Performing responsibility –

Ethical 'Know-How' through Drama Facilitation

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Abstract

I explore, and reflect on, the everyday ethical practices of drama facilitation. Rather than being a set of principles I apply, ethics emerge as I respond to situations that arise in a drama workshop. Their significance calls for understanding workshop facilitation as a space of containment. This offers the possibility of transforming personal and social being through the tensions and possibilities of interactive activities and conversations. To illustrate, I reflect upon an experience in a high school where an exploration of racism led to my learning from (and through) facilitation practice. Using a hermeneutic process of interpretation and interrogation that draws on the work of German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, I explore how I moved *beyond* ethics to *ethical know-how*.

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Moral knowledge is clearly not objective knowledge, ie., the knower is not standing over against a situation that he merely observes – he is directly confronted with what he sees. It is something that he has to do (Gadamer 1989, 170).

I facilitate theatre for social change workshops with pre-service teachers, educators and high school students. In particular I use an adaptation of *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal 1979) that includes storytelling, improvisation exercises and collectively developed *Images* to enable students to develop understandings and address experiences of racism and other human rights violations.

Based on the idea that a "picture is worth a thousand words" (Jackson in Boal 1992, xx), *Image Theatre* develops static group images through an interactive dialogue between facilitators and participants to represent participants' stories. The result is "emergent knowing" (Scharmer, 2000). The process of representing the experience leads to reflections that challenge us to find strategies which address problematic power relationships. These are ultimately tested in new images, lead to new experiences and to a new cycle of alternative strategies. A "rehearsal for reality" (Boal, 1979, xxi), we 'try out' actions in the workshop space that we might use in our daily lives.

Ethics as Skilful Engagement

> Knowing is effective action; that is, operating effectively in the domain of existence of living beings (Maturana & Varela 1987, 29).

Workshop facilitation does not just involve *knowing-what* set of techniques or activities to lead the group through; *knowing-how and when* to use them is just as important. John Dewey (1922) notes

> We may...be said to *know how* by means of our habits...We walk and read aloud, we get off and on street cars, we dress and undress, and do a thousand useful acts without thinking of them. We *know* something, namely, *how* to do them (177).

According to Dewey, all human action is *moral* action because it has an impact on, and implications for, both self and society. The development of character requires us to become attuned to, and act appropriately in, our environment. Through repeated engagement, our ethical know-how is employed, and, through feedback, modified.

Francisco Varela (1999) terms the situations where these engagements happen microworlds, and, furthermore, when these microworlds breakdown that ethical know-how emerges through a "commonsensical emergence of an appropriate stance of the agent's life" (11). How what is 'appropriate' is determined can be understood through two terms developed by the philosopher of phenomenology Maurice Merleau-Ponty: the *intentional arc* and *maximum grip*. *"Intentional arc* names the tight connection between body and the world" (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1999, 103). The skills we acquire become ways to respond to situations we face. *Maximum grip* refers to our body's tendency to respond to the world in ways that bring the situation to an optimal gestalt. It is the combination of intentional arc and maximum grip that helps us understand the notion of ethical engagement as actions emerging through our response to breakdowns in order to achieve these tight connections between facilitator and group participants.

In the course of any workshop one is faced with a multitude of decisions without recourse to planning, deliberation, or reflection. Moment-to-moment decision-making is the performing and enacting of ethical practice. Thus, my practice is not based on objective principles I apply to

cause predetermined outcomes. Principles emerge in spaces that integrate the purposes, processes, and outcomes of practice. My background as a workshop facilitator enables me to explore these spaces through an *enactive* and *embodied* view of knowledge, where I am part of a particular series of improvised experiences of facilitation which are shaped by, and unfold in, the workshop environment.

Enactive means that ethics develops not only as principles, but emerges collectively through my engagement with others in joint and shared action. *Embodied knowing* means my ethical practices depend upon having a bodymind[i] actively attuned to, and in, the world.

In the day-to-day coping activity of a drama workshop process, I as facilitator do not stand back from the group as an observer and then impose my plan on it. We are in a much tighter relationship, as (inter)acting is experienced as a steady flow of skilful activity in response to my own sense of the situation. I continually adapt to the situation in an embodied way. As I respond to the situations in which I work in, I "skilfully cope" (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1999, 111) within the steady flow of the living/lived experiences of the participants. This process, which Varela et al (1991) have described as letting go ("rather than to struggle to achieve some particular state of activity... body and mind are found to be naturally coordinated and embodied" [29]), beginning to pay attention to what I am thinking feeling and doing in the moment of (inter)action with others.

