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Integrating Affect and Advocacy: Suicide Prevention Education and Community-Based Performance

Sharon L. Green¹

In this analysis of a performance-based collaboration, I argue that affect and relationship-building are vital tools in shifting cultures that stigmatize mental illness and social difference. I explain the context, logistics, and impact of a project which served as a community-based learning experience for college students. Embracing an ethics of care complemented the foundational principles of community-based performance to deepen the project's educational and affective impact on participants.

Introduction

In spring 2016, students in my Community-Based Theatre and Social Justice class at Davidson College in Davidson, North Carolina, embarked on a 10-week collaboration with Davidson Lifeline, a local suicide prevention organization. Together, we explored ways that theatre games, community-based

¹ Sharon L. Green is professor of theatre at Davidson College in Davidson, NC. She regularly teaches courses in community-based performance which include collaborative projects like the one discussed in this article. Several recent projects have tackled issues related to bullying and cyberbullying including a production of R.N. Sandberg's play *IRL: In Real Life* that she directed and toured to area middle and high schools. She also directs regularly in Davidson College's production season, focusing on plays that tackle social justice issues. Her scholarly work on community-based theatre has been published in *Theatre Topics*, *American Theatre*, *Theater*, and *Small Axe*. This article is dedicated to the director of Davidson Lifeline, Lynn Hennighausen, the members of Davidson Lifeline's teen advisory council, and the students in her spring 2016 course, THE 362: Community-Based Performance for Social Justice. The author may be contacted at [shgreen@davidson.edu](mailto:shgreen@ davidson.edu).

performance techniques, and other performance-based exercises could be used to support Davidson Lifeline's mission of "supporting suicide prevention and mental health awareness in our community."² In this essay, I detail the context, logistics, and goals of this collaboration and offer a personal reflection on its efficacy. I discuss how community-based performance techniques functioned within the context of what theatre scholar Lisa Jackson-Schebetta calls a "pedagogy of care," a concept that has ideological intersections with *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Theatre of the Oppressed*. My analysis demonstrates the potential for performance techniques to shift the way participants feel about those experiencing mental illness and explores the role of empathy and an ethics of care in creating systemic and social change.

Months after the conclusion of this project, during my own personal reflection and assessment period, I read Lisa Jackson-Schebetta's essay, "Worlds of More Than One: Pedagogies of Care and Naomi Iizuka's *Good Kids*." Her approach to rehearsing a play about teen sexual assault with college students resonated with the strategies I had incorporated into my classroom facilitation in this course and into our shared sessions with Davidson Lifeline. Jackson-Schebetta describes the concept: "A pedagogy of care prioritizes inter and intra-personal dialogue (spoken, visual, corporeal, spatial) across diverse constituencies; the foregrounding of the larger social and cultural context of the performance work; and destabilization of certain conventions of theatre production and their attendant expectations" (296). In this paper, I consider how a "pedagogy of care" can work alongside the central principles of community-based performance to support exploration of subjects as emotionally complex as suicide prevention and mental illness. Mutual vulnerability, reciprocity, and a pedagogy of care were principles central to the efficacy of the community collaboration and my class. I examine how each operated at different phases of the project, and I reflect on the overall impact of this work for my students and Davidson Lifeline.

² For more on Davidson Lifeline, visit davidsonlifeline.org.

Background and Context

Each time I teach a course about community-based performance, I aim for students to learn, in part, through the planning and execution of a collaborative, performance-based project. For the last five years I have focused my own pedagogy and community-based performance practice on issues related to bullying, cyber-bullying, and other forms of social aggression amongst teens. The last several iterations of this course have included community partnerships and projects that engage with these issues. It was in the preparation for one such project that I first met and worked with members of Davidson Lifeline (DL). Founded in the aftermath of what is referred to as a “suicide cluster”—in 2012, five members of our small town had taken their own lives—DL offers suicide prevention education programs and strives to decrease the stigma associated with mental illness. An integral part of the organization is its teen advisory council, composed of community members that attend area high schools and serve as peer educators and resources in those schools; together the members of the teen council also tackle community projects that further DL’s mission.³

