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**COLLECTIVE IN THE CLASSROOM: CREATING THEATRE IN  
SECONDARY SCHOOL COLLABORATION PROJECTS**

This school-based study explored how two intact classroom groups of students engaged with their drama teachers to collectively create original theatre for outside audiences. Two and one half months spent in a grade-ten classroom and four months in a grade-eleven classroom in two different schools yielded descriptive data drawn from classroom observation notes, documents, and interviews with ten students from each classroom group. Descriptive categories identified through preliminary analysis of data include group creative process, collaborative relationships, and evidence of theatre arts discourse. This paper explores how teachers and students understood their collaborative work as theatre.

*Cette étude en milieu scolaire porte sur deux classes d'élèves qui se sont engagés en compagnie de leurs enseignants d'art dramatique dans un projet de création collective présentée publiquement. Nous avons passé deux mois et demi auprès d'une classe de dixième année et quatre auprès d'une classe de onzième année, ce qui nous a permis de recueillir des données à partir d'observations, de documentation écrite et d'interviews réalisées auprès de dix élèves de chacune de ces classes. Les catégories que nous avons dégagées dans l'analyse préliminaire des données ont porté sur le processus de création du groupe, la collaboration entre les élèves et le discours théâtral. Cet article démontre la façon dont les enseignants et les élèves collaborent à un travail théâtral.*



**C**anadian Beginnings:  
Collective Creation as Documentary Theatre

Collective creation has enjoyed an important position in the Canadian theatre tradition. Alan Filewod identifies Paul Thompson, then artistic director of Theatre Passe Muraille, as the first director to use this term in 1972 to describe his process for involving actors in the creation of plays. Thompson and his

company went beyond the then popular documentary style as they attempted to characterize Canada's history and culture through original theatre pieces based on source material they explored through the lens of their own experiences (Filewod 22).

According to Filewod, the most famous of Thompson's collectively created plays was *The Farm Show*, partly because it was an excellent piece of theatre and partly because it "became the model for a form of community documentary theatre based on the actors' personal responses to source material" (24). During the summer of 1972, members of the theatre company lived in the rural community of Clinton, Ontario and interviewed its residents while they attempted to capture theatrically the essence of farm life. Thompson engaged his company in a variety of exercises that were designed to create focussed theatrical performance pieces from the plethora of personal perceptions and experiences the actors brought to the collective process. Filewod describes the company's "collectively created populist documentary form" that was characterized by theatricality rather than realism. Monologue and metaphor were some of the representational conventions employed by the company to realize their artistic vision (49). Thompson's approach to collective playmaking was (and continues to be) echoed in collaborative theatre work in Britain, the USA, Canada, and other countries around the world.

### **Youth Theatre and the Collective Process**

Errol Bray, an Australian youth theatre director, elaborates a detailed approach identified as "playbuilding" that he developed in his work with young people. He also suggests that a "thematic" or episodic structure serves the collective process most effectively (7). Bray elaborates on the conventions of theatre available to collaborators: "[it] can include dramatic scenes, songs, dances, poems, monologues, mime, and, in fact, almost any element of dramatic presentation produced by the group" (6).

British theatre artists Alison Oddey and Gil Lamden use the term "devising" to document similar collaborative play development practices that they have employed with professional and youth theatre projects. Theatre activists around the world (including Augusto Boal, Philip Taylor, and Eugene Van Erven) use such collaborative approaches to promote social justice, political activism, and community building. In 2005, the American journal, *Theatre Topics*, devoted an entire issue to concerns and questions surrounding devising or the collective process of creating plays. Norma Bowles, Crystal Brian, and Joan Schirle each used this

forum to explore the benefits and the problems encountered in devising plays with adults and youth.

Secondary-school theatre and drama educators began looking at the educational benefits of collaborative play creation over twenty years ago. Charles Lundy and David Booth identify forms of student-created plays according to the source of dramatic material and the level of responsibility students have for creating the work. They suggest the term “anthology” to describe a process whereby students select a theme, collect material (prose, script, poetry) that reflects that theme, and organize the material (with transitions) into a cohesive whole (Lundy and Booth 95). Alberta teachers Glenys Berry and Joanne Reinbold wrote about their experiences using play-building strategies with school students in the mid-1980s and adapted the term “collective creation” to the school context.

