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Theatre as a Medium to Discover a Pedagogy of Activism

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Abstract: This study revisits two data sets, narratives from theatre artists exploring sexual identity and interviews with participants from queer theatre festivals, to explore experiences of activism within the participants' reflections.

Keywords: theatre, activism, queer theory

Marcuse (1970) suggested that all art holds the power to rebel, setting the stage for foundational work in a critical pedagogy of performance. Denzin (2010) further politicized the act of performance—particularly theatre—to shed light on systems of oppression and to create a participatory consciousness collaboratively between the performer and audience. The propensity for theatre to critique sociopolitical issues is well-established in the academic theatre literature, and some theatre pedagogues have positioned theatre as a politically-motivated pedagogy of resistance (Russell, 2007; Steiger, 2011)

Drawing from examples in adult learning theory, Ollis (2008) frames social activism as a foundational form of radical adult education. Specifically, she positions learning through social action as a form of emancipatory learning situated within a community of practice (Ollis, 2012). She describes two ways in which adult learners become activists, either as circumstantial activists who develop their activism through a series of life events, or lifelong activists who are more formally socialized and educated as activists through training or the family of origin. Further, she describes several learning processes or sets of circumstances through which individuals become circumstantial activists (Ollis, 2012).

Using these learning processes as a framework, the purpose of this analysis is to explore two ex post facto data sets (Chaffe, in press; McCadden, 2015) to identify ways in which participants came to a performative pedagogy of activism. This paper will share examples from the two data sets, situated within Ollis' framework, and provide support to reify her model as an illustration of adult learning.

Review of the Literature

As this analysis draws from two existing data sets, we seek here to summarize briefly the relevant literature at the intersection of these two studies. Because both studies were rooted in queer theory as a foundational theme, we begin with a brief introduction to queer theory, and then draw connections to applications of activism and theatre.

Queer Theory. Queer theory is situated at the intersection of complex and overlapping identity politics. Often, the term *queer* intentionally blurs traditional dichotomies of sexual and gender identity to describe those who are marginalized by those dichotomies (Hill, 2011). Queer theory, then, reappropriates that marginalization to situate identity politics as both an inclusive force and as a site of revolution (Morris, 2005). Early queer theorists drew on the work of Foucault (1970) to situate binary sexuality as a political construction with the goal of destabilizing unquestioned notions of sexual identity and expression, and to create a discursive

space to explore identity politics (Hill, 2011; Pinar, 2013). Relevant to this paper, queer theory provided frameworks for the original studies in which these data were collected.

Activism as Adult Learning. As a queer politic seeks to question the status quo and examines the use of power to reinforce hegemonic notions of identity, activism is a natural outgrowth of a queer worldview. Ollis (2011) identified activism as a site of learning that allows for the challenging of the status quo: “Neighbourhoods and communities are often the sites of education where we learn to acculturate hegemony and resist hegemonic practices in society” (p. 254). Moreover, engaging in activist work provides space for thinking critically about societal structures and systems (Ollis, 2011). Activism exists on a continuum, ranging from more individual, personal activist activities to ones that are more public and in community with other activists (Pemberton, 2016). Regardless of its form, activism involves acknowledging ways in which hegemony maintains systems of power and structures of marginalization, and urges the activist to confront these problematic frameworks.

Activism in the queer movement has been described as resistance to heteronormativity and takes various forms, ranging from more direct initiatives (demonstrations, protests, and marches) to indirect forms through art, celebration, and performance (Bhaskaran, 2007; Shepard, 2010; Yekani, Kilian, & Michaelis, 2013). In the contemporary queer movement, the politics of sex and gender are often inextricably linked, particularly in the performative medium (McCadden, 2015). Butler (1990) likewise situated the performance of gender as an important fulcrum of queer political activism. Hill (2004), in his discussion of LGBTQ activism in adult education, tasked activism in the queer movement with destabilizing binaries of sex, gender, and sexual identity as arbitrary and overlapping constructs. We draw from this intersection to frame our understanding of activism within the queer movement.