Would it be possible, within the context of a semester-long college course, to engage with an issue as complex and serious as suicide? This concern was in the forefront of my mind when I first met with the director of Davidson Lifeline to explore a partnership. The director of my own institution’s Center for Civic Engagement recommended DL as a potential community partner because they had communicated to her an interest in developing skills in performance. When I contacted the director of Davidson Lifeline, Lynn Hennighausen, she told me that the teen members of the organization’s advisory council had expressed an interest in making short films which could be integrated into their suicide prevention education programs. *Theatre*, then, didn’t seem that far of a stretch from film. She invited me to attend the next board meeting of the teen advisory council at which I discussed the possibilities for a theatre-based collaboration and

³ The teen advisory council is made up of students from local public, private, and charter high schools.

answered questions. Lynn then polled the teens who voted in favor of moving forward with the collaboration.

Mutual Vulnerability from the Start

With the teens' interest confirmed, the director of Davidson Lifeline and I met to hash out the details of a performance-based collaborative project. At this meeting, Lynn confessed to me her inexperience with performance and the fact that she would be learning about theatre along with the students. I shared my own doubts and fears that my experience tackling issues related to bullying weren't adequate preparation to engage DL's dual commitment to suicide prevention and mental health awareness. I would rely on her expertise around these issues and DL's goals, and she would have faith in my ability to structure a creative process that would frame the teens' stories and experiences. The mutual vulnerability with which we started our relationship would, I later learned, be a key to the project's success.

We agreed on an eight-week period during which my students would facilitate a weekly workshop in Davidson Lifeline's regular Wednesday evening meeting; additional meetings and rehearsals would be added as needed. We agreed it was essential that she and I communicate weekly between these meetings to reflect on the students' emotional comfort and the project's progress. Given the concerns I raised above, this was a critical component of our work together. While we agreed to be open and flexible about the final or culminating event of the collaboration, I had in advance reserved space in my department's theater with the hope that we might strive to create a public showing of our work at the end of April. If, however, the participants decided this was not something they wanted to do, we could easily skip it.

Despite the mutuality of the partnership, I remained nervous about the project. Suicide prevention and mental illness are deeply complex issues and I didn't want to rush the process or minimize that complexity in the necessarily limited time together. I knew these issues were very personal for the DL teens; one of their peers was a part of the above-mentioned suicide cluster and the loss was quite fresh. I did not know whether the students in my class would have personal experience with these issues, nor was I

certain of the emotional terrain we would encounter in our work together. Further, I was embedding this project in a college course for which I had previously-set learning goals: could I provide a rich learning experience for my students⁴ while also making a meaningful contribution to DL's goals? Would we encounter emotional terrain which I was unqualified to manage? I was uncertain of the answer, but certain that a particular kind of attention to my students' emotional well-being—above and beyond what is typical in this, or any other, course—would be required.

Setting the Stage for Community Collaboration

The pedagogical intent of embedding such an experience in my class is to allow students to *experientially* learn the foundational principles of the field of community-based performance. As Jan Cohen-Cruz describes in her book, *Local Acts*, one of the key elements of any community-based performance project must be reciprocity in which members of the community organization and the collaborating theater artists both give and take, learn and teach, and create a relationship that is “mutually nourishing” (93). This notion of reciprocity builds on Paulo Freire’s theory of dialogic pedagogy in which teachers and students are always inherently learning with *and* from one another. Freire has noted, “They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (61). In practice, this typically means that theatre artists enter into a collaboration able to offer certain performance-based skills but simultaneously acknowledge that members of the community with which they are about to work have expertise in the experiences, stories, and issues that the project will tackle. Theatre artists engaged in this work seek to learn about these aspects and deepen their understanding of the issues to which the organization is dedicated.

