

Facilitating social justice dialogues after interactive theatre performances: An introduction to our methodology

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ABSTRACT

Applied theatre performances that address social issues can inspire feelings and reactions. In this article, we draw from our experience working together as facilitators since 1999 as examination of the challenges we have encountered and the importance in holding space for difficult – yet productive – conversations. Working from a framework of inclusive justice, we merge social justice practices in applied theatre and inclusive education. We share with the readers our experiences with the role of self as facilitator and the concept of holding space; we challenge the idea of neutrality in facilitation, and advocate for the facilitator as instrument to change. We are not offering a manual of instructions – we offer, instead, a few ingredients that other facilitators may also find helpful in their practice.

During our session at the 2016 NYU Forum on Education Theatre, a participant asked, “Do you have any information on how to do this (indicating the facilitation of the session)? I want to turn you inside out and learn how to do what you do.” The central theme of this request is one that we receive often – how do I learn to facilitate difficult conversations?

Facilitation is, at its core, a social interaction. Maurianne Adams and colleagues define a socially-just society as one where all members participate in the management and direction of that society as full and equal members (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997). They acknowledge that the vision of a socially-just society is one that requires an understanding of what it takes to move a culture forward, as well as continue to strive toward that goal. They emphasize the need for guided interactions when addressing stereotypes; their work is based on a pedagogical model where the facilitator directs, interprets, and analyzes. Additionally, Omar Swartz’s (2012) view of social justice includes “an equitable distribution of social resources, including nutrition, shelter, healthcare, and education” and we seek to do so by facilitating positive interpersonal relationships through theatre-based techniques. Our practice is rooted in social justice education and resonates with these definitions.

As such, we strive to make our performances accessible to audiences by using relatable characterizations to address forms of oppression; we also strive to humanize those characters to build empathy for others. We use interactive techniques to engage audience members in the fabric of the scene as well as the larger social issues the scenes address.

Facilitation is a blanket term meant to cover a breadth of activities that include working with groups in a job or psychoanalytic setting, strangers working on a common problem, mediation, or to describe leadership qualities (Kolb, Jin, & Song, 2008; Borštnar, M., Kljajić, M., Škraba, A., Kofjač, D., & Rajkovič, V., 2011). While facilitation is crucial in applied theatre, the definition of facilitation is not singular. Kolb (2004) notes that “people called in to facilitate groups may be expected to lead, mediate, train, present new information, make process suggestions, serve as peacemakers, take notes or simply be there in case their expertise is needed” (p. 207). This wide range of definitions and applications has led to a lack of empirical research on the importance of who fulfills the role of facilitator and an agreement of what is expected of someone in that role (Neidermann & Volkema, 1999). Our aim is to

discuss how we use facilitation linked to theatrical presentations that are about identity and social justice.

Applied theatre performances that address social issues (such as race, class, gender identity, sexual identity, etc.) can inspire reactions that manifest as denial, resistance, defensiveness, feelings of guilt, anger, hostility, and outrage (Neihus, 2005; Dawson, 2013). These reactions prevent many from engaging in the discussions necessary to address the issues at hand, short-circuiting the opportunity to learn and work towards a more just world (Dawson, 2013). It is not responsible to create a powerful, interactive piece of applied theatre without the ability to facilitate the dialogues that can come from the performance. One can be so invested in using theatre to create change that we don't focus enough on how to live in the discomfort that our performances create.

Applied theatre educational programs should emphasize the skills of a theatrical practitioner as well the dynamics of complex facilitation. Scholar Michael Balfour (2010) argues that this is a large task and there do not appear to be frameworks that will allow for the benefit of the student and the audiences who participate. Michael Rohd further asserts "...facilitation is not making a scene activating... it is actually getting to the meat of this work and playing through the dialogue that results from real activation" (Rohd, 1998, p. 112). The focus on the content and context of the actual scene is an important part of our process, and, as Rohd reiterates, the true "work" comes from the dialogue and interaction(s) inspired by the work.