American educators Jeannette Horn and the research team of Ellyn Berk and Melody James demonstrated that extensive benefits result when students work collaboratively to create theatre. Horn’s collaborative theatre research project, undertaken with inner-city New York high-school students, demonstrated improvement in attendance, self-esteem, critical thinking, problem solving, and use of outside resources (Horn 20-23). Berk and James, in a companion project, note improvement in attendance, critical thinking and problem solving, student writing, ability to negotiate and compromise, understanding of leadership responsibilities, awareness of community resources and aesthetic values (Berk and James 55-63). Horn reports, “They discovered that they could influence the thinking of others—even if it was only momentarily. They were able to find issues of significance to their lives, translate them into a theatre piece, and affect the people who saw their creation” (Horn 18).

George Belliveau’s research explored the issue of bullying through collective play building. Diane Conrad worked with secondary students using collective work as a tool for exploring social justice issues. Collective creation as a drama teaching practice has been documented by researchers Melissa Swick, Debra McLaughlan, and myself through three independent studies. Little has been reported, however, about how adolescents construct their own understandings of the purpose and nature of collective creation within the classroom context. My research was designed to recognize student voices as authorities on the collective creation experience.

## Students and Collective Creation: What's It All About?

Well-known Canadian theatre artist, Linda Griffiths, in conversation with Kathleen Gallagher, has this to say about collective creation: "I haven't been in a collective in a long time; maybe they're for the young. It's too nerve-racking and soul destroying and . . . fucking awful" (qtd. in Gallagher and Griffiths 126).

Some students (and teachers) who have participated in classroom collective creation projects express reactions similar to Griffith's (albeit perhaps not as strongly worded). My own early experiences modelling the approach with drama education students were often less than positive and, on occasion, I found myself (silently) echoing Griffith's sentiments.

When Saskatchewan Education implemented the Arts Education Curriculum for middle years and secondary schools in the early 1990s, collective creation was included as an integral unit in the drama strand of the curriculum document. Students in grades six through twelve are now expected to spend one quarter of their yearly classroom drama education program learning about collective creation and creating their own plays collaboratively. Because my academic teaching role includes preparing drama teachers to teach collective creation in Saskatchewan classrooms, I devote a full semester drama education course to the process. During my early work in this course, I wondered why, if collective creation was so challenging and difficult, it belonged in the secondary school drama curriculum. If it was, in fact, an educationally viable practice, what could teachers' and students' perspectives contribute to refining the practice as pedagogy? The search for answers to these questions drove my research agenda from 2000 until 2005.

### The Research Journey

My initial research into collective theatre practices in classrooms focussed on describing the perspectives and understandings of secondary school drama teachers. A group of nine Saskatchewan drama teachers completed questionnaires about their most successful collective theatre activities and conventions, participated in one- to two-hour interviews, and—in the process—created a portrait of the best of collective creation teaching practice in our province.

I learned that most teachers, like Paul Thompson, used monologue, collage, vignette, and improvised scene work when working with their students. Many included dance, singing, and other

forms of music creation in their work. I discovered that most favoured an episodic (thematic) rather than a narrative structure for collective plays. The teachers told me how important collective creation could be in creating a cooperative environment in the classroom, in fostering students' self-esteem, and in providing a forum where students' voices could be heard about a topic that was important to them. Two of the nine secondary school drama teachers I interviewed were enthusiastic about showing me how the process worked for them, and both invited me into their drama classrooms to observe their collective creation work with students.

I realized that these invitations created an excellent opportunity to honour and explore students' understandings of collective creation. I scheduled this phase of my research for my sabbatical year so that I could adapt my participation to the needs and schedules of these teachers and their students. I spent sixty minutes per day, five days a week with the grade-ten drama teacher and students from mid-September to mid-November 2004. I was able to obtain informed consent and interview ten of these students during this time period. I observed the grade-eleven students in a different school for two or three sixty-minute classes per week over a period of three and one half months commencing in March of 2005. Ten students from this group also consented to be interviewed.

Each student participated in three, fifty-minute one-on-one interviews designed to elicit their understandings, beliefs, and attitudes towards drama and the classroom collective creation experience. The first interview was scheduled at the beginning of the project and the second occurred halfway through the process for both classrooms. The grade-ten students participated in the third interview two weeks after they had performed their collectively created play. Because the grade-eleven students performed their play as the final project for their drama course at the end of June 2005, I had to conduct the third interview with this group one week prior to their performance since they were writing final exams after their performance. All interviews were conducted in sound-proof rooms adjacent to the school theatre spaces and were recorded on audiotape (with students' permission).