⁴ Learning goals for the class included the following: students will embrace the foundational principles of community-based performance, in theory and in practice; students will have an overarching knowledge of the history and development of the field of community-based performance; students will familiarize themselves with strategies for navigating collaborations with community-based organizations; students will know multiple different locations and contexts in which the techniques of community-based performance are practiced; students will gain experience facilitating theatre exercises and games; students will develop skills for designing theatre-based workshops that engage with various social issues.

While not terribly far away in age and experience from the Davidson Lifeline teens, my college students—a racially and ethnically diverse group of 18-22 year-olds—still felt that in the handful of years that separated them, social media had shifted the landscape of social pressure and aggression to such an extent that they had much to learn from the teens. Davidson Lifeline teens were excited—albeit a bit nervous—to engage in what was for most of them, a new mode of expressing themselves and telling their stories.

There are multiple ways in which the students in my class began to practice this principle of reciprocity before even meeting any of the members of Davidson Lifeline. In small groups, they completed several research-based assignments to learn more about the constituency and issues to which Davidson Lifeline was dedicated, and shared their findings with the class. These assignments included investigating the culture and demographics of area high schools that members of Davidson Lifeline attended, learning about the history and mission of Davidson Lifeline, researching mental health resources in our community and those specifically available for teens, and jumping in to the shallow end of suicide prevention education. The latter was accomplished by our participation in one of the central services that Davidson Lifeline offers our local community, QPR training. QPR—Question, Persuade, Respond—is a 90-minute educational program that provides support for those who may be in a position to respond to someone they think is at risk for suicide.⁵ An adult member of Davidson Lifeline facilitated this QPR training for my students before we began our collaborative work. It was during this QPR training that I more clearly saw the possibilities for the role of theatre—and community-based theatre, specifically—in supporting DL’s mission. QPR training emphasizes that suicide prevention can begin in small acts, that there is power in validation, acknowledgement, concern, advocacy, and letting someone know that they are *seen*. Theatre of the Oppressed can be, as David Diamond of Vancouver’s Headlines Theatre has said—riffing on Boal’s own

⁵ For more information on the content and goals of QPR training, see qprinstitute.com.

claims—a “rehearsal for living.”⁶ Our work together, in part by embracing a pedagogy of care, could provide opportunities to “rehearse” the kind of compassion and supportive gestures that QPR advocates.

Immediately following the QPR training, and prior to beginning our collaborative work with DL, the tone in my class shifted. We became acutely aware of the power and significance inherent in small acts of caring and compassion (particularly during moments of heightened stress and anxiety, both of which were experienced by the students) and these were gradually integrated into classwork by both the students and me. QPR training shares foundational philosophies with pedagogy of care and Cohen-Cruz’s articulation of the core community-based performance principle of reciprocity. For the purpose of my own assessment, Jackson-Schebetta’s application of a pedagogy of care during a college production usefully added consideration of working on emotionally complex material with college students to my analysis. What differentiates such work is that college students may be participating for academic credit (my students were) and unlike professional actors, or even community collaborators, may not want to reveal their personal experiences with the issues and situations explored in the theatrical work.

Our collaboration was officially slated to begin in late February. As part of our preparation for the collaboration and as part of the learning process of my class, I arranged for an artist residency with one of the best-known community-based theatre companies in the US, Cornerstone Theatre. Two members of Cornerstone Theatre came to Davidson College and facilitated a three-day “Institute Intensive” during which Davidson students learned the fundamentals of Cornerstone’s theatre-making process, with the intent that they could then use some of these techniques in their work with Davidson Lifeline. At the advance suggestion of one of the Cornerstone company members, we invited members of Davidson Lifeline to join us for a story circle midway into the residency. While my students were nervous and anxious about this event, not knowing quite what to expect nor what was expected of them, it turned out to be an

⁶ Diamond’s book about his work with Headlines Theatre also references this aspiration with its title, *Theatre for Living*.