We have been in this practice since 1999 and experience has shown us that becoming a facilitator is like following a cooking recipe – it has basic ingredients, and varies depending on taste, resources, situation, and desired outcome. Some of those ingredients are harder to find, difficult to measure for any given situation, and can produce very different results depending on when they are used and in what quantity. The question of how to use these ingredients becomes even more pertinent when exploring and addressing identity within these difficult conversations.

We will outline some of the ingredients we use when facilitating a dialogue about identity. We will share those that have been shaped, refined, and polished from our experience. We offer this recipe to you because we must; our experiences are influenced by our own mentors and grown from years of experience of many brilliant individuals. In that spirit, we also offer our own understandings as a means to continue

sharing.

INGREDIENT 1: YOU DON'T MATTER

You, as the facilitator, do not matter. Facilitation is done in service to the space and the people in it. Your ego must be left outside the space – preferably several years before you enter as the facilitator. When we say you don't matter, we are talking about the part of you that thinks you are important and have a lot to share about social justice. Your passion for equity or ending discrimination has to be among what leads you to the work, but this cannot dominate your facilitation. Having your own agenda or holding on to a specific outcome is not facilitation, but teaching or activism.

We are not the first to mention this quality. In the context of facilitation in theatre, for example, Augusto Boal spoke of the Joker or coringa as a “midwife, whose task is to facilitate, but not control” (Babbage, 2004). It is in this sense that we say that you don't matter. You need to be able to acknowledge your individuality, while simultaneously placing yourself in a central yet invisible place among others. If your passion enters the room when you facilitate, you are not a facilitator in that moment – you are an activist or an educator. A lecturer. When you decide to take the role of the facilitator, you're the guide, not the leader. And that distinction matters.

INGREDIENT 2: FLOW

As facilitator you will be responsible for all sides of every issue. Your skills must foster a place where all (well, mostly all) viewpoints can be expressed and heard as valid for the people who hold them. There will be exceptions, and negotiating those exceptions is part of your journey as a facilitator. This means “holding space” for the people who have views that may be contrary to yours. Genuine “space holding” requires that you have the ability to name, validate, and honor differing points of view. The facilitator coaches and guides by “offering gentle, non-judgmental support and guidance” (Plett, 2016). This does NOT mean that you are neutral. Ingredient number one might lead some to believe that; however, that is not the case. Holding space means that you are willing to walk a journey with another person, without making them feel inadequate, trying to fix or correct their attitudes and beliefs (Plett, 2016).

To facilitate dialogue, interaction, or conversation – where heated community issues are at the forefront and where identity matters – you have to be willing to engage in holding space for various viewpoints. This is one of the most challenging aspects of facilitation. Particularly when those opposing viewpoints may appear to challenge yours (or other participants’ core beliefs, including basic rights or in some cases the right to exist). This is the situation that causes anxiety in a group setting (Phillips & Phillips, 1993) and that which is challenging for new facilitators. As the facilitator, you’ve got the entire room to consider, as well as the rest of your time. In our experience, intentionally and virulently shutting down a voice that is challenging, contrary or, “troll-like,” might be an appealing place to go; however, it often has the consequence of shutting down more than the person (or persons) making those comments in the moment. This does not mean that challenge and disagreement do not happen, it does mean that space has to be given to hold those disagreements in a respectful manner.

INGREDIENT 3: WHO YOU ARE IS INFINITELY IMPORTANT

The first ingredient and this one have to occupy the same space. There is a fine line between where you don’t matter and where you are absolutely integral to the process. On that line there is a space where a facilitator balances between different viewpoints, experiences, and perspectives of the participants, and their own identities. Sometimes you have to be the role model of how to deal with dissenting ideas. Sometimes you have to validate the comment by someone whose experiences or opinions are opposite to that of the rest of the group (or maybe even contrary to your own). You have to find the common ground, and make the facilitation space a welcoming place for all participants. The facilitators use themselves in the space to allow others to learn through them. This can mean role modeling vulnerability, naming difficult emotions, actions or beliefs; or allowing oneself to be challenged in an action or opinion that may not have happened (in the space) or one in which the facilitator does not own. The facilitator’s task is the ability to put the needs of the group ahead of ego and play a role that moves the group forward. As Bell, Goodman, & Ouellett (2016) point out, the presence of different viewpoints in the space you are holding will likely challenge, clarify, and extend everyone’s perspectives (p. 82). Undoubtedly, this task is extremely difficult, and is one of the most

challenging, albeit crucial aspects of being a facilitator.

