

Importance of the Outsider: Reflections from the Facilitator of a Community-Based Playbuilding Project

[JENNIFER WONG](#)

NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

Facilitators entering a community to do applied theatre work often carried the identity of an outsider to the community. This identity is frequently problematic because there are several assumptions critics to the field make about the inherent privileges and imbalance in powers an outsider, in the form of a facilitator for an applied theatre programme, possesses. And it becomes a sticky argument especially when the communities applied theatre practitioners work with are often likely to be vulnerable, marginalized and/or disenfranchised. In this article, I argue that there are benefits to being an outsider to the community where the applied theatre work is happening. The applied theatre practitioner's identity as an outsider serves the function of maintaining a critical distance from the lives of the participants in a playbuilding project. The lack of knowledge and access to the culture and people within the community where the playbuilding work was

situated provided the participants an added layer of safety when they examined issues and problems which they experienced in their daily lives. The desires to connect with the applied theatre practitioner through the performance making process in the playbuilding programme motivated the participants to produce sharper pieces of theatre.

INTRODUCTION

As a doctoral student in 2015, I arrived at the office of the Voluntary Welfare Organisation (VWO) located at the fringe of the central business district in Singapore, ready to plunge myself into three months of playbuilding work. The young participants in the playbuilding workshops lived in a low-income estate under the care of the VWO. From past experiences and also through conversations with the social service worker who acted as the main liaison for the project, I learnt that the children participating in the playbuilding programme faced acute academic challenges and behavioural management issues, on top of being very poor. While it was not the main purpose of my doctoral research to examine the facilitator-participants relationship and power balance in this study, it became a pertinent angle for discussion as the reflection journal that I completed religiously recorded consistently the many thoughts I had about my identity as an outsider to the community of children from the low-income homes.

I was keenly aware of the differences between the children and me. My middle-class, educated background from a dominant ethnic group in Singapore contrasted sharply from the children's demographics of low-income, low educational levels and most of them in the programme were from a minor ethnic group. The young people preferred to converse in their ethnic language when communicating with each other, while they struggled to speak Singlish¹ with me, and they considered my attempt at Singlish too proper for them.

In this article, I discuss the tensions of my identity as an outsider to the community I was working with, and at the same time, I highlight the space that was enabled as a result of the identity for a robust and

¹ A colloquial form of English embellished by Chinese, Malay, Tamil and various Chinese dialects.

sincere dialogic relationship to emerge between the children and me. Heap (2015) suggests that in an applied theatre programme, a positive exchange takes place between the facilitator and the participants where “participants become part of the teaching/facilitation, the facilitator learns and all the participants are affected within this continuing cycle of exchange” (p. 248-249). This suggestion is further echoed by Howell and Heap (2013) who advocate for teachers in a drama process to relinquish the power they have as teachers to enable more agency in their students. However, Snyder-Young (2013) reminds us that the authority drama educators and practitioners bring into the space they are working in makes juggling the status and power we hold a precarious balancing act. Therefore, I argue in this article for different ways to look at the (im)balance in power because the differences can serve the intentions of the community we work with.

POSITION OF THE OUTSIDER

At the beginning of the project, I was critically aware that I was facilitating and providing a drama experience for the children in the low-income neighbourhood which was an uncommon occurrence. Opportunities to engage in participatory arts programmes for these children were rare. Their infrequent school attendance also meant that they missed out on important opportunities to engage in extra-curricular activities that aimed to develop their literacies outside of academic subjects. The children in the programme were excited by the prospects of making a performance together for an invited audience although at the beginning of the project, they were fairly doubtful of their capabilities as theatre makers. At the same time, they were wary of me, an outsider to their community who was introduced by the social worker as a drama teacher. The imbalance in power, privilege and status between the children and me became a confounding mess compounded by my identity as the facilitator of the programme, leading and teaching them how to make performances.