Activist Theatre. From its roots, we can identify examples of social critique in theatre—both in text and performance. While the original authors differ in their lens on the power of theatre as an activist art, with McCadden (2015) following Marcuse’s supposition that the intentionality of activism in art dilutes its activist purpose, the common thread between these studies lies in the experiences and purposes of the participants to use their art as activism.

Within the adult education literature, there are several examples in which practitioners intentionally use theatrical performance as a form of radical and critical adult education to spark critical reflection or critique oppressive power structures (Bates, 1996; Butterwick & Selman, 2012; Lawrence & Butterwick, 2007; Newman, 2006; Picher, 2007). Several of these works draw from the foundation writings of Boal (1979) in *Theatre of the Oppressed* as a basis for activism. While some of these examples mirror mainstream theatre in the strictly defined artist/audience dichotomy, others are more interactive and blur those boundaries to engage the audience in a participatory consciousness around power structures or oppressive forces (Denzin, 2010). This purposeful critique of hegemonic institutions through performance mirrors Ollis’ (2012) positioning of activism as an embodied and performative pedagogy of resistance.

Research Methodology

This paper presents an ex post facto exploration of two existing data sets. McCadden (2015) provides a narrative exploration, grounded in the narrative framework described by Clandinin and Connolly (2000), of the experiences of adult male actors who identified as non-heterosexual to determine the relationship between the participants’ practices as actors and their understanding of sexual identity. Chaffe (in press) presents a data set collected through semi-structured interviews and postcard surveys framed within the literature of social movement

learning and leadership. While Chaffe sought to examine queer theatre festivals as sites for social movement learning and leadership, McCadden's data explored identity development in performance artists. The common thread between these data remains the emergent theme of circumstantial activism.

With these data sets, we revisit the participants' reflections of their experiences of activism and frame those experiences within Ollis' (2012) framework to provide illustrations of her learning tasks, adding support to her framework as a model of adult learning. Each of these data sets independently revealed an underlying theme of participant activism; however, it was not within the scope of either study to provide an in-depth analysis informed by the literature of activist pedagogy. Here, we re-imagine the data through a framework of activism to more closely explore the participants' reflections as an activist learning process. Using a thematic qualitative analysis of the original data, including transcripts and interview notes, we present the common threads of activist learning throughout the participants' experiences.

Findings

Hill (2004) suggests that cultural works at the confluence of mainstream voices and marginalized voices is a fulcrum of activism as a practice of adult education. In both data sets, we have identified examples that illustrate the power of this confluence.

Three of the participants in McCadden's (2015) study shared in their interviews that it was the intersection of their acting practice with their life experiences that led them to a practice of activism. For Jon, it was the experience of acting, dancing, and directing as a Latino man in a predominately white professional theatre setting that led him to question what he perceived as discrimination against or limited opportunities for minority actors in mainstream theatre. He has since devoted his practice to opening opportunities for cultural minorities, including LGBTQ actors of color, in mainstream theatre. He intentionally leverages his power as leader in theatre to provide opportunities for marginalized actors. Similarly, Sean drew from his education and training in theatre to confront dominant power structures and bring to light the oppression of LGBTQ people. Specifically, he weaves strategies drawn from Boal (1979) into his practice in order to ground his theatre practice as intentional activism. Sean finds it difficult to balance his roles as actor and activist in mainstream theatre, and has therefore devoted his career to arts management within activist theatre settings.

Conversely, Aundra found his activist role by happenstance while engaging in acting. When portraying a gay male character, and contemplating how the character would be received by the audience, he realized that it was his own oppression as a gay man that he was exploring. While he doesn't label his practice as activism, as he only performs in mainstream theatre (rather than in intentionally activist work), he was able to illustrate several examples from his practice in which his work was activist in nature.