As Merleau-Ponty (1962) writes,

> whether a system of motor or perceptual powers, our body is not an object for an
> "I think"; it is a grouping of lived-through meanings which moves towards its
> equilibrium (153).

While facilitating I don't think about what I want to do at each moment, but, rather, experience

the situation and that experience draws my "doing" out. Those experiences build up one upon the other and I draw on them in future situations.

This skilful means (Varela et al 1991) or spontaneous coping (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1999), as activity responds to the sensed needs of a particular situation. Furthermore, each part of the workshop informs and is integrated into the other. This means I often do things out of the range of consciousness.

Varela et al (1991) refer to skilful means as embodied and compassionate action, avoiding harmful actions and performing beneficial ones:

> The point is not that there is no need for normative rules in the relative world – clearly such rules are a necessity in any society. It is that unless such rules are informed by wisdom that enables them to be dissolved in the demands of responsivity to the particularity and immediacy of lived situations, the rules will become sterile, scholastic hindrances to compassionate action rather than conduits for its manifestation (252).

We always operate in this kind of immediacy in a given situation. We are constantly 'ready-for' action but don't need to categorize these situations, only notice their recurrence and take appropriate action. These everyday ethical skills are often passed over by moral philosophy. They emerge through moral action and thus can not be separated from the practices I engage in. Their significance calls for understandings of 'theory' and 'practice' as a space of containment – one that offers the possibility of transforming personal and social being through the tensions and possibilities of interactive activities and conversations. To illustrate this, I will describe, reflect on, and question, one example of learning from (and through) my practice.

A Circle of Stories

March 21. A high school in a small Canadian city. A day to commemorate the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. I was asked to work with a group of 20 self-selected high school students for the morning and prepare them to explore racism in the afternoon with small groups of elementary school students. This group of grade 11 and 12 students represented the diversity of the high school. About 1/3 of them were English as a secondary language students who were either refugees or recent immigrants to Canada. This diverse group was more than ready to listen to and learn from each other.

We began with a circle, where each person held a talking object and introduced themself. We then spent the first part of the morning doing warmup and trust exercises as a sense of community emerged. There was a break in the morning activities. We began the next section of the workshop with another sharing circle.

I begin the circle by asking "Would anyone like to share a time where you experienced racism?"

There is a pause

Silence as the group processes the question

I, waiting for something to unfold.

A stop (Applebaum 1995), "a form of movement purer than that of body, mind or feeling alone" (24)

We are at a hinge of the workshop as we move from abstract play about racism to the lives of the players

What have we been hiding behind in our play?   What would be on the other side of the hiding?

I recall "Andrea" jumping in with a strong, accented voice, speaking for what seems like 10 or 15 minutes.

I come from China. I spent the first fifteen years of my life there. I did very well in school there and had many friends but my parents decided to move here to go to graduate school.

I was put in the ESL program at this high school. Everyone speaks different languages. Our classroom is in a corner of the school. I take classes with regular students, but feel less is expected of us so I am glad when we return to our ESL classroom where I can work at my own pace.

I am far from my friends back home. People think I am dumb because I don't speak English well.

But I had only asked for a moment!

An expectation
Of an instance of racism

> Every experience worthy of the name thwarts an expectation. Insight is more
> than the knowledge of this or that situation. It always involves an escape from
> something that had deceived us and held us captive (Gadamer 1989, 356).

I noticed everyone staring at Andrea. There was not a sound in the room. Though her story at the time seemed to be peripherally related to the task at hand, I continued to listen.

One wintry day, I was going to school and tripped on the icy pavement. My books went flying.

No one helped me pick them up or even asked if I was o.k. In fact, I think the students surrounding me thought I didn't understand English because I heard one person make a negative comment about me. I could hear other students laughing at me behind my back as I continued into school.

My memory recalls her story being long and detailed. I had to focus on looking at her while she continued talking about her life. But I remember her accent and how the others were captivated by her story. This was her living in this moment. In telling the story inner/outer conflated and (e)merged. Her body spoke through language but also through her voice and its tone, her eyes, her hands, her whole kinesthetic intelligence, "the ability to use one's own body in highly differentiated and skilled ways, for expressive as well as goal-directed purposes" (Gardner 1983, 206). Being in the frame of a workshop, with a task to do, enabled me to be present and active, letting the fragments of her story make their impact on both me and on the others. Intertwining our narratives had two powerful effects that involved, as well as called for, an ethical response:

An awareness emerged for me of the gaps between the storyteller and the rest of the group as dynamic, shifting spaces of containment.