The social identities that the facilitator holds will also be significant. As much as we strive for a society where the playing field is level, facilitation of those very conversations requires deeper understanding and acknowledgement of the concepts of privilege and oppression as social constructs. We hold these as paramount because they have a role in the experiences of others in the room. Our practice acknowledges that people have different experiences based on identity (race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, religion, national origin, etc.). A facilitator must be aware of how others will perceive them (justified or not) based on their social identities, and be able to speak to those identities with some comfort. This is one of the major reasons we co-facilitate, particularly across identity. We have found it impactful to have a male facilitator during our performances exploring sexual assault to ask difficult questions about male privilege or to have a white facilitator during our performances on race assist the audience in exploring white privilege. It is significant to the dialogue when the facilitator who has an identity that is a part of a dominant group can name it and the privilege associated with it. Your understanding of your own self with dominant and subordinated identities will be extremely important when facilitating discussions about privilege.

INGREDIENT 4: SELF AS INSTRUMENT TO CHANGE

Expanding on the previous ingredient, number 4 implies that the facilitator must be willing to show a vulnerability that can enlist the ideas, viewpoints, and experiences of the participants in the process. This requires that the facilitator has done some exploration of the issue(s) associated with the facilitation and that the facilitator is ready to “extrovert” the good, the bad, and the ugly around the issue(s) salient to the facilitation – which is particularly important when stressing a place of privilege. On teaching about racism, Brookfield (2014) noted that teachers should examine and share their own personal process to model their own learning, to make their experience public, and engage others in how to address the issue. We actively seek to speak about our experiences from our privileged identities in an effort to engage those who share that identity group to also engage in self-examination and understanding of the social constructs of oppression.

Acknowledging your vulnerability is key to feeling compassion and

empathy towards others with whom you work in a facilitation setting. As organizational psychologist Roger Schwarz has proposed:

If you act out of compassion [. . .] you are able to move beyond defensiveness and to be vulnerable. This vulnerability in turn enables you to create conversation in which you can mutually learn. (Schwarz, 2002, p. 48)

You, yourself, are instrumental to change because through vulnerability, as a facilitator, you invite others into the arduous task of engaging in dialogue.

INGREDIENT 5: YOU REALLY DON'T KNOW SHIT

Change, progress, and movement demand a confluence of factors in order to happen. The “simple change model” (change requires awareness, knowledge, and skills to be effective), is a helpful framework; especially when a group goes directly into problem solving. This model suggests that the intermediary steps of gaining knowledge and skills are required for understanding the complexity of the problem and emphasizing skills necessary for changes to occur. We have found when a group gets disheartened or resorts to finding solutions right away, as a way to avoid the challenging aspects of the issues, using the change model is a good way to redefine the conversation and keep participants focused and engaged.

There is value in this model as a framework to understand how to address the issues that can come up during facilitation; however, the challenge lies in applying knowledge and skills to lived experience. For instance when dealing with issues of identity there are mountains of data that are important to have as a portion of the understanding around those issues, AND those are not the sum of lived experience(s). It's an old epistemological roadblock: learning how/learning to, versus knowledge/experience.

As the facilitator, you have to live in and hold the space where BOTH of those things are truthful, valid, and worthy of exploration – especially where those things are in direct opposition. To hold space while living in it with the group at hand is to participate. Applied theatre scholar Sheila Preston has discussed a similar idea:

If genuine participation exists through co-intentionality, the relationship nurtured by the facilitator or artist is crucial and therefore their sensitivity and skill in working 'with' participants and enabling democratic ownership of creative mediums is key. (Preston, 2009, p. 129)

This idea of genuine participation and co-intentionality also exemplifies the idea that this is a journey and a destination. There will never be an end to the conversation when talking about our social identities, including our perceptions and experiences related to those identities. We must pay attention to where we are going as well as how we are getting there, and assume we "know it all."