Students were assured that all information shared with me in the interviews would be confidential. They were invited to choose their own creative pseudonyms: I found myself interviewing Colonel Mustard, Strawberry Shortcake, Priscilla Sasparilla, and even Rasputin! I addressed them by their pseudonyms on tape and the shared joke seemed to build trust and establish rapport during

the interview situation.

When I was not interviewing students, I was observing the teacher and students work in the school theatre spaces. The grade-ten class (28 students) worked in a very large theatre with a raised proscenium stage. This space had fixed seating with concrete floors and high ceilings. Students often worked in the lobby, the dressing rooms and at the back of the auditorium when they were participating in small-group planning activities. The grade-eleven class's theatre space was much smaller with a combination thrust/proscenium stage area and carpeted, raked audience area. The audience chairs were usually stacked at the side, and the nineteen students sat directly on the audience floor "steps" during instruction and for small group work.

Student interview transcripts, field notes (recorded daily after each classroom observation), and teaching documents provided to me by the teachers comprised my data sources and created triangulation (Denzin and Lincoln 8). Findings based on my analysis of this data are necessarily subjective and context-bound: qualitative research studies in education do not purport to yield "objective" truths that can be generalized to other classrooms (Eisner 40). I offer my findings as a single step towards understanding the place of collective play creation work in high school drama classrooms.

### **Applause, Applause: The Final Product of the Collective Creation Process**

Although my primary focus in this paper is to examine how students understood collective creation as a theatre form, students' responses may be best framed by a brief description of the theatre products that were created in both classrooms as a result of the collaborative process and how those products were realized on stage. In order to ground these descriptions pedagogically, I must briefly describe the teaching styles of the two teachers who guided the students' work.

Both of the drama teachers involved in this study were experienced and successful teachers with strong extracurricular play-directing credentials and extensive drama and theatre education backgrounds. We met as colleagues and equals since neither was ever a student in my drama education courses. They differed, however, in the way they approached the collective creation process. The grade-ten teacher believed that collective work should be improvised and did not subscribe to the practice of scripting the students' work. She also suggested to students that they experiment with a variety of theatrical genres (farce, realism,

melodrama) and forms (dance, song, mime) as they explored the topic they had selected: fitting in. The final product in this classroom was an eclectic revue that included choreographed dances, mime pieces, realistic scenes about high school life, a fairy tale adaptation of the Cinderella shoe scene, choral recitation of poetry, one monologue, and a group collage piece where the entire class expressed their feelings about what it meant to fit in to life in a high school.

The grade-eleven teacher believed that a key learning opportunity offered by collective work was to assist students in developing scriptwriting skills. When the students determined that they wanted to write a “real play” following the life story of an older couple celebrating their anniversary at a restaurant and looking back over their married life together, she supported their choice. Students in this classroom worked exclusively with small-group improvised scenes and attempted to weave different threads and ideas into one cohesive narrative. In the early weeks of the process, improvised work was tape recorded, and students took turns transcribing the work into script form. Later on, when the performance date drew closer and conflicts erupted, the scripting process was abandoned. The final product in the grade-eleven classroom showcased one couple who provided the narrative thread and created the transitions between (often unrelated) flashback scenes that were performed by the rest of the class.

Neither teacher engaged in direct teaching of theatre terminology or conventions during the course of my classroom observations (direct teaching would entail teachers introducing and defining/explaining theatre terms, practices, and traditions in a didactic format so that students could record and memorize this information for future recall). Direct teaching may certainly have occurred in other contexts for these teachers and students, but during my observation time both groups consistently worked towards performance goals. Conventions and terminology were introduced on a “need-to-know basis.”

Students were expected to direct their own scene work in both classrooms, so neither teacher engaged in hands-on directing of scenes prior to the technical and dress rehearsals. The grade-ten teacher stated explicitly that she saw her role as making suggestions to the directors and letting them direct the group because she was “teaching them to be directors.” The grade-eleven teacher occasionally stepped in and directed a scene if the students were experiencing difficulties, but her comments tended to be responsive to students’ directing decisions rather than proactive.

