

Positionality Shifts through Theatre Arts Practices

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Abstract: Understanding educator positionality is important to socially just learning. Teachers can apply arts practices when reflecting on their own backgrounds, experiences, and potential biases toward understanding their own positionality. From two semi-structured interviews, we explore how practices inherent in theatre arts can facilitate positionality shifts in arts learning environments. Implications for leveraging the arts toward disrupting inequities.

Introduction

Arts practices are powerful for engaging creativity, expression, and helping us think about our identities and place in the world (e.g., Halverson & Sheridan, 2022). Artists can speak to power and reshape culture through their creativity (Hanley, 2011), and as instructors, can bring that practice to the students they teach. Teaching artists, particularly in out-of-school contexts, often have high levels of autonomy over what they teach, what content they decide to cover, what materials they use, and how they want to deliver instruction (Bolin & Hoskings, 2015). This freedom spurs the likelihood that artists introduce arts learning that they believe to be valuable (Bolin & Hoskings, 2015), and opens the opportunity for advancing critical inquiry around the purpose of art and the ways arts fit into our relationships and environments. As arts educators bring their own beliefs and priorities into their teaching, consideration of positionality and context become particularly important.

Self-reflection is a critical component of understanding personal positionality (Acuff, 2018) and “the arts are a particularly potent way to activate imagination and a broader understanding of injustice, its consequences, and the range of alternative possibilities” (Bell & Desai, 2011, p. 287). In arts learning settings, arts instructors can apply arts practices when reflecting on their own backgrounds, experiences, and potential biases toward understanding their own positionality, or their power and privilege in the learning environment and in relation to their students, particularly around race and whiteness (Acuff, 2018). Arts practices have the potential to support teacher reflection and help facilitate shifts in understanding positionality. We consider the ways educators understand and address positionality through the arts by asking the following: *How do the practices inherent in theatre arts facilitate positionality shifts?*

Methods

This study is drawn from a set of semi-structured interviews with teachers and teaching artists, representing five afterschool sites across Chicago. We selected a teaching duo (Lindsey and Sarah) because they exhibited a sophisticated understanding of positionality and power as: 1) tied to identity, 2) something that evolves over time and across context, and 3) because they engaged in reflection across all four domains of Milner’s (2007) positionality framework. Our understanding of interrogating positionality comes from Richard Milner’s (2007) framework where he describes four non-sequential components to considering positionality: the self, the self in relation to others, engaged reflection and representation, and shifting from self to system. For our first round of analysis, we read through survey short answer responses (provided after each of two PD sessions) and interview transcripts to identify instances of each of the four domains. We then reviewed each instance identified, looking for mentions of arts materials and practices and drew themes that emerged from the co-occurrence of positionality dimensions along with arts practices or materials.

Findings

Arts practices in theatre or drama, like improvisation, role-play or acting, and directing, play a role in shifting power in the arts learning space. For Lindsey, theatre practices support power shifts between self in relation to others, specifically between her as teacher and her students. In the drama club’s exquisite corpse film project, Lindsey became the actor while a student became the director, bringing about a shift in naming. The professional title of “director” was conferred upon the student, Lindsey became “actor,” able to make creative choices, but subject to her director’s vision for the scene and film overall. Lindsey reflected on the experience sharing, “I’m the actor right now. I’m being directed by my director, not this student, but my director.’ And that was just super

cool. It was a super fun experience; to film that.” In addition to naming, there was a shift in social structure. The student as director told his actor where to stand, how to move her body, and when to take a pause in her movement, directly handing control of both self and the artistic process to the student.

As Lindsey describes that shift in relation to her students, she also considers self in relation to system by describing school as a traditional institution, steeped in structures and histories that set a teacher up as the authority figure. Within that structure, she shares, “I think that whenever you have that reversal in a classroom where a student explains something to a teacher ... I think that changing those positions, giving that authority to students is such a powerful learning experience for teachers. And it's an, I would imagine, empowering experience for the learners.” Not only is she intentionally considering what it means to give a student authority, she is shifting herself into the role of learner and considering what she gains in perspective and understanding, how it affects her positionality, based on letting herself be taught while mutually discovering a shared creative process.

In exquisite corpse drawings, each section of a subject's body is created in detail and without a view of the whole; the whole is revealed later, only once the drawing is complete. Often the final image is disparate, reflecting different styles, genres, artistic intentions. This film project came together through a written exquisite corpse activity, where different sequences written independently from one another were brought into dramatic sequence as a short film. As the actor and subject of the film, Teacher Lindsey had to confront ideas of body and movement, and how the film and direction directly related to her identity as a person with disabilities. This context of the artistic mode of the film pushed her even further away from the position of power in relation to the drama club, her co-teacher, and her students. Lindsey describes that discomfort that emerged for her as the actor in the film, “throughout the whole film, it was called *The Corpse* ... and that makes me really uncomfortable as a person with multiple disabilities and they [my co-teacher and student director] were very responsive. They were like absolutely we'll change it. So the final showing didn't have the title of *The Corpse*.” This experience led Lindsey to imagine what it means in a broader sense to build a “space that's comfortable,” where power and context can be questioned openly. Milner (2007) talks about the positionality framework as non-sequential, and in application to the exquisite corpse film project, re-titled *Wurthers*, we see simultaneous reflection on self, self in relation to others, and shifting from self to system.

Discussion

Theatre arts practices are themselves powerful tools for facilitating positionality shifts. As Lindsey discovered, taking on roles of director or actor enabled changes in position and power within their film. Lindsey willingly stepped into a position of vulnerability; that release of power helped her reflect critically, not just on her own identity, but also on her relationships with her students and co-teacher, and the broader context of the school institution. The practices inherent in theatre arts, switching leadership roles from teacher to actor, and even exploring self as artistic subject, yielded sophisticated thinking around positionality, incorporating multiple domains at once. This power shift fragile. As Sarah and Lindsey note, they are white and carry the opportunities, power, and positions that whiteness affords. In addition, they are still adults and teachers in the arts learning space. When they choose to release power, power is still there for them to reclaim at any point. Despite these limitations, implications for this work are meaningful. The use of theatre arts practices has potential for enacting shifts in positionality in learning spaces. Educators can use these insights as strategies in their own practice, while designers can use these insights to design more equitable learning environments.

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