excellent launching pad for our collaborative work with this organization. Davidson Lifeline's executive director and three members of the teen advisory council attended the story circle, which was facilitated by a member of Cornerstone. During this shared time together, the Cornerstone facilitator had all of us draw maps of our neighborhood. These maps included places in which we felt safe and others in which we felt fearful. Participants were then invited to share a story about a specific place on their map. Through these stories we not only began to get to know one another, but also started to find common ground. This was further affirmed during our post-workshop shared meal when a spontaneous sing-along ensued. Having practiced a pedagogy of care with one another, students in my class were more attuned to ways this approach could support their work with DL teens and I witnessed them practice that care in this setting. These activities helped to break the ice and dispel fears and apprehension that both groups of students felt. The story circle concluded with a tremendous amount of excitement and positive anticipation for the collaboration that would commence the following month.⁷

Ten Weeks with Davidson Lifeline Teens

The first set of theatre techniques to which I introduced my students were Augusto Boal's image and forum theatre. We decided to include some image theatre techniques in our first session with DL. In that session, we asked DL teens to use their own bodies to create and show us a series of three images of themselves: who their parents thought they were, who their peers or school community thought they were, and how they saw themselves. Based on the responses, it was clear that DL members learned new things about each other and also about the pressures to *be* something particular for their peers and parents that was not always commensurate with their true selves. It was precisely this discrepancy that we hoped to explore in further sessions together. The following week, a similar image theatre exercise shifted the tone

⁷ I am deeply grateful to Cornerstone Theatre for suggesting we include Davidson Lifeline in their residency, and for working with us to build a solid foundation for the rest of the project. For more information about their extraordinary work see their own website, cornerstonetheater.org.

of our work. We asked DL members to show us images of mental illness. First we asked them to show us what mental illness looks like to their peers and school community; then, what mental illness looks like in popular media; last, what mental illness looks like to them. For this exercise, students were invited to create frozen images with the bodies of as many other participants as they chose. The images they created revealed their perception of mental illness as an isolating experience, and that those experiencing mental illness are often shunned, ridiculed, misunderstood and feared by others. The range of images shared, and the information gleaned from them, gave us a rich place to continue our work together.

Over the next few weeks we continued to explore and theatricalize their stories and experiences, using various techniques Davidson College students learned in class and in the residency with Cornerstone. Midway into our time together, we divided up into three separate groups to continue to develop performance material. DL teens shared stories in response to various prompts, and students in my class led the process of dramatizing those experiences. Those stories included ones about family members trivializing symptoms of depression and anxiety, peers misunderstanding or ridiculing similar symptoms, and the feelings of isolation and loneliness that resulted from this treatment. Each group met outside of our regular weekly session to rehearse. During our weekly Wednesday meeting, each of the three groups shared the performance material they were developing, and the rest of the group offered feedback. Some of the material developed rendered these experiences in non-realism, while others were narratively more straightforward.

The Role of Reflection and Care in Our Process

Central to community-based performance practice is the opportunity for reflection. Thus, as good practice and as good pedagogy, it was essential to weave opportunities for reflection into both our project and the class process, though these necessarily took different forms. Students in my class wrote weekly reflection essays which considered ways in which the project illustrated various foundational principles of the field of community-based performance. They also wrote about artistic and logistical challenges or

concerns that they experienced. I read these essays before our next class session and flagged particular concerns or comment threads, which I then brought to the group for conversation.

The design for individual workshop sessions incorporated feedback that emerged from these reflection essays. The class was divided into three teams that rotated responsibility for designing and facilitating our weekly meetings with DL. In the class session prior to our weekly meeting with DL teens, the facilitating team presented their proposed agenda to the rest of the class for discussion. Issues and ideas that emerged from their weekly reflection essays were integrated into adjustments to that design. This created a feedback loop which was effective in demonstrating to students the importance and influence of reflection on the structure and substance of the art-making process. For example, we noticed that several of the teens were uncomfortable with a tongue-twister warm-up, and that rather than serving to get them engaged at the top of our session, it did the opposite. For the following week, the team proposed a very different warm-up. While the class often disagreed on constituent elements of a workshop plan proposal, discussing it inevitably led to reflection of complex questions.