Hughes and Wilson (2004) explain that participation in out-of-school youth theatre activities provides a physical and social-emotional space for adolescents to “feel known, accepted and supported; a means of establishing positive identity and relationships with peers and adults outside of their day-to-day lives” (p. 65). As an adult outsider, I had entered the community with a task and it had made me very aware

that I could have appeared to be the coloniser coming to improve the lives of these unfortunate people. I was also careful that I did not enter the community or give the impression that I had a “privileged set of assumptions that the communities need to be changed” (Snyder-Young, 2013, p. 38) so that they could lead improved lives.

Blight (2015) expounds the importance of “the building of trust and understanding within the partnership” (p. 22) between the facilitator of a drama programme and the participants. I understood clearly from the beginning of the study that my position as an outsider to the community meant that I had to work on building trust within the playbuilding group. It was imperative that they trusted me as the facilitator of the programme to lead them in the journey to achieve the artistic objectives. It was equally crucial that they built trust with each other as they were going to be working together very closely.

There was also the element of understanding each other and respecting the perspectives offered through the process that had to be negotiated from the start of the project. Hickey-Moody (2015) explains that it “is a theatre facilitator’s role to take an audience, or participants, on a journey that pushes them to relate to new worlds, and often difficult social issues and for this to occur both sides must relate to one another” (p. 216). A constructive and trusting relationship with the children was forged quickly when we acknowledged and made use of the differences between us to advance our goal in creating performances for the audience. Throughout the playbuilding process, it was not apparent that I was the teacher in the room as the children constantly took the lead in deciding the trajectories of the stories we were building collaboratively. I had also made a deliberate effort to remind the young people and myself that I was there to facilitate the process of putting the performance together but the decision-making and ownership of the product remained in their hands.

Throughout the playbuilding process, I reflected that I needed to enable through the theatre making opportunities for the children to gain agency in determining how they wanted to shape the narratives they intended to perform. My position as an outsider to the community gave me a reason to ask the children many questions—questions about what had happened in the story, why did it happen, who were involved or affected. The children were very interested to perform stories about their neighbourhood and tried their best to answer verbally, and when language failed them, they showed through still images and

performances to help this outsider understand. The young people were empathetic that this outsider was a stranger to their community and thus did not understand the culture and workings in their neighbourhood. At the same time, I used questions extensively throughout the playbuilding process to motivate the young people to think deeper about the choices they were making and analysed the rationales behind their decisions. When I asked questions, I aimed to “bring them to a point where they think from within the framework of choices instead of talking coolly about the framework of choices” (Heathcote, 2013, p. 204).

The questions used in conjunction with specific drama conventions meant to advance the development of the performance became powerful tools in making visible the cultural discourse within the community. My identity as the outsider aided and justified the use of questions as a way to push the playbuilding process forward and the children were eager to educate me in the ways of the community as they empathised that I genuinely did not understand. The young people saw the need to make explicit the intricacies of the narratives so that I could understand the nuances which would otherwise be unnoticed by external eyes.

Wilkinson and Kitzinger (2013) suggest that “(instead) of speaking for Others, we maintain a respectful silence, and work to create the social and political conditions which might enable Others to speak (and be heard) on their own terms” (p. 86). In the project, I was given the identity of a teacher as the children either addressed me as ‘cikgu’ (pronounced ‘chek-ku’ in Malay) when they spoke with each other in Malay or they called me ‘Ms Jennifer’. The younger ones simply called me ‘Teacher’. I reflected that my position as an outsider to the low-income estate benefitted my role as the facilitator in the playbuilding programme. I had no links or history with the residents and therefore my relationship with the children was confined to the drama programme. I was an adult who was always asking them questions and being interested in the ways they viewed the world around us. I was an adult who had time to listen and was not linked to the problems they were facing in their lives. Therefore, the covert ‘Othering’ that was happening between the children and me became a means for us to be acquainted with the other’s world on our own terms.

The children’s backgrounds and their circumstances were outside of my social-economic strata although it was not completely unfamiliar

to me. Regardless of our differences in culture and backgrounds, the children and I co-created two pieces of theatre together with the same respectfulness accorded to each other. Video recordings showed the children being patient with me when I clarified my interpretations of the tableaux work they had created. They pursued the refinement of their images in order to help explain to this outsider what they really wanted to communicate through the images they had created. On the other hand, I was conscious throughout the playbuilding process that I did not suggest or direct the tableaux creation. The commitment to facilitate and not dictate the trajectory of the plots of their performances was observed even till the final rehearsals for each of the performances throughout the project. Therefore, despite the awareness that I was a drama teacher, the children were empowered throughout the playbuilding process to make decisions for the creation of their performance.