While the grade-ten teacher used the collective creation project to introduce students incidentally to a wide range of genres, conventions, and art forms, the grade-eleven teacher often emphasized elements of dramatic structure. On one occasion she reminded them that they needed to identify their characters, establish their setting, present their problem, and make the problem difficult to solve as they created their scenes. Both teachers expected their students to workshop scenes they had created in small groups and then gave them notes at the end of the workshop process.

When students were successful, both teachers were quick to acknowledge what made the scenes work. There seem to have been fewer instances of teachers using theatre terms in their positive feedback to students than in more critical teacher responses. I would speculate that the use of theatre terminology helped the teachers to make the criticisms sound more professional and possibly helped them achieve an emotional distance from the students' feelings about having their work criticized or discarded.

Collective creation posed emotional and creative challenges for the teachers and their students in both classrooms. The understandings revealed by students in the interviews suggest that students can help drama teachers, drama educators—and possibly theatre artists—understand the obstacles that make an empowering collaborative practice so difficult to achieve.

### **Students Talk Theatre Talk**

All students in both classrooms had experienced a two- to three-month block of drama education in grade nine. Many of the grade-ten students had no other experience with drama or theatre beyond this block. A minority of students in both drama classes were involved in their school's extracurricular drama program. Of the twenty students that I interviewed in both schools, three had speaking roles in each school's annual theatre production (one grade-ten male student in one school and two grade-eleven male students in the other school).

Students in both classrooms were given regular opportunities to respond to and comment on each other's work. These conversations were often characterized by injections of "theatre talk." Students in grade ten commented on each other's timing in some scenes. They recommended that their peers "pick up the pace" on one occasion. One student commented that he liked the "offstage stuff" in reference to offstage dialogue that students used to communicate an attempted rape scene. The grade-eleven students



recommended that students include more conflict in their work and offered suggestions for symbols to “tie it together.” On one occasion a student remarked that they needed stronger characters in the play. On another occasion someone suggested that repetition would make the work even funnier.

My interview questions enabled students to demonstrate their understandings of theatre and collective creation before, during, and after the classroom project. When I asked students at the beginning of the work what they expected to learn during the collective creation experience, their predictions suggested a somewhat innocent lack of awareness of the complexity of the work they were about to embark upon:

DAWN. I really don't know—something about acting and about being open and not afraid to learn. Thinking on your feet. More stuff about the theatre—like positions and front stage and back stage.

ROB. I'm kind of hoping to become a stage manager so I could contribute all of my management skills and like light design and scripting and editing and stuff like that.

MARION. I think it's going to be a lot of just trying to make up scenes in little groups and trying to figure out what scene would fit the best in the play and from there we could probably get lines worked into it so we eventually have a script.

Midway through the collective process I asked the interviewees to reflect on positive and less-than-positive experiences they'd had so far. Some were beginning to recognize the challenges that were inherent in collaborative play creation. The grade-ten students mentioned the difficulties of keeping small-group work focussed and dealing with difficult issues:

RASPUTIN. It's not hard to just write down a few points then just goof off the rest of the time—but that's not really working toward the collective. Yeah—if you don't really have a clear goal in mind or we don't know what we're doing, it's frustrating.

DAWN. Definitely the hardest was the one we did about drugs and it was a real-life situation. It was the hardest because you had to make it up because you haven't obviously been in that experience yet? So we had to make it up and still try to make it real and it was really hard to do. It didn't turn out the best—there was too much talking—I just didn't think it

turned out.

Grade eleven interviewees were more concerned about whole-group than small-group work:

GREGORY. We usually split up into little groups, but when we try and discuss things as one big huge group we get absolutely nothing accomplished because everyone's trying to talk at once and you really can't get your point across.

Others were particularly concerned about some students' lack of participation in the process:

VICKI. Well some of the people in the class who don't really have much to contribute and they goof off and stuff and it distracts the whole group in general. So I don't really like that.

Students in both groups also demonstrated positive responses to collective creation as an approach to creating theatre. Some grade-ten students were pleasantly surprised by the inclusion of primarily physical conventions such as mime or tableau or other art forms in the collective since they'd expected to be working on scripted scenes.

DAWN. For that one, there wasn't that much talking and you could kind of express it through your facial expressions and through your body positions and you really didn't have to make up conversation for it.