INGREDIENT 6: THE SECRET SAUCE

There are skills that can be helpful albeit not written in stone, and can be just as harmful as helpful depending on the situation. We call them the secret sauce because they are often used in combination and in varying amounts. This is where your personal skills and experience come into play; where the needs of the group are balanced and you as the facilitator need to be willing to lean into a difficult situation, make a challenging decision, and fully reflect on the outcomes. The skills that comprise our notion of the secret sauce are reflective listening, challenging opinions, digging for gold, noticing and naming out loud, and slowing and pulling the stick out of the mud.

Reflective listening is a skill borrowed from psychology, defined as "a way of responding to another person to communicate empathy" (Craighead & Nemeroff, 2004). By using reflective listening, facilitators attempt to code what a member of the group has said into their own words (Rautalinko, 2013) and offer it back to the others. The reflective process can also be infinitely important in making sure that other participants are heard and understood in the room. The reflections can be a powerful tool in nurturing understanding between participants as well as validating voice. In our practice, we have found that reflective listening and open-ended questions help guide the group, particularly in difficult conversations around identity.

A skillful facilitator can challenge a participant's opinion or widely held belief in a way that invites further examination. Michael Rohd refers to this as "exploring communication and how the life experience of each

character (and every person) brings to it an interaction that affects their choices and their ability to follow through on those choices” (Rohd, 1998, p. 127). Thus, through the story of the theatre, the intention is to invite critical thought of subject matter with facts, data, AND lived experiences. During a performance and facilitation of *Just Another Party*, a performance about sexual assault and alcohol, we would often hear from audience members about a “friend” who was falsely accused of sexual assault. We typically wouldn’t challenge that participant’s experience, but rather would point out the statistics of false reporting and invoke the stories of sexual assault survivors as a way to temper the undertone the comment might imply. In doing so, we would invite everyone to think critically and to weigh the scrutiny of reporting a sexual assault versus the low numbers of false reports.

In a group facilitation setting, open-ended questions are a vital tool as well, particularly with challenging statements. We call this “digging for gold.” Phrases like “Tell me more?” or “Where did that come from?” Using questioning, without being invasive, allows for dialogue and sharing of viewpoints and stories. This idea has also been discussed by the International Association of Facilitators, albeit in a different context: that open-ended questions are essential to framing a dialogue that forwards critical thinking and allows for possible responses – and, by extension, shared experiences and viewpoints (Schuman, 2005).

Phrases like “Do we all agree?” or “I see people nodding in agreement,” “I see what look like some different opinions,” and “What other experiences might be present in this conversation that we’re not hearing?” are also a good condiment to have at hand, as is reminding participants to speak from “I” statements. We mention that it is hard to argue someone else’s experience. We also remind people that as facilitators we may push on their understanding of that experience, but the idea is to get participants moving from phrases like “We all know...” or “Everyone does...” to “I know” or “I’ve seen.” This is also where the facilitator may introduce facts, data, testimony, or other known quantities to add to the conversation.

Noticing and naming, out loud, around group identities and group dynamics is another important skill. Phrases such as, “I’m noticing that all of the women have been speaking as we talk about sexual assault, and we’ve not heard much from the men” can be an avenue to open up the conversation to other voices. The same is true for naming the emotional temperature of the room by stating, “It seems like this

conversation got really challenging. Everyone has gone silent and I notice a few people looking down. How is everyone feeling?” or “Wow. That was a pretty heavy statement that was just said. It makes me feel anxious. How are you all feeling?” Lastly, we also own experiences and reactions (when appropriate): “This can be hard work. I know I’m feeling anxious right now,” or “This was hard for me to hear as a man and I’ve learned a lot by being patient and listening.” By doing so, narratives may foster empathy, as theatre scholar Anne Bogart has discussed before (Bogart, 2014, pp. 92-105).