The workshop was a container that enabled students to take risks by telling stories of their lives in an atmosphere of safety and develop communitas[ii] across gender, linguistic, cultural and demographic (among others) boundaries. The word for container comes from the Greek *tenemos*, "meaning a sacred space and time specially prepared and set apart in order to reconnect with ancient energies" (Salverson 1996b, 185). The workshop had a gap which couldn't be too open or it would hold nothing, transmit and allow nothing, thus destroying the structure so there is no connection between storytellers and listeners. Such a space doesn't allow the storytellers to explore through their stories "what they know and what they are trying to discover" (Salverson 1996a, 47). If "too small or nonexistent, there is no room for Other, no space across which the

familiar and strange can exist upon each other" (47), losing life and the ability to breathe, grow and be inhabited. Such a container must hold people within the tension of both the pull of connection and the pushing back of difference.

Martin Ringer (1999) links this aspect of connections to the need for adequate containment in groups where participants have a "sense of being firmly held in the group and its task, yet not immobilized by the experience" (5). Salverson (1996b) points out this firmness with flexibility means there must be a space or gap within the container. "This form is moulded as we work together holding the circle of knowing open and inviting a current that prevents steering a straight line through the story or arriving at a predetermined destination" (184). This requires me as facilitator to become mindful of the development of my own ethical expertise.[iii]

For example, Andrea's emotional telling of her life as she was living it defied my expectations for what kind of story I was going to hear. This was not comfortable. The unexpectedness of the telling meant there were differences in climate before this story and after it had begun. I felt a momentary sensation of freefall[iv], where my intellect (expressed through my "plan") was arrested; we just listened. As time came to a stop, it became part of the event of the telling. There was a pulse, rhythm and tempo as Andrea's voice rose and fell. I sensed we were all becoming engaged in the telling and the listening.

In this rhythm of telling – and in my listening and feeling – I sensed how the story related to further exploration through drama techniques and how I would engage the others in this process. I didn't know what would happen but I began to sense when to open things up and when to close them down. What would be enough information and what might be too much? What could be entered into more deeply (the incident) and what might be postponed (her alienation). I heard the silence of the others and saw the intense speaking of their bodies in that quiet circle. Even when they became absent in the listening, I glanced at them, ensuring the gap was still opening and

closing – paying attention to the timing of the workshop; but also to the rhythm of the story.

I realized that we in the group were all witnesses to one another's experience.

Even though I had heard many such stories before, here I was listening, without knowing why, even before I knew what it was I was listening to. I looked around and saw that others were also drawn into the story, becoming "obtrusively present, throughout the testimony" (Felman and Laub 1992, 71). We were becoming respectful witnesses to this story; and this witnessing event implicated us in a new relationship with Andrea as we all became witnesses both to her story and to our own responses to it (Felman & Laub, 58).

I had a moment of self-doubt about what to do as her story touched, and directly implicated, me since I, as facilitator, had asked the question and was guardian of its process and momentum. I was "imminently present, in the lead" (Felman and Laub, 71), yet non-directive in that leadership. I was both explorer and guide for the group in its own exploration; on a journey into an uncharted land, which we would traverse together.

Knowledge of racism in this workshop was not simply sharing facts or definitions, but a genuine advent [a becoming], that stood in its own right. This journey brought forth aspects of "acknowledgment, remembrance and ... consequence" (Simon and Eppert 1997, 178), emerging through my own double attentiveness – double in that it involved both an appropriate pattern of acting as facilitator/witness as well as being attentive to the effects of my actions as witnessing facilitator.

Through the telling, and the imagining, we could hear the story, but we were not required to listen to it. Thus, it was "claiming but not requiring our witness" (Hillman, 1982, 78). Such an ethical practice also included the obligation[v] to re-testify, to somehow convey what one has

heard and thinks important to remember. In this process, a community of memory emerges. These are relationships through which people

engage representations of past events and put forth shared, complementary or competing versions of what should be remembered and how...To participate in a community of memory is to struggle with the possibility of witnessing (Simon and Eppert, 186).

We were all part of that community then and now. We had a responsibility, an obligation not only to hear her story, but to take her story and transform it for others to hear and see through Image (using our bodies as tableau to tell parts of a story) and dramatic play.

Ethical know-how brings another perspective to understanding

> In human relations, the important thing is... to experience the Thou truly as a Thou – ie., not to overlook his claim but let him really say something to us. Here is where openness belongs. But ultimately this openness does not exist only for the person who speaks; rather, anyone who listens is fundamentally open...Openness to the other, then, involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so (Gadamer 1999, 361).