Reflection was also integrated into our creative and collaborative work with Davidson Lifeline. Each of our collaborative workshop sessions with Davidson Lifeline began with a “check-in” activity and concluded with a “check-out.” The check-in was an opportunity, at the top of each work session, to find out how participants were feeling in general, and then specifically how they felt about the work. It was a short, quick activity meant to both connect all members and get them ready for collaborative work, but also to provide a “breath” or buffer space between their regular, real-life days, and the intimacy of the rehearsal and workshop process. The check-out process was intended to provide space for any member to offer an idea or thought about the work just done, or share a personal realization, hesitation, or anything else. Check-out activities typically took place with all of us convened in a circle, and each member of the group was given an opportunity to speak, usually in response to a particular prompt. Early in our time together, these prompts were quite open-ended: for example, participants were asked to offer a few words that

describe how they felt about our work together. As our work progressed, the prompts grew more specific. One week participants were asked to give a shout-out to someone else in the group by pointing to something specific they saw them do that day that they appreciated or admired. These affirmations contributed to the broader atmosphere of mutual care and positivity that we nurtured throughout. In Jackson-Schebetta's application of a pedagogy of care for a university production of *Good Kids*—Naomi Iizuka's play about sexual assault—she notes that, "The cornerstone of the pedagogy of care, and the development of *being with*, is a *breathing with*" (296). While facilitated breathe work was central to Jackson-Schebetta's process, check-in and check-out activities helped our group build capacity to *be with* one another, to listen actively and compassionately, build confidence in one another, be intentional in our expressions of appreciation, and think critically about the work we were doing.

We practiced a pedagogy of care throughout our collaboration with the teens of DL by prioritizing the well-being of all participants throughout the exploration of personal stories and experiences. We also created space for *being with* one another outside of our creative work, something that was regularly accomplished through shared snacks and *Hamilton* sing-a-longs. During our first session, we posted large sheets of poster paper around the room each of which had a prompt, question, or title. We distributed colorful markers and invited the DL teens to respond to any they chose by writing a few words. Prompts included: What I am nervous about; Questions I have about this collaboration; My favorite snack. Each week, our check-out activity was followed by a shared snack, and we purchased items from the list they created that first day. At other times, *being with* one another meant stopping our theatrical work to pay close attention to the emotional responses it evoked. This was critical given the subject matter, and the participants' experiences with it. Our use of check-in and check-out activities allowed for necessary reflection, but also for communal acknowledgement and response to that reflection. This "care" became a critical part of the project's successful engagement with affective responses and shifting emotions. It also

allowed for our work to emulate the foundational principles of the QPR training which is at the core of DL's work.

This approach is also likely responsible for the deep emotional impact both constituencies made on one another. Davidson students were dealing with issues—mental illness, social exclusion, suicide—which have such a profound emotional impact that we necessarily included discussions of our own emotional responses to our collaborative work with Davidson Lifeline teens during class time in a way I have not consistently done in previous iterations of this course, or any course. We talked frankly about the gestures that lifted us up and the things others do for us that bring joy and meaning and lightness to us; students demonstrated a deep appreciation for each other by exacting such gestures for one another throughout the semester. We were, in essence, practicing a pedagogy of care not only in our collaboration with DL, but also within my college course. This practice emanated not just from my actions and the exercises I facilitated, but primarily from the students themselves who, organically and without instruction from me, cared both for one another and for the DL teens in ways large and small.

The aggregate sharing—of experiences and stories of heartbreak and loss, of increasing courage and comfort in art making, of a love for *Hamilton* and snacks—cultivated a genuine exchange of shared ideas and mutual trust and respect. During that very first story circle when DL teens and Davidson College students came together under the leadership of Cornerstone Theatre, the director of Davidson Lifeline shared with my students the fact that from the outside, the community looked at Davidson College as a very special place, and viewed its students to be young people who, “had it all together,” were smart, capable, and exceptional. This seemed so strange to the college students, many of whom were struggling to keep up with assignments, or just felt overwhelmed by all they had to do. But having shared that idea allowed a special kind of mutual vulnerability; they were unafraid to show the DL teens that they too were not, underneath it all, everything that their community expected them to be. In retrospect, this was

singularly important in establishing an environment of reciprocity: no one was in a position of “knowing it all,” and both constituencies understood, and valued, their mutual nourishment and care.