Remaining participants in McCadden (2015) did not talk overtly about their activist practices, but through the interview process, described practices that fit within Ollis' (2011) framework of activism. For many, there was a consciousness-raising similar to that described by Aundra—an awareness that their practice was sparking a reaction in the audience. Aaron described the power of performance to illuminate important social issues, such as bullying, as they are linked to the oppression of LGBTQ individuals. Others talked about theatre as a safe space for them in which others used the power of activism to help them overcome marginalization.

One outlier in this study remains Lee, whose internalized homophobia was apparent throughout his story. While he was able to benefit from the safety of expression within theatre, his attitude remained one of marginalizing other members of the LGBTQ community through derisive remarks and intentional exclusion of those who did not fit his notions of masculinity.

Participants in Chaffe's (in press) study represented a broad spectrum of 70 participants in the arts including curators, performers, and audience members from three queer theatre festivals in Canada: Rhubarb in Toronto; Pretty, Witty, and GAY in Lethbridge; and OUTstages in Victoria. The majority of the productions at these festivals addressed LGBTQ themes.

Of the 24 performers interviewed, only eight directly referred to their art as activism with a direct goal to inspire action towards social change. After considering the benefits of their work, however, the majority of the artists interviewed understood the political aspects of their work and how it was a form of activism—albeit not in the “traditional sense” as Sasha stated. Whether they considered themselves activists or not, artists noted that some of their performance material, if not all, was based on personal experiences as queer individuals. Related to Ollis (2012), these activists “come to activism because of a series of events or life circumstances”—being queer in this case (p. 14).

The activism (or *artivism*) of performers was not didactic, but occurred through entertainment that sought to “start conversations” (Riley) or to “ask questions about social structures impacting the queer community and to invite the audience to engage with those questions and the art form” (Justice). For many of the queer performers, it was through finding theatre, together with coming to terms with their queerness, that they found their way into activism. As Lulu indicated:

I came out in university while I was studying theatre. I was constantly feeling hopeless every day of my life against capitalism and the powers that I live against being a queer woman. I discovered that in making art and doing theatre that I didn't feel this way and that I could also change things.

Also facilitating the push into activism theatre for some artists was their discovery of queer theatre festivals, which provided a safe and supportive environment to express their activism through art. Justice explained that it wasn't until they attended a Rhubarb festival as an audience member that they decided to create queer activist performances. This is not to suggest that performers were not aware of the social struggles they faced as queers, but rather that they for the most part had not intentionally addressed social issues before finding theatre.

For a small number of other performers, it was a series of life events not related to their sexuality or discovery of performance that resulted in them creating queer *artivism*. Asha indicated that after being rejected from graduate school, they were left feeling like they “had one foot out of the performance world.” It was this circumstantial event that led to them creating queer performances. Prior to this, their performance work was not queer focused.

From the perspectives of audience members, the sharing of personal narratives within queer performance, and the propensity of those narratives to challenge and question social norms around oppressive power structures, resulted in empathy, consciousness-raising, self-liberation, and a greater sense of a queer community. As a result, the majority of the 36 audience members and festival organizers interviewed understood the work of artists as a form of activism.

Implications for Adult Education Practice

The findings from this analysis reflect Ollis' (2012) conditions through which adult learners become activists. In particular, the participants in each study described the life

circumstances that led them to find activism through their art, whether intentional or not. This provides an additional example of support for Ollis' framework as a means of emancipatory learning rooted in the traditions of radical adult education.

Further, this analysis shows a number of commonalities between theatre situated within a social movement in Chaffe's study and the mainstream theatre performers in McCadden's study. This connection may suggest that some benefit could be gleaned from engaging performance artists as adult educators in other areas of activist teaching and learning. This is perhaps one means of encouraging circumstantial activists to continue their work through formal arts training.

Finally, this analysis reifies the positions asserted by both Chaffe and McCadden in their original studies, as well as earlier adult educators (Lawrence & Butterwick, 2007, for example), that theatre holds significant power as a critical performance pedagogy in adult education, which occurs through theatre's inherent exploration of social issues and capacity to bring conscious awareness to previously unquestioned assumptions.

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