What would it mean to be able to say we understood her story? Thomas Schwandt (1999) points out that understanding is not just an internal process involving text and reader (or in this case, her telling the story and us listening). Engaging with Andrea's story was not just a mental act of interpreting the text of her life (through image), but, as Schwandt points out, it was a process of learning. "On this model, understanding and interpretation are not acts of an individual conscious mind but enactments, performances or a kind of praxis" (455)

Thus, understanding is practical and moral, having less to do with grasping her story (or the meaning of it), and more about engaging all of us in a dialogue as the story emerged later in an embodied way through Image.

Understanding as "relational" involved the rest of the group intently watching and belonging to this community of learning – listening to Andrea, moving with her as she sketched her life (and its frustrations) to this moment. Her story was not just uttered into the air. Talking about the incident had the effect of an address where her story, a response to my invitation to "share," was thus a reply with a gift in the form of a question – I have addressed the group through my story, what is your understanding of this drama work about racism now?

Understanding becomes ways in which we experience being in the world. It co-emerges through her recounting of her life, of that country of China and her embodied presence, and the presence of other sons and daughters of recent immigrants, in this high school, this room, this drama workshop. And they also co-existed in our witnessing of something she was saying about her life. Such understanding requires being awakened to new experiences and learning from them. It requires opening up to experience and a willingness to engage in dialogue with that which troubles or challenges us – risking confusion and uncertainty and struggling within it.

Ethical know-how involves ongoing reflection of my role as facilitator

What of me?

There was a tension between being aware of the need to listen to the story so I could facilitate the follow-up to it, and "holding the space" (Hogan 53), allowing the story telling and listening to happen, without the constraints of time and space. Standing or sitting in this crack of the in-between – in-between containment and an opening, in-between being outside watching as a

facilitator, and inside participating, in-between the world of the workshop and the world outside the workshop, I try and keep it open, connected to the world outside this room. But I also try to keep the gap narrow enough so that there is an atmosphere of safety where participants can risk, and play.

This model of facilitation means realizing that leadership doesn't reside with the facilitator all the time, but shifts, through improvisation, from moment to moment *amongst* the participants. Thus, leadership then becomes a form of 'instruction' (from the Latin *instruere*), which means not simply to teach, but to put into order, to set up a structure, to put into form. Then instruction is the process of formation found in the playful movements of the participants in the workshop. In this light, creating the conditions for learning means teaching is not the transmission of some passive knowledge, preconceived, believed to be known in advance, "believed to be (exclusively) a *given*" (Felman, 56). Rather, it involves enabling an informal network of relationships to emerge that "continually grows, changes, and adapts to new situations" (Capra 1998, 47). Facilitation becomes the "subtle art of creating conditions within which people can exercise full self-determination of their learning" (Heron 1989, 17).

I waited some more while Andrea continued. She paused, caught her breath and then kept going. It seemed she had waited since she had arrived at this school for this moment to tell her story. Unexpectedly, (since I wasn't looking for this) this storytelling became part of the workshop as I had opened the crack and let her, and the rest of the group, in.

The energy of the group was now concentrated in serious play, renewing "itself in constant repetition" (Gadamer 1989, 103), as we developed Images that emerged from Andrea's story. The work we began to do was the playing; playing with her story – working it out in Image – opening up its own possibilities of "being that emerge[d]" (Gadamer, 118) as the Image of Andrea's story and the story of racism, explained themselves – "a coming-into-existence of the

work itself" (Gadamer, 116). On this day for the elimination of racism, they were doing so, by opening themselves up to listening to one of their fellow students.

And I, too, opened up to her story, moved from facilitator to someone part of the circle, watching and listening in wonderment, becoming part of the container and, at the same time, the gap within it. Realizing that the planned activity, however simple, exposed something which resonated on a deeper level, my automatic following of the "plan" came to a stop.

There is an unfinishedness to this story. It was contained within that circle but that circle was also open as we were operating in this high school. We were not talking about some school somewhere else; some world somewhere else; but here and now – down the hallway, turn left, out the school doors to the parking lot. A few months ago on a wintry morning. There. Here. Now. Then.

This event was unfinished in the remembering; unfinished in the telling.

Andrea's story became a work that will/has lead itself to be read and re-read.

Here. Now. Then. When?