Our Final Performance: The “Image Forum”

In early April at our weekly check-out, we discussed the possibility of a public showing of the performance material we were developing. There was some apprehension, but also a tremendous amount of excitement; the group understood that many could benefit from the discussions their performances could catalyze and all agreed to move ahead with the performance. Two weeks before that performance, which we had dubbed a “social justice cabaret” because it would feature a series of vignettes, each of the three groups shared the performance piece they were developing. Each performance featured a situation in which the protagonist was struggling with mental illness or confronting the grief of suicide. During check-out that week, one teen shared that she had hoped we would include some solutions, not just problems, in our performance. I had originally hoped that we would be able to do so through the development of a Theatre of the Oppressed-style forum theatre piece (a form students in class had studied) which would have allowed spect-actors to join the action on stage and propose different solutions to the protagonist’s problem, but this did not materialize. The group decided that including at least one piece which either gestured towards hopefulness or allowed the audience to participate in brainstorming solutions would bring the performance more strongly in line with their goals for the project.

We had very little time left to create new material, yet it was clear that meeting the goal of hopefulness was very important. I immediately thought of a striking set of images shared early in our collaboration process in which the teens showed us what mental illness looks like in their school communities. An idea occurred to me, one that was inspired by my memory of Sanjoy Ganguly’s description of his work with Jana Sanskriti, a theatre company in India dedicated to Theatre of the Oppressed practice: “I decided to do an experiment by synthesizing two exercises, one from Boal’s *The Rainbow of Desire* and the other from *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*,” Ganguly explains (46). The result

yields a compelling narration of the creative possibilities of TO techniques. I proposed that we similarly combine TO techniques and create a kind of “forum image.” After all, Boal himself always insisted that the techniques ought to serve the people, not the reverse.⁸

The image we chose to explore during our performance was originally created by a DL teen in response to the prompt, “Show us what mental illness looks like to your peers and school community.” It featured a protagonist at the center of a circle, curled into a ball, and shrunk away from the outside world in clear emotional distress. The protagonist was surrounded by three “classmates,” each of whom had been sculpted into an image which revealed disdain, rejection, or fear. The classmates appeared to be devoid of compassion for the protagonist’s despair, or were simply ignoring her emotional distress. For the performance, the image of each classmate was dynamized—Boal’s language for bringing an image to life—with the technique of interior monologue.⁹ An interior monologue allows participants to hear what a character is thinking; these are not words that they would ever speak out loud, but rather their true honest thoughts revealed in a stream of consciousness. The person playing a particular character improvises this stream of consciousness; their knowledge of the character’s internal thoughts and feelings is informed by the image in which they have been sculpted, the other characters in the image with them, and the overall image itself. This technique externalizes the character’s thinking and allows others to see how the situation has impacted the character’s thoughts and feelings. In rehearsal, I facilitated this by tapping each actor on the shoulder in sequence; my shoulder tap activated their interior monologue which continued until I tapped them a second time. In performance, however, the actors performed these interior monologues in a set order without the shoulder taps. The classmates’ feelings revealed in these monologues included fear of

⁸ Ganguly quotes him as saying, “Methods are for the people, people are not for the method” (89). This is an idea that Boal articulated throughout his lifetime.

