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Responsivity in Applied Theatre Practitioner Expertise: Introducing Identifying Patterns and Names

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines a research project investigating the expertise of applied theatre practitioners. Summarising some of the research approaches and findings, a conceptualization of 'responsivity' is proposed to encapsulate the blended expertise of those artists that work in community, participatory and applied settings. The 'practice responsive' research methodology utilizing 'reflective dialogues' with practitioners is explained and the resulting artists' commentaries are embedded throughout. I outline how reflection and response thread through a conceptualization of applied theatre in literatures, and discuss how these themes informed both the method and the findings of my research. Whilst offering namings for patterns found common to practitioners operating across diverse contexts, the article also acknowledges how naming can close down understanding of the complex operations and qualities of the practitioner. I suggest a theoretical proposition of '__' (underscore) to open up understanding of

the workers and the work of applied theatre, in order to allow further insight to their expertise. The proposal concludes by arguing how the practitioners' developmental response to the work enhances applied theatre's beneficial objectives for participants.

INTRODUCTION

The qualities demanded of a practitioner in applied theatre are notoriously difficult to describe and can appear daunting. Their expertise is made up of a combination of qualities and skills that build on a foundation of art form knowledge, blending the ability to guide creative performance activity with facilitation of positive engagement through interactive exchange, which in turn, ethically takes account of context and objectives. To manage these multiple demands, a practitioner develops holistic expertise *in response* to the work. Building on this premise, my paper will introduce a concept of 'responsivity' as a way to identify patterns within the enigmatic sensibilities, revealed through analysis of a number of applied theatre practitioners. Responsivity is a way of discussing how in-the-moment choices are made and how, whilst acknowledging a focus on the participants, the practitioners also develop within the practice.

The commentaries included in this article are drawn, with full agreement, from 'reflective dialogues' (see also Hepplewhite, 2016) undertaken with a number of senior practitioners in the UK, which contributed to the research for my PhD thesis investigating applied theatre practitioner expertise. Helen Nicholson (2005) highlights the important pattern of self-reflection within the field: 'Applied drama has a reflexive ethos, a tradition of creative and critical questioning' (p. 166). A 'reflexive ethos' was a key informant in the structure of my research methodology and has informed my proposed concept of responsivity.

This paper cites extracts from the 'reflective dialogues' with artists operating in applied, participatory and community contexts. The process used video-recordings to capture moments of workshop or rehearsal, allowing both researcher and artist to co-reflect on the detailed navigation of practice decisions. The transcribed dialogues highlighted their concerns and values about the work, aiding analysis and pointing to a set of patterns that emerged as a fundamentally

responsive expertise.

Responsivity is a route to explaining the expertise of applied theatre practitioners and thematically reflects analysis of applied theatre; Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston (2009) discuss how the 'very form itself is responsive to the circumstances in which it is used' (p. 10). My research explores how responsive-ness is evident in the expertise of the practitioners undertaking the work, investigating in-the-moment choices and what enables them to operate well. Nicholson (2005) describes a responsive approach that embraces aesthetic concerns:

> Contemporary theatre practitioners who work in educational and community contexts are, at best, developing practices that are both *responsive* to the narratives and cultural memories of the participants with whom they are working and artistically imaginative. (p.152)

Although focused on the impact of arts participation, the research also revealed how the practitioners prioritised their identity as artists; how this informed their relationships with participants, the processes and practices within the work.

The researched practitioners worked across a range of sites of participatory practice within education, health, community and other social applications of theatre and drama. Informed by a pedagogic motive, the related terminologies of responsivity that I introduce in this article aim to support development of student and novice practitioners. Having worked in community and educational applications of drama and theatre, and now lecturer involved with students developing their expertise in applied theatre, I was looking for a way to supplement practice learning with research analysis and seeking a vocabulary for what is sometimes hard to name. My concern is with the practitioners' *expertise*, an embracing term that includes approaches and qualities, skills and sensibilities, understandings and ethos, all of which informs practice choices and enables a responsive way of operating.