RO-RO. (*about what she thought a collective was*) Since we've been doing this I've learned that it isn't just scenes—it's different types of things—songs, dances, scenes, readings, monologues—a bunch of stuff and that's why it's called a collective.

Grade eleven students were especially pleased with the level of cooperation and teamwork that was demonstrated during the early and middle phases of their collaboration:

MARION. Right now what is really positive is we're all putting in a lot of effort and trying our hardest to get all of our ideas out. And it's positive because we're working as a team and you need a team to put this together.

Initially, the grade-eleven students were very pleased with their choice of a narrative form for the collaboration:

LESLIE. Well the semester before they were talking about how they had all these different scenes and they put them together. And last year when I went to watch the grade-twelve's collective it was like they all had a scene. But none of the scenes were linked like ours are—it's a story—not like five different stories that kind of go into one.

Interestingly, students from both classrooms expressed frustration about the collaboration at approximately the same point in the process (two to three weeks before the performance) but for very different reasons. Some grade-ten students (especially one who had assumed technical responsibility for the final production) were concerned that they had too much time and that more time did not mean a better product if the time was not properly focussed by the teacher:

DOUGLAS. Yeah—you hit a wall and nothing really happens after that. If we could keep working it didn't really get any better. It seemed like certain times during the day—like Friday, fifth period, we just really wouldn't want to do anything so nothing would happen.

ROB. Those two days when we were supposed to have a run-through and they just never really happened? I would have changed that because that was really frustrating for me. I was trying to build lights, but since we never really got going I never got building.

The grade-eleven students, on the other hand, were frustrated by not enough time:

SS. It would have been better if we had planned ahead to know if we had enough time to do what we planned on doing and not just jump into something so big that we couldn't do because it was just too much.

A few of these students also held their teacher accountable for not being able to predict the problems they would experience with the narrative approach:

PRISCILLA. If we were organized and knew exactly what we were doing in the beginning we probably could have made it about ten times better than it is. Not that it's bad but we could have had it more organized. We could have pulled off the play if we had started earlier and if we had worked on it

hard every day.

Others recognized that collaborative play creation is a difficult process for anyone to predict—including teachers:

BOB. [W]hen we did that first idea, it was tough—it was just a really, really tough thing to do. And if everyone was a 100% motivated we probably would have been able to pull it off. But obviously you can't get nineteen or twenty people in a class to be 100% motivated on one thing. . . it's pretty well a trial and error thing.

### Conclusions and Curtain Calls

“A trial and error thing” might be perceived as an appropriate phrase to summarize the experience of collective creation for the teachers and students who participated in my research project. The students in both classrooms were very positive about their final performances: applause from classmates and families was enthusiastic in both situations. Students from both classrooms told me in their interviews that they had learned about teamwork, the importance of cooperation, patience, and how to express themselves in a group during the collective creation experience. Teachers' beliefs that classroom collaborative work builds a spirit of teamwork and cooperation seem to be supported by students' responses.

But among the enthusiasts there were voices of dissent and dissatisfaction also, often from the students who were most committed to the extracurricular drama program in the school:

DOUGLAS. [You should have] more time with a teacher or director telling you what you could do to improve things. Lots of this we did all by ourselves and we would be self-critical sometimes, but when we'd do the runs we'd get notes after and there'd be like five minutes left in class and we wouldn't really do anything so we'd just forget them. We need more time when we're making things up to work with the teacher or work with someone experienced who could tell us what to do. That would probably give us a better product. (Grade ten)

GREGORY. I don't really like our collective because we just have random scenes that don't have anything to do with each other. They try to tie it in—the two at the dinner table—but it's just they'll be talking about something and then there'll be a scene [. . .]. So if I had more say I would try and make it more connected. I know it's a collective and I guess collec-

tives don't have stories in them, but still the scenes could be related to each other and you could have better scenes. Our scenes don't really have conflict or anything. I don't think they're that great to watch personally.

Gregory, a grade-eleven student, was quite fearless in both his creative suggestions and his criticisms—a stance that both delighted and frustrated his drama teacher.

But in spite of reservations from Douglas, Gregory—and Linda Griffiths—collective creation does provide its participants (students and professionals) with opportunities to listen to each other, to let go of individual glory for the benefit of the group, and to experience the thrill of creating art as an ensemble. And, after the curtain falls and the audience has departed, isn't that really what theatre is all about? ❁

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