⁹ The technique of interior monologue is described in Boal’s *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (207). This book also contains additional exercises for image theatre.

social retribution, annoyance, and anxiety about the unknown; for each, these feelings resulted in actions that exacerbated the protagonist's isolation and rejection. Then the image of the protagonist was dynamized in the same manner, and we learned that she felt judged and abandoned by her community. We discovered that even though she asked for help, and told others about her feelings and situation, no one responded. Unfortunately, during our shared time with Davidson Lifeline, we learned that this is often what teens experiencing mental illness face; parents, teachers, and peers often tend to dismiss symptoms as a "normal" part of adolescence. The image forum allowed us to lean into the emotional intimacy of a teen in the midst of a mental health crisis, rather than focus exclusively on the *actions* of spect-actors, as in traditional forum theatre. While Ganguly asked the participants in the above-mentioned exercise, "to try to understand the possible desires of the protagonist through studying the representative images, and present it through personal images" (48), I asked the students to more fully sit in the emotional experience of their community by creating monologues, propelled by images, that expressed the fears and anxieties their peers experience when faced with mental illness.

In our social justice cabaret, this dynamized image was first shared with the audience (which included teens, college students, parents, and community members familiar with DL's mission). Then, I asked the audience if they could imagine ways of intervening in this situation—with words or actions—to positively shift the protagonist's reality. In the style of forum theatre, we started the scene from the beginning and allowed audience members to yell "freeze" at any point to stop the action. Audience members were then invited to join the scene and "try out" their solution. They could either replace a character already in the image, or become a new character that worked alongside those already there. Several members of the audience joined us on stage, entered the fictional world, and shared strategies for providing meaningful support for the protagonist. As in traditional forum theatre, the protagonist responded to each of these interventions, and an improvised scene ensued. One audience member sat down with the protagonist at the center of the circle and asked, with sincerity and compassion, how she was feeling and

whether she needed support in any way. The protagonist immediately responded positively and the two had a brief, heartwarming chat. Another audience member joined one of the judgmental classmates and attempted to rally peer support for the struggling protagonist; she was successful and together they invited the protagonist to join them in an activity. In a third intervention, an audience member replaced one of the classmates and affirmed the protagonist's feelings. He told her that he too had experienced similar feelings and fears, had sought help, and encouraged her to do so too; his reminder to her that she was not alone normalized her feelings. This image-forum was successful in accomplishing the students' goal of infusing our performance with hopefulness as each strategy suggested successfully improved our protagonist's reality. Pedagogically, it was also meaningful for my students who had studied Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed techniques to see them in action. Additionally, the proposed solutions usefully intersected with the QPR training that DL offers; audience interventions effectively demonstrated the techniques and power of QPR's foundational principles. Through facing and acknowledging the fears that precluded their peers from engaging with someone experiencing mental illness, we were better able to publicly begin a dialogue about an often-taboo topic. Immediately following the image forum, the director of DL introduced the work and goals of Davidson Lifeline, shared information about resources available in our community, and offered a personal story about the efficacy of QPR training.

From Product to Process: Reflecting on the Impact of Our Work

During Cornerstone's residency with my class, the students were asked to locate themselves on a continuum with *process* at one end and *product* at the other. As artists, they were asked, which do you find more rewarding and rich, the *process* of creating, or the *product* you create? For student theatre artists, this came down to a preference for rehearsal or production. The majority of students put themselves closer to product; their experiences with performance up to this point fed their greater investment in the final product, the fully rehearsed and performed show. Their final reflection essays for this course, however, demonstrated a shift in their thinking: process, they now recognized, can be just as valuable both

aesthetically and personally. While not expected, it was the *process* in which we engaged with DL teens that I believe will have the longest lasting impact, both in terms of its social impact and pedagogical efficacy. It was through the *process* of creating alongside the DL teens that my students experienced deep learning about the principles of community-based performance. Reflection and reciprocity, their final reflection exercises revealed, were key to the project's success and they understood how to integrate these into a creative process.