Qualities of practitioners are highlighted elsewhere in literatures; some features are touched on here to establish a context for my own research findings. Eugene Van Erven (2013) discusses skills of 'community artists' who walk 'the fine line between mainstream arts and the world of ordinary people' including 'temperament, commitment,

stamina and courage' (p. 140). Prentki and Preston (2009) highlight humility, sensitivity and adherence to democratic principles (p. 252). James Thompson (2015) highlights the importance of 'attentiveness' and develops what he names as an 'aesthetics of care' about a 'set of values realised in a relational process' (p. 437). Thompson emphasises a care for the *whole* experience of the practice, including audience relationship, within an 'affective, sensory dynamic' (p. 439). Monica Prendergast and Juliana Saxton (2013) reflect on responsive qualities to consider issues of implementation and facilitation:

> An applied facilitator...will be consistently responsive to all the contextual factors at play in each session: who are these people? What do they bring with them? How are they different today from yesterday? How does this space shape what we do? What is the social health of the group? (p. 7)

Prendergast and Saxton make links in particular with educational applications of drama and theatre, highlighting how facilitation is centred on immediate influences of place, space and participants.

As a result of my research and to aid understanding of the complexities of practice, I formulated a series of labels for inter-related patterns that emerged as evident across the range of practitioners. These proposed facets of responsivity (awareness, anticipation, adaptation, attunement and respond-ability) are not offered as a universal catch-all list of 'how to do it', but as a way of encapsulating common approaches and qualities within their expertise:

- anticipation and adaptation – being able both to plan and to respond well in the work
- awareness – of issues relating to the politics and ethics of the social context
- attunement – which builds on an awareness- having an empathetic and informed response to the practitioners
- respond–ability – where practitioners are able to nurture, grow and develop themselves through the work.

The feature of 'respond-ability' explains how practitioners were themselves receptive to applied theatre's ethos of change. Rather than

fixing what they do, the practitioners were open to the possibility of what their work can be. What enriched them was also that which allowed for the work to be creative for the participants. This trope of open-ness informed my way of conceptualising the work. The article returns later to illuminate some of these patterns with material from the reflective dialogues.

PRACTICE RESPONSIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Naming the Practice and the Applied Theatre Practitioner

Recognising that practitioners work across locations and with a diversity of participant groups using many difference descriptive titles, the research was seeking to discover whether there were practices common to different contexts, such as drama in schools, education, work with the elderly, in health or care contexts and with communities such as prison or those with disability. Many of those researched move between locations of practice, adopting concerns and language of the context whilst maintaining aspects of their own practices and objectives. The naming of practitioners in applied theatre can provide both a clue, but also a barrier to the understanding of their expertise. Names are partially dependant on localised use, but a widely recognised list can include many labels: teaching artist, facilitator, animateur (in community arts), community director, participatory artist, actor/teacher (in Theatre in Education), workshop leader, conductor (in Playback Theatre), Joker (in Forum Theatre). Naming puts the focus on the practitioner, centring them at the heart of the practice, but I queried whether how they name themselves and what they are called by others fully communicates what they do.

The diversity of names for practitioners reflects the eclectic nature of applied theatre itself. Acknowledging the gathering of many types of practice, Michael Balfour (2009) questions any consistency of identity, describing applied theatre as ‘an ‘umbrella’ title that contains as many contradictions as it does commonalities’ (p. 348). The proliferation of labels for practitioners can be evidence of these ‘contradictions’. However, without proposing a wholly homogenous identity, my research suggested there are intersections of activity encompassed within the range of labels. It may be significant to understanding of the nature of these practitioners to ask why no single name for the practitioner has evolved as dominant. Those I researched welcomed a

focussed debate about identity in relation to their expertise. Interestingly, few used the term applied theatre and there was no conclusive common name in their own use of labels. I recognise that concerns about naming may be of greater interest to academics and researchers. Choice of nomenclature reflects discourses and an opportunity to deconstruct ideas. Debates around applied theatre, aesthetics, objectives and politics are tied up in the use of titles for practitioners.

Reflecting the disputed and diverse identity of applied theatre, differing titles are adopted in books significant in the initial establishment and formulation of the term of applied theatre. These include the following: 'teaching artist' (Taylor, 2003), 'facilitator' (Thompson and Schechner, 2004), 'practitioner' (Nicholson, 2005). More recent studies of practice use 'facilitator' as a default name of choice (e.g. Prendergast and Saxton, 2013, and Preston, 2016), although this potentially makes the role as artist less visible, as discussed further below. The researched practitioners used a range of self-labelling; some titles were dictated by a job description, for example, 'Director of Engagement'. Other names were externally ascribed by the many contexts within which they operated as free-lancers: for example, the same youth theatre drama leader was sometimes facilitating other community groups, also worked as a clown doctor in children's hospitals, as well as being a respected director and writer for professional contexts.

