalinya group film *When They Stole Us*, the young people wanted to honour and understand that story by retelling it.

The old ladies gave a talk about their lives including when they were taken from their families. After their talk I felt a great sadness. In the movie we made we tried to make out the feelings of how the Stolen Generation ladies felt.

As young people they inherited the big cultural narratives of Indigenous Australia. In their story they chose to recreate the *Stolen Generation* narrative (in which children of Aboriginal families were forcefully taken from their parents by government agencies up until the 1970s and which has an ongoing impact on their own lives) and make something new out of it. The narrative was important to re-tell in their own way as demonstrated by one of the participants who brought her four-year-old son to one of the workshop sessions to be “stolen” in their film. The young people's retelling of the story meant they were in control of disrupting this powerful narrative. In their films black people play the white characters. The young people chose to play “the other” so they had the power to disrupt the normal social narrative. They were building representations of their world in taking on different roles which they had created in their stories.

For Indigenous scholar Karen Martin (2008) a ‘story’ is a personal or collective history, a narrative or description of life events, which allows people to make meaning of their lives. Stories capture the ever-changing environment, and this evolves into understanding. For Martin, the act of re-conceptualising stories helps create different narratives and thereby reclaim power over Indigenous people's lives. The content of their stories was their world and the creativity was driven by them in their context.

From what I've seen of the kids it makes them braver and that – the kids that have been acting and all that. Yeah – they looked like they were enjoying it too. I don't like acting, cause I never act in my whole life.

The sharing and telling of stories is a way for people to listen to and learn from each other. According to Indigenous leader Patrick Dodson, the “validity of the living oral tradition of teaching and learning is it engages the whole person and not just their intellect” (2006, p. 3).

My family was surprised and they wanted to watch it over and over again. I was in it and we were acting and we went to all sorts of places and they were laughing and just really interested in it all.
I realized the workshop space provided the young people with the opportunity: to represent themselves authentically, to weave and develop their own story, to situate, place and contextualize their story. This workshop space, this open communicative space (Habermas, 1997), provided a framework for listening to the young people's voices. They were making sense of their lives through this creative process, and the applied theatre created the opportunity for these elements to occur.

Second phase: Autobiographical voices, cultural safety, creative participatory space

My approach developed significantly by 2008 and was largely driven by the group of young people, several of whom returned from 2007 with a desire to achieve and to lead the group. I realized that I had adapted to their context by relying on my partners and the participants, instead of trying to control the outcome. Over time there developed stronger bonds between us. My partnership with the women meant incorporating the need to construct a communal and culturally safe space to encompass the street knowledge of the participants and the realities of Indigenous lives in order to make it authentic. The workshops provided a framework for development of relationships, potential for change and the opportunity for inclusivity – a significant component of the context.

Cultural safety is a collaborative philosophy, which empowers individuals in the group as it “enables them to contribute to the achievement of positive outcomes” (Bin-Sallik, 2003, p. 21). Cultural safety is about “shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience of learning together” (Williams, 1999, p. 213). The skills of listening, storytelling and sharing are “fundamental cultural tools” (Atkinson, 2007) and essential components of our relationship. For me the sense of trust and acceptance that I had after three years was indicative of the cultural safety that had been established in the Youth Program. And equally I was embraced within it.

Transformed space – privileging voices

I learnt to adopt a different understanding of what it meant to create a safe space for participatory drama purposes. In 2008 I did not change anything in the room but facilitated the sessions in the middle of the room as I found it. I did not try to control the process but trusted in it and in our partnership. The coming and going of the group in 2007 did not continue and the workshops were fully attended by the largest group at Nungalinya.

I realized that the young people over the years had been constructing a safe participatory space that went beyond the boundaries of the workshops. My previous concept of an enclosed safe space, which I could control, did not work here. The space the young people created was porous, accommodating the real world and the imagined worlds of the workshop. The cluttered public workshop space literally and metaphorically provided shelter and safety for the young people to explore their creativity and to participate in the shared processes of
meaning-making. In their context anyone could observe the workshops and the various doorways meant there were lots of exits and escape routes for young people not inclined to actively participate. It was acceptable to be on the edges of the room as well as in the centre of the room. Within this alternative use of space the young people expressed their own power through narratives and meanings relevant to their lives, transforming what I considered the “margins” into a “space of radical openness” (hooks, 2009, p. 80).

The process was summed up by one of the participants:

   It’s teamwork. It’s not something where you can just do by yourselves and I of course was more than happy to help you step by step. There were a couple of people from last year’s film pitched in as well like myself, and it’s good to see some new faces in there which was good and it all turned out really great.

With the film making I found that the production of a tangible outcome was important for the young people’s understanding of the creative process and provided proof of their capacity to commit to a project, collaborate with others through a variety of roles and bring something to completion. It is often the case in Indigenous families that there is a great deal of instability and movement in Indigenous families, and a DVD is permanent and portable. The young people could own the DVD both in content and hard copy. Their public screenings heralded the achievements of the group and provided opportunities for increased connectedness with peers, family and community.

The “context and ownership of autobiographical stories, the power of narrative and relationships of trust and reciprocity” (Nicholson, 2005, p. 157), which occurred during the applied theatre projects, were important factors in the community meaning-making. The young people, telling alternative stories from different perspectives, disrupted social narratives and gave them an opportunity to “speak their truths into public life” (McIntyre, 2008, p. 12). They were building representations of their world in taking on different roles which they had created in their stories.

My project partners said that the young people continued to watch the DVDs in preference to commercial options as “young people their own age in similar circumstances had made them” (Blight, 2012, p. 237). They provided a symbol of hope. Brice Heath (1993) coined the term “visible victories” (p. 59) for young people who had rarely achieved in their lives and have proof of a personally meaningful experience.

Through adapting the applied theatre aesthetic space to suit their needs in their context the young people led me into developing an alternative model of participation and what they had to offer from within this space. The Youth Program space then became a stage and a showcase of potential and possibility. The success of the projects depended on the leadership and participation of my partners and the young people as they knew what was needed for this context.
Between 2007 – 2010 ten participants from the drama projects received scholarships to attend Trinity College's two-week Young Leaders’ Course as a reward for their achievements. Several participants have gone on to finish school and to maintain regular employment. This indicates to me that these young people dared to imagine a different future at least in part through experiencing a sense of new possibilities and from having their voices heard.

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Author/s: BLIGHT, R

Title: Privileging Aboriginal Voices: Applied theatre as a transformative process for Aboriginal Australian youth.

Date: 2015


Persistent Link: http://hdl.handle.net/11343/55090