The children's heightened sense of self-efficacy and agency during the debrief at the end of the performance were evidence of this respectful relationship we shared.² Qid, an eight-year-old, explained that making performance was special to him because he performed stories that he had told, and not stories that belonged to someone else. Twelve-year-old Sha agreed with Qid and further explained that the children owned the narratives and the final performance, and they were thankful to me because I had shown them the tools to making theatre. If there had been consciousness during the theatre making process that we were other-ing each other, it was not intended to demonstrate the differences between us but instead to bridge the gap so that we were able to look into each other's worlds. I saw the children's lived experiences and aspirations through their lenses while they saw my journey as a drama practitioner through their playbuilding process. It was not an equal relationship, but it did not hinder the way we worked.

Wales (2012) explains that drama itself does not foster the positive changes in identity and agency construction. Instead she posits that it is the "facilitation of, and interactions within, the drama experience" (p. 540) that contributes to the changes in the relationships and personal identities of the participants. On the other hand, the facilitation of the playbuilding process in this project propelled me to work at a level of

² All the children's names have been replaced by pseudonyms in this article.

complexity that was unanticipated and I “develop(ed) a very distinct level of high-order thinking skills” which Heap (2015, p. 246) argues is important for workers in the applied theatre field.

TENSIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF BEING AN OUTSIDER

Hughes and Wilson (2004) assert the need for positive and proper structures to support the transition of adolescence into adulthood. The children in the playbuilding programme had been prematurely inducted into the adolescent phase of their lives because of the circumstances that formed their social and environmental fabrics. The children exhibited behaviours that were beyond their age and innocence so as to protect themselves in the rough estate. Sha and his best friend, eleven-year-old Tin’s swaggers when they walked and their propensity to engage anyone in a physical fight are just two examples of how the two pre-adolescents wanted to impress upon the other children in the community that they were more capable and much bigger beings than their peers of the same age. The children’s relationships with the adults in the neighbourhood and in their lives did not appear to support their transition into adolescence as the children told stories about the absence of positive adult figures. Their perception of me as the drama teacher in this playbuilding project filled the gap temporarily in the children’s need for an adult figure who was audience to their thoughts and perspectives and at the same time provided guidance when requested.

Maier and Monahan (2009) advocate researchers to establish “strong interpersonal connections with their subjects in order to get them to open up and share the intimate details of their lives and provide a portrait of the social reality being studied” (p. 11). In this project, my position as an outsider to the low-income estate fostered that connection between the children and me. As an outsider, I did not subscribe to the cultural rules of the community and there was no need to refrain from topics that were considered taboo. In one of the playbuilding sessions that was poorly attended, eleven-year-old Ins brought up the topic of sex and puberty for discussion. The only boy who was present that afternoon was eight-year-old Ros. The young boy had retreated to the sofa at the end of the room that afternoon and declared that he was too tired to participate in drama that day. Ins and then followed by Dana who was of the same age took the opportunity

to ask questions about the physical changes they were experiencing due to puberty. The topic changed very quickly to premarital sex and the two girls explained they felt pressured to conform to the culture established by the adolescents in the neighbourhood.

Ins and Dana explained that they knew girls who were sexually active with some of the boys in the community and amongst the adolescent group, there was covert pressure for teenage girls to use sex as an initiation ritual to grow up. According to the girls, these were not topics they could broach easily with an adult figure in the community. Ins' declaration that her mother would not address such issues further crystallised the pre-adolescents' need for an adult figure to speak with and seek guidance from. I was at that time curious why they did not speak with the social service worker managing the playbuilding project as she was a trusted figure amongst the children. The responses from the girls plainly explained that social service worker shared a very close relationship with the low-income community which included the girls' parents and caregivers.