Some hybrid labels attempt to name key features of the role; in 'teaching artists', for example, Philip Taylor (2003) brings together two strong influences in a term that 'highlights the pedagogical function, which should drive the leaders' artistry' (p. 53). Along with Taylor's emphasis on artistry, I propose that a graft rather than hybrid image roots the practice in the art form. This avoids any dominance of the more instrumental aspects of the practice that can illicit criticism of over-emphasis on measurable outcomes and goal-focused artistic processes. The inclusion of 'artist' allows more interpretive leeway for understanding what the practitioner actually does and reflects an enduring concern for the aesthetics of practice.

In my research dialogues, knowledge of the art form was seen as an essential foundation to their successful operation as a practitioner and, for some, applied practice with communities was only one part of their working life in theatre. Jan Cohen-Cruz (2010) outlines,

> What distinguishes engaged theatre from the mainstream is not lack of technique, which many performances that fit the engaged criteria have in abundance, but rather the artists' *actively committed relationship to the people* most affected by their subject matter. (p. 9, my italics)

I argue that practitioners are operating with particular expertise to distinguish this work from, for example, an artist who chooses to use participation as a feature of their practice. The applied theatre 'artist' is doing more, *is* more than just an artist, as Cohen-Cruz suggests in her discussion of (her preferred term of) engaged theatre. These are *responsive* artists; their expertise is specifically focused around the 'actively committed relationship' they dialogically nurture with participants. The quality of responsivity can distinguish definition of this type of work.

The ability to focus on and respond to the experience of the participants clearly distinguished the projects and practitioners in my research as applied theatre, contributing to my formulation of responsivity. Monica Prendergast and Juliana Saxton (2013) highlight participant needs when outlining a series of desirable qualities for an applied drama facilitator, concluding the list with 'the kind of person who… is able to "de – centre"; in other words to see the work as about and coming from the participants rather than from him/herself' (p. 5). This de-centring is a phenomenon that I have been exploring with evidence from a range of practices, informing my use of the concept of the underscore: '__'.

The Practitioner Conceptualised as '__'

In conceptual terms, the signifier often fails to convey the exact meaning of what it describes. No single one of the labels outlined above can alone encapsulate all the skills and activities of the practitioners and this has led to my substitution of a double underscore ('__') to represent the names of the practitioners in writing. The underscore, or __, is proposed as an alternative, non-label, and a replacement for the multiple nomenclature and implications associated with existing names for the role. This concept of __ is a temporary strategy to 'underscore' and hold in one place the identity of the practitioner. In using __, I am contesting the fixed or certain meanings

of the names used for the work of applied theatre practitioners to further explore their expertise.

Theoretically, __ opens up a potential interrogation of the subject. Jacques Derrida, within an essay in *On The Name* (1995), questions the connection between identity and what one is called, 'you *are* not your name, nor your title' (p. 12, italics in original). I utilise this notion of naming as a substitute for the being in my research. The meanings associated with naming the practitioner are destabilised and opened up to multiple interpretations and potential features within __ as the new site of identity. This concept does not petition for one homogenised perception of practice through the substitute signifier of __, but encourages a fresh viewing.

My analysis seeks to find detail in the common and draw interesting observations from evidence of the differences presented by the work explored. Exploring the nature of performance, Sarah Jane Bailes (2010) discusses 'an eradicable duplicity in live art practices, evidenced through theatre's materiality and its ambition: that it can at the same time both *be* and *not be* the thing it is portraying' (p. 10). The underscore serves as a performative way to allow analysis of the practitioner; my research hopes to reveal new ways of seeing the work of the __s through them both *being and not-being* the thing that they are named as. The theatre practitioner, when 'applied', *responds* to each of the participants, is required to answer to the demands of stakeholders and context, be more than just an artist, all of which contributes to the role's performed identity as multiple, unfixed, responsive.

Proposing the practitioner as __ allows us to interrogate what they represent when they are practicing. I return here to the voices of researched __s to fill out notions of responsivity. The research asked the practitioners to reflect on how they saw themselves in the work, for example:

> As an energy ball, I am giving out energy. That's my style, I am a heightened version of myself, [gesture] Ta dah! The way that I move and the way that I speak, I am performing a different version of myself and that is different whatever context I am in... sometimes standing back is the right energy. (Amy Golding)

The empty space of the underscore resonates with the responsive

nature that Golding discussed. This image is multi-facetted, ever-changing and 'performed' differently, as required, often making space for the performance of others by 'standing back'. Practitioners' commentaries illustrated facets of responsivity through a theme of openness, such as this description of:

