



Change from the BottomUp: How participation & creative methods are needed to challenge school context in South Africa

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In the Changing the Story community of learners with experiences from arts, academia and civil society organisations, our means of reaching across quite different contexts with histories of oppression and conflict is through **participation**.

However much we appreciate forms of engaging people who might otherwise be left aside, in many political contexts ‘participation’ is a concept and approach that can be utilitarian: window dressing as consultation where power sharing, decision-making and authority remain unchallenged.

We will discuss how ‘participatory approaches’ are not only methodologies for research, but demand an ethos of relationship-building or what Routledge & Dickerson call ‘situated solidarities’ (2015).



Why participation? Why arts-led practices?

Shirley Brice Heath offers the following provocation to practitioners and researchers seeking to demonstrate the value of the arts with young people ‘at risk’ that could also be useful in places of conflict.

“Explanations supported by theory and research from across the disciplines address the need to think and to think hard about where and how the arts and young people fit together and in concert with moral reason, societal inclusion and environmental justice. To do otherwise is to risk denying the benefits that can come from the ingenious insights and seemingly endless energies and imaginative powers of the young. (in O’Brien & Donelan, 2008: xv).”

Participatory arts fulfill a developmental function in the attempt to **build the capacity** of individuals, groups and communities with the potential to empower, strengthen and energize (Sloman, 2011). Capacity-building refers equally to specific practical skills as to developing emotional literacy, empathy and the ability to articulate feelings, thoughts and desires in constructive ways. They are also focused on **strengthening community cohesion**. While often targeted on individual and small group needs, the ultimate intention of participatory arts (as opposed to arts therapies) is wider social acceptance, integration, and cohesion.

The participatory arts often aim to enable **marginalised groups** to ‘voice’ or **story their lives**, challenge power structures and advocate for change (Marken & Taylor, 2001). They are inherently political, responsive to social change, and engage with needs as they are identified. The arts – when platformed in public such as through public performance, invited sharings, community events or through disseminating research results – can make visible the exclusionary factors that cause social problems, and mobilise support for wider mechanisms of change. In this, arts-led outcomes can serve to **raise awareness**, and arts processes often seek to instigate **behavioural change**.

Participation in schools: Ceding authority

A significant challenge in promoting youth participation and action in high schools is the authoritarian postures sometimes adopted by school leaders. This undermines student voice and creates antagonistic relationships between school leaders and students, when students would rather be working collaboratively with school staff. This also extends into attempts by school leaders and/or SGBs to exclude student representatives from important decision-making meetings in which they have a right to attend and to contribute (according to the South African Schools Act).

BottomUp says

“another challenge faced in the work we do is finding creative pedagogical strategies that work.”

Often students have a very good understanding of their own school and community situation but such understandings are frequently rooted in individual experiences. The challenge is in finding ways to begin with these experiences but to develop a sociological imagination that recognises the linkages between personal experiences and public issues, as well as to develop the capacities for social analysis that leads to collective action. Many students because they have ‘received’ (antidialogical) education in under-resourced schools have not had several opportunities to exercise their creative and intellectual potential and have participated in an education system that has not expected or required very much from them (in the past it would have been called gutter education – for some reason in a post-1994 context, we don’t use such terms anymore).

The pedagogical challenge then is in finding ways that develop these capacities in students, ways that stretch students to look beyond the common sense understandings of the world about them, within the context of a dialogical setting, and that engages them, keeps them interested and sparks collective agency and social action.

A further benefit of the arts is the capacity to develop the voices of young people in order to include them in **decision-making processes** (see Jancovich, 2017). The degree of self-awareness, confidence and ability to articulate thoughts and feelings that can result from participation can be encouraging for young people, who learn that it is not merely possible, but necessary for them to be involved in planning and implementing their own pathways towards integration.

Some of the values and skills provided to participants include the seemingly oppositional notions of order through creativity. Arts processes require participants to become accustomed to **order and structure appropriate to the artform**. For example, many drama-based sessions begin with a welcoming circle exercise that is consistent, achievable, and marks the beginning of the session. Some technical sessions require participants to engage with items, objects or materials in a specific order. The artforms contain inner logics, into which the participants become inducted. There is flexibility, but the structure offered that is inherent to artforms can be convincing – even for disaffected, alienated children or young people.

By contrast, the arts provide opportunities for participants to be **experts** – thereby challenging the paradigm of adults always appearing to be ‘right’ when they may feel they are criticised for being ‘wrong’. This model has been widely used in drama in education.

The choice to highlight and focus on what expertise young people already have is empowering and affirming; but practitioners can also craft situations in which facilitators use role techniques to model certain relationships in which **‘authority’ is flipped on its head**.

A core strength of carefully structured arts processes is in catalysing participants’ as creators: to reveal how we can all make something new out of nothing. This is very powerful in a world that often tells marginalised groups that they are receivers, never makers or creators. As Stephen Duncombe says ‘... the very activity of producing culture has political meaning. In a society built around the principle that we should consume what others have produced for us ... creating your own culture... takes on a rebellious act. The first act of politics is simply to act’ (2002, p.7).

Acknowledgement

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