Facilitating these types of dialogues can become a track meet – where individuals in the room, or indeed the entire room itself, take off in one direction leaving the other people or the agenda behind. Or, it can be an effective tactic to “change the subject” to avoid a difficult portion of the conversation or to push a particular idea or need into the conversation. Slowing down the conversation is a great technique for making sure that the intent of the session, a point of view, or an impactful moment doesn’t become lost. Phrases like: “I want to go back to what we were talking about before,” or “I know we are going in one direction, but let’s not lose sight of...,” or “This is a great conversation, and I want to hold on to our original subject / idea / intention,” or “There is so much to know here, and let’s remember our intent here is to talk about...” can be effective ways to redirect the facilitation.

There may be times when it is important to stick with a topic because the group might be struggling or there might be some insights being offered to consider. There will be other times when the group might be going down a rabbit hole, and it is time to move on. Gauging this is a balance of time, agenda, and engagement of the group. The concept of the “parking lot” (using a space on a chalkboard to list topics that may not be addressed during that session) can be useful or simply telling the group, “This is great conversation but we need to move on,” or “We seem to be a bit stuck here. Let’s shift the focus a bit.” Unfortunately there is no formula. It is also important to recognize that YOU might be the stick in the mud – and might need to get out of the way.

INGREDIENT 7: IT IS ALWAYS A LEARNING JOURNEY

Any opportunity to be in a space where there is interaction on difficult issues is a learning opportunity. There will be new perspectives and

ideas shared, leading to the possibility of new personal insights that will come from the interactions, both for the participants and for the facilitator. Facilitation is, at its core, a learning opportunity for ALL involved and must shape the foundation of any facilitation. In their research, Kolb, Jin, & Song (2008) interviewed self-identified facilitators. Those facilitators reported that they all learned through self-guided learning, mentoring, and second chair opportunities. As you construct your own recipe for facilitation, it is important to know that learning about (and studying) facilitation are limited and one truly becomes a facilitator by doing. The ingredients and mixtures that work for individual facilitators can be useful but truly understanding how to facilitate requires an exploration of the ingredients necessary. Each must be personally understood, experienced, and blended into their own practice as facilitator.

INGREDIENT 8: POST-MORTEM

The concept of the post-mortem is not new to theatre, and has a place in the world of facilitation as well. Often called a de-brief, the concept is the same: “Every play and every group is different and has individual problems peculiar to it; but the need for growth and creative expression must be recognized in all” (Spolin, 1963, p. 363). This recognition ascends from collaboration. In turn, post-mortem is inherently connected to collaboration, as a means to both examine the production and “ensure healthier collaborations in the next production” (Roznowski & Domer, 2009). We understand the same to be true in our practice, in terms of growth and creative expression. It is important to review the flow of the experience, receive and give your co-facilitator(s) feedback (if you have them), and reflect on success to polish for the next time. While no two facilitations will be the same, there is learning that can be applied from one scenario to the next.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Since we began working together in 1999, we have encountered as many obstacles as we have met opportunities to learn. As educators and facilitators, our work is strongly influenced by social issues (race, social class, gender and sexual identity, etc) and gravitates towards creating meaningful engagement with those subjects. Throughout this article, we

outlined *some* of the principles and guidelines we use in our practice. The ingredients we have mentioned in this article pertain to the facilitator's role within these complex conversations – who you are, where you are, which parts of yourself you bring to the group, and what matters to you as a facilitator as well as to the group. We cannot emphasize enough the fluid nature of this type of work and the need for those who wish to engage in this practice to be mindful that no one formula will work every time for every situation. The fluid nature of working with groups of people requires that those who take on the mantle of “facilitator” be willing to do that work where ambiguity and multiplicity are the norm.

These ingredients are a sampling of the depth and breadth we have found useful in facilitating dialogues about identity and social justice. As with any good recipe, one must do some actual cooking. The goal of becoming a fluid facilitator requires practice, reflection and, if you can find it, solid mentorship. A foundation of our practice is to remember the crucial idea: if people can move towards one another within their differences, that is where progress lies.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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