I hadn't realized all this as the workshop moved on in a hubbub of action. But at the closing circle as we passed a talking object around, student after student commented on how important the morning had been for them. They had begun knowing others across the divide which exists between students in the regular stream of classes and those in the English as a Second Language program. They also realized that taking a stand against racism meant more than speaking out against jokes or acts of discrimination. It was also wrapped up with/in their relationships with others in school; relationships we had begun enacting in the world of the Image. Image thus

became an encounter with an "unfinished event which [the encounter] itself was part of this event" (Gadamer, 99) As Gadamer points out, since the development of this Image (as a work of art being performed) occurred in the world of the workshop, and since we were encountering Andrea's world in the Image, our work was not just a product of our imaginations. The Image had moved us beyond simply a visual representation of a story. The Image's development through Andrea's story moved beyond Andrea, transcending her experiences to include our/my own. And now, aware of how I have portrayed this event as coming to a happy ending, I continue to question the experience:

How do I, as facilitator model ethical engagement for participants?

Understanding (through?) Ethical Action

> We *always* operate in some kind of immediacy of a given situation. Our lived
> world is so ready-at-hand that we have no deliberateness about what it is and
> how we inhabit it (Varela 1999, 9).

What comes from all this? I haven't just *had* these experiences; I exist inseparably from them. They are part of the history of my life as a facilitator.

Ethics emerges in the compassionate actions and simple acts of everyday living. They are cultivated partly through engaging with the other. This address, this obligation to listen, conveys meaning that resides neither in words nor texts, but, as happened with Andrea, in the give and take of subjects in a constantly shifting shared space. This returns me to the beginning. Obligation happens and this is perhaps where the social negotiation of trust between self and other must begin.

How does one learn to engage in this way? What are the ethics of this sort of practice where *communitas* in the high school creates an island in turbulent seas?

Dreyfus and Dreyfus maintain that the

> teachers of a skill are frequently articulate dispensers of helpful facts, procedures and principles. As such, they may hasten the student's progress from novice to advanced beginner to competent performer. But if, like expert systems, all they know are facts and rules of inference, such teachers cannot possibly be successful doers or guides on the way to expertise (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986, 201).

How have I moved beyond ethics as "facts" and "rules of inference" to intuitive action? This ethical know-how is based on continually developing common sense, wisdom and mature judgement. I move within the space/time of someone working not as a detached observer but implicated in a spell of involvement in the here and now. In this way, my ethical expertise isn't just something I turn to, but I experience the enactment of dramatic work as drawing the expertise out of me.

Connections are made bodily through experience. We inform ourselves as facilitators by also going through the process we ask others to engage in. By sharing similar experiences we might listen better to the experiences of others (Howard 1996). Our bodies speak from experience if we to listen to them. We then use what we have lived through to open up possibilities for interpreting and understanding new experiences. We become listeners in the drama workshop as we begin to know and understand through intuition and introspection

In this context, ethical engagement means responding to situations similar to those I have already experienced (and become expert in responding to). This includes not only previous workshops on

similar topics but also being in touch with my own experiences being bullied or discriminated against. It is not an abstract process. Principles and theories serve only for certain stages of learning. No principle or theory can ground an expert ethical response as each dynamic situation dis/er upts the ground we expect. We learn from our satisfaction and regret in similar situations. It means staying involved and refining one's caring responses in practical wisdom and compassion for the world.**Coda**

Because truly ethical behavior takes the middle way between spontaneity and rational calculation, the truly ethical person can, like any other kind of expert, after acting spontaneously, reconstruct the intelligent awareness that justifies the action....us[ing] such a postiori justification as a stepping-stone for continued learning (Varela 1999, 31)**.**

The workshop event I have shared is unfinished in the remembering; unfinished in the telling.

Andrea's story became a work that will/has lead itself to be read and re-read.

The resonances are still moving beyond that particular workshop. They resound in my discussions with my co-facilitator about those moments. They rebound in this rewriting of my experiences. As Gadamer writes, the experience "cannot be exhausted in what can be said of it or grasped as its meaning" (69)

For example, fourteen months later while evaluating a one-day workshop we had conducted at the same school with other students my co-facilitator noted the difference between the new group and the one Andrea had been part of. These new students had not engaged in similar ways to Andrea's group. My co-facilitator commented that the earlier group's openness, and responses to, listening to Andrea's story indicated a level of maturity that continued throughout the day and beyond. This maturity had emerged in the trust exercises conducted prior to Andrea's story, to their tuning into the story and its implications (perhaps because similar incidents had happened to them), and also extended to Andrea's personal development over the year.

Even in retrospect I can not say one interaction preceded another. They coincided, overlapped, (inter)acted, interplayed. Because I was/am not a detached observer reflecting on the situation of those moments of my life, these "holistic and gripping experiences" (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1990) became the basis