The close connection between the social service worker and the adults in the estate meant that she was not an option with whom to discuss sex. Instead, my position as an outsider meant that I had no access to their parents or caregivers and I did not know any of the adolescents girls they were discussing making me a safe option. It is, of course, debateable if an outsider to the community should be offering advice on puberty and sex to the girls but I decided that I was comfortable approaching the topics because there was implicit trust between us. Maier and Monahan (2009) caution that "(researchers) must find a balance between closeness and detachment *that is right for them*" (p. 23, italics in original), and in that situation, my identity as an outsider to the community offered a level of detachment for the girls, but our working relationship built a connection that made them feel safe.

However, I was also keenly aware that both the drama programme and my presence in the community during the theatre making duration were not permanent supporting structures the young people could rely on indefinitely. The conversation with the girls about puberty and sex was also a "stop" (Fels, 2012) moment in the playbuilding process. I had to pause and consider my role as an outsider facilitating a process that resulted in the participants peering into their own lives and contemplating their futures. I became even more keenly aware of the

warning by Etherton and Prentki (2006) about applied theatre practitioners being visitors to the site of the participatory work in which we engage. They suggest that “the benefits of critical distance and innovative vision have to be set against the disadvantages of restricted knowledge and limited time” (p. 144). It is further suggested that one way to circumvent this stricture was to engage persons who would have continued access to the participants to move the work forward after the ‘visitor’ has left. While I was encouraged by the trust the children had in me and the drama process to raise sensitive issues for exploration and dialogue, I was deeply concerned about the lack of support they might feel when the playbuilding programme came to an end. In my mind, the children’s attitudes towards sex and the pressures they felt required more intense examination and careful facilitation on my part but I was limited by the time I had with them. My ethos as a drama practitioner were challenged when the programme came to an end: there were issues which remained unresolved; and there could have been children who expected and needed continual support.

Muris (2017) highlighted that girls who have lower self-efficacy levels are more prone to depression than boys. Brummert Lennings and Bussey (2017) further this claim to explain that when young people cope with stressful situations through self-blaming and isolation, they experience an increase in depressive symptoms. It was evident that the children, especially the girls were needing support in ways that fell beyond the scope of the playbuilding project. However, their membership in the programme had provided the space and time for them to articulate fears and concerns which might have otherwise gone unheard. I was particularly concerned with how or who would continue to support the young people in the programme after my PhD fieldwork ended, but at the same time, I was conscious that the stories told to me were in confidence and not meant to be shared with persons related to the community. When I left the community at the end of the project, my identity reverted back to that of a stranger. When I met two of the children one year later, the distance and awkwardness between us made it hard to imagine that we had spent about three months building two performances together. However, I speculated that it was also the knowledge that I would one day leave the community that made it safe for the children to share intimate personal stories with me. My induction into the rental estate and its events would have no impact

on the ecology of the community once I left.

CONCLUSION: LEAVING THE COMMUNITY

Hogett and Miller (2000) suggest that the outsider does not get an “all access pass” into the community. I reflected in this article that I was an outsider to the public rental housing community. I entered the community with my bag of tools in the form of drama processes to facilitate the making of performances with the children. In that sense, I had gifted each of the child participants an access pass into a playbuilding programme where they became theatre makers of original performances. The children reciprocated by gifting me an access pass into the personal and communal stories of their lived experiences as young residents in a tough neighbourhood. The relationship of reciprocity lasted throughout the playbuilding programme.

Throughout the playbuilding journey, the children found opportunities to delve into conflicts and issues which made up their lived experiences, and examined them from different perspectives within the dramatic contexts. The young people transited between the fiction and the real world to make sense of the events happening in their lives to re-imagine and visualise their realities. The experience of working collaboratively within the fiction facilitated multi-modal ways of learning and multiple ways of being.