My own assessment of the project was also initially biased towards product. I was disappointed that we were unable to meet DL's articulated desire to create a short film or other type of performance that could be integrated into their educational presentations. Both time and expertise precluded us from doing this, and I initially identified this as the project's shortfall. We hadn't created anything of permanence, nothing that Davidson Lifeline could "keep." But deeper reflection—facilitated in part by reading the students' final reflection essays and listening to the conversations between DL teens and Davidson students during our final check-out activity—yielded the conclusion that the project's greatest impact lay elsewhere: in the relationships fostered between Davidson College students and DL teens. These two groups formed a deepening relationship over the course of the collaboration that allowed them to generate a meaningful, mutually supportive—albeit temporary—community. DL's director, Lynn Hennighausen, pointed out to me months later in an email that the most meaningful component of the project for the teens was the experience of grappling with emotionally difficult experiences and the willingness of college students, to whom they looked up, to "fumble through really tough topics, come to know one another for their 'insides' rather than their 'outsides.'" Our experience demonstrated an idea articulated by theatre scholar Ann Elizabeth Armstrong as she riffed on the ideas of bell hooks: "Love and emotional connection then become important ingredients for coalition building" (181).

Questions about the impact of our work still linger for me. Did we do enough to contribute to Davidson Lifeline's primary goal of raising awareness about the stigma associated with mental health? Did

we significantly impact the development of DL's tools for use in their suicide prevention education work? Is university-supported community-based learning compatible with issues as complex as these, or do the logistical limitations make it impossible to meaningfully tackle a topic like suicide prevention? While the final performance certainly raised awareness about the complexity of teens' struggles with mental illness, it was a one-off event that was performed on a college campus, in a theatre. One student noted in her final reflection essay that the audience that "really needed" to see this performance was the teens' high school classmates; touring this performance to area high schools, or finding another way to perform for the teens' peers, would have been an effective way of expanding the impact of our work. Did we impact attitudes towards those struggling with mental illness? Final reflection essays written by students in my class described changed attitudes and a more nuanced understanding of these struggles, but beyond the participants the project likely had limited reach in this regard. Further, because we were working with a small group of teens, the specific mental illnesses discussed were limited to their own experiences.

At the same time, I do not want to mistake *limited* impact for *lack* of impact. Over a group pizza outing after our final performance, DL's director told me that a student approached her after the show; the young woman told her that she was concerned for a friend who was struggling with depression and other mental health issues and because of this the performance was particularly meaningful for her. This young woman was someone I knew, a student from a previous semester, and once I learned of this situation I immediately contacted the dean, our campus point-person for students in crisis.¹⁰ Because of confidentiality, I do not know precisely what happened next, but I do know that our performance connected at least one person experiencing a mental health crisis with needed resources.

¹⁰ Anytime a professor (and certain other college employees) suspect a student to be in imminent danger, they are required to report this; in this case, the possibility that her friend could be suicidal meant that such danger existed.

Beyond my hope that this project would support DL's mission, I also intended the collaboration to support my learning goals for the class. First, I wanted students to learn from and experience the challenges—logistical, ethical, and artistic—and pleasures involved in creating community-based art. Secondly, I wanted them to *feel* what a Freirean dialogic process was like, and what it would *feel* like to learn deeply about a community's concerns and struggles. Of course, the latter goal was one I couldn't articulate on my syllabus, because affective learning is considered "less rigorous" than fact or skills-based learning in higher education. Yet, such empathy is crucial in shifting the cultures that cultivate bullying, social exclusion, and fear of mental illness. Moreover, as we discussed throughout the semester, affect is precisely what can propel activism; emotional responses to social injustice ought to be brought *into* the classroom and harnessed as companions to intellectual and historical analysis. This is difficult work and, much like performance itself, it involves inherent risk as results are unpredictable and unquantifiable. This particular project was able to accomplish a depth of empathetic and emotional learning thanks to the support of our community partner and the commitment of the students (both the DL teens and those enrolled in my course) involved. What I learned—both from this project, but also directly from all of the students—is that acknowledging and tending to such emotional responses not only deepens the impact of social activism but also transforms the way in which change occurs. This project gave me—and I believe, the students involved—the courage to commit to always taking such emotional responses seriously going forward. Practicing a pedagogy of care, prioritizing the relationships we were developing, and asking all participants to engage with the emotional experiences of those experiencing mental health crises were mutually nourishing processes that worked together to deepen, arguably *transform*, the impact this project had on all participants.

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