> Practitioners that are very comfortable with having their feet in many, many different worlds … playing between the boundaries of providing structure but also areas of openness and being able to facilitate and negotiate that … you would have to come in to this work because you believe in it. (Deborah Pakar-Hull)

The theme of 'openness' was valued here alongside the ability to structure work, and the work was signalled as attracting committed practitioners: 'you believe in it'. Openness was also highlighted within practitioners' concerns about planning and responding:

> I find it much easier to be in the moment if I know I've got quite a clear plan or a set of activities and sometimes it's slightly about buying myself headspace because of course you can completely re-write a plan and take a totally different direction… I am interested in sharing my skills but I'm interested in creating structures for other people to be creative, seeing what journeys they might go on. (Annie Rigby)

Rigby's comments typically outline how planning (paradoxically) enabled the practitioners to be more open and responsive, illustrating the patterns I have highlighted as anticipation, adaptation and respond-ability. She expressed a responsibility to prepare and lead, but also a desire to leave space for participants as an ethic for the work. A satisfaction was gained from *not* locking down the processes, thereby allowing for the interests and creativity of the participants. Further comments reflected on qualities that the work demanded:

> An openness, just a complete clean slate. An openness that when you go into that room you sort of expect the unexpected and you're willing to go with that and play with that … I think that's – for me – the most exciting thing about my kind of work and the people I work with. I think it keeps me alive, I think it keeps me

> excited. (Pady O'Connor)

The potential for the facilitator also to be enriched and sustained by the work was evident, illustrating my proposal of a feature of respond-ability as a motivator for the work. In his commentary Pady O'Connor valued an ability to be open about qualities needed in the role; he was open to growth and new knowledge in himself. Tim Wheeler articulated an important ethos of being open to possibility and the 'unknown':

> We're made and informed by perspectives and concerns of the work, but the projects also have an element and feeling from the unknown. Unpredictability and being open to possibility; that's maybe an important element, that's part of an ethos of choices and decisions in the work. (Tim Wheeler)

Practitioners were open to applied theatre's ethos of change and discussed how they were richly rewarded. The ability to respond was embedded within their approaches and respond-ability discusses how their own openness to growth was an essential part of the work, and also that which provided the greatest rewards:

> It re-arranges your insides a little bit and you have to just negotiate your way through the rest of the world. (Laura Lindow)

> Actually the reason I've been doing it is because it feeds me, I feel a bit more connected to the world. (Annie Rigby)

> I am fed. (Adrian Jackson)

Respond-ability is a way to conceptualize how a practitioner is nurtured. They value the experience of art, evidencing a synthesis of their own response and their artistic concerns. This is seen to increase purpose in the work and a fruitful experience for all:

> I think everyone's developing, I'm developing myself in that moment, I'm developing *them* in that moment, 'cause otherwise it's not creative is it? (Juliet Forster)

Forster's comments here encourage a view of the practitioner as a

blend of both artist and facilitator. There are useful pedagogical implications arising from my proposal of respond-ability, concerning the education and training of future applied theatre practitioners who value the role of art within the work.

Discussing an aesthetic value for applied theatre, Gareth White (2015) highlights the contribution of layers of experience and a plurality of interpretation. He concludes, 'there is art in participation that invites people to experience themselves differently, reflexively and self-consciously, and that is shaped both by facilitating artists and by participants themselves' (p. 83). Reflective discussion of practitioner views of their work forms a vital part of this paper, seeking to explore how this 'art of participation' is managed.

Acknowledging the prioritization of participant focus, I suggest, however, that a facilitator does not have to be a selfless or invisible part of the creative process. Indeed, omitting the role and motivations of the artist in the formula for practice risks losing much of the possible value to the work as a whole. This type of artist, whatever they may be named, situates their self within the work in the same way they hope the participants also engage. Respond-ability can promote valuable outcomes and ensure the practitioner's own full engagement within a responsive medium. And the rewards for the practitioner can also lead to a greater enrichment of the participant experience, which is, after all, applied theatre's primary focus.

Drawing on research conversations and reflective dialogues with:

Luke Dickson, TIE actor, Leeds
Amy Golding, Live Youth Theatre, Newcastle upon Tyne
Juliet Forster, York Theatre Royal
Adrian Jackson, Cardboard Citizens, London
Catrina McHugh, Open Clasp Theatre, Newcastle upon Tyne
Pady O'Connor, The Fool Ensemble, Gateshead
Deborah Pakhar-Hull, Theatre Blah Blah Blah, Leeds
Annie Rigby, Unfolding Theatre, Newcastle upon Tyne
Tim Wheeler, Mind The Gap, Bradford

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