The shared experience of building a play together fostered a new sense of identity in the children, both collectively and individually. The young people saw themselves as a group of young theatre makers and they were doing something other than spending time at communal spaces in the low-income estate just ‘hanging out’. The children also found that they had talents and capabilities that they had not realized before, and their identities were not limited to their perceived inadequacies and lack of academic achievements. This propelled a sense of agency in some of them as they started to see themselves as capable of making positive changes to their environments and lives. However, this newly formed group identity proved to be limiting and exclusive when they rejected the inclusion of other children into the playbuilding community. The children in the programme became protective of the shared experiences and they felt their privacy had been compromised when newcomers wanted to join the artistic

journey.

The final performance in June 2015 ended the intense playbuilding process I had shared with the children. During the debrief at the end of the second performance, the children returned the figurative access pass for the playbuilding programme to me. They thanked me for teaching them how to do drama but reminded me that the stories belonged to them. The children were ready to move on from their participation in the playbuilding programme to try other activities. The social service worker was trying to recruit the young people into a Scouts programme starting the following week, and many of the children appeared interested. Prendergast and Saxton (2013) explain that “the group may carry on without the presence of the facilitator, or perhaps with a new facilitator, so the “exiting” process may be around the dissolution of the whole group, or the departure of the facilitator from the group, or both” (p. 199). With the completion and submission of my thesis, it was also my time to return the figurative access pass back to the community.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Wong, J. (2019). Importance of the outsider: Reflections from the facilitator of a community-based playbuilding project. *ArtsPraxis*, 6 (1), 26-38.

REFERENCES

- Blight, R. (2015). Privileging Aboriginal voices: Applied theatre as a transformative process for Aboriginal Australian youth. *Applied Theatre Research*, 3 (1), pp. 21-35. doi:10.1386/atr.3.1.21_1
- Bowell, P., & Heap, B. S. (2013). *Planning process drama: Enriching teaching and learning*. Routledge.
- Brummert Lennings, H. I., & Bussey, K. (2017). Personal agency in children: Assessing children's coping self-efficacy in the context of parental conflict. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 41 (3), pp. 432-443.
- Etherton, M., & Prentki, T. (2006). Drama for change? Prove it! Impact assessment in applied theatre. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 11 (2), pp.

139-155.

- Fels, L. (2012). Collecting data through performative inquiry: A tug on the sleeve. *Youth Theatre Journal*, 26 (1), pp. 50-60.
- Heap, B. S. (2015). The aesthetics of becoming: Applied theatre and the quest for cultural certitude. In G. White (Ed.), *Applied theatre: Aesthetics*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Heathcote, D. (2013). Drama as a process for change. In T. Prentki & S. Preston (Eds.), *The applied theatre reader*. Routledge.
- Hickey-Moody, A. (2015). The political imagination and contemporary theatre for youth. In G. White (Ed.), *Applied theatre: Aesthetics*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Hughes, J., & Wilson, K. (2004). Playing a part: the impact of youth theatre on young people's personal and social development. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 9 (1), pp. 57-72.
- Maier, S. L., & Monahan, B. A. (2009). How close is too close? Balancing closeness and detachment in qualitative research. *Deviant Behavior*, 31 (1), pp. 1-32.
- Minter, A., & Pritzker, S. (2017). Measuring Adolescent Social and Academic Self-Efficacy: Cross-Ethnic Validity of the SEQ-C. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 27 (7), pp. 818-826.
- Prendergast, M., & Saxton, J. (2013). *Applied drama: A facilitator's handbook for working in community*: Intellect Books.
- Snyder-Young, D. (2013). *Theatre of good intentions*. Springer.
- Wales, P. (2012). Telling tales in and out of school: youth performativities with digital storytelling. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 17 (4), pp. 535-552.
- Wilkinson, S., & Kitzinger, C. (2013). Representing the other. In T. Prentki & S. Preston (Eds.), *The applied theatre reader*. Routledge.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Jennifer Wong is a Lecturer in the National Institute of Education - Nanyang Technological University (NIE-NTU), Singapore. Before joining NIE-NTU, she spent ten years in Singapore Polytechnic where she was one of the key members in designing and starting the Diploma

in Applied Drama and Psychology. Her PhD thesis examines the role of drama in enabling a positive sense of self-efficacy in children from low-income homes in Singapore. Her research interests include participatory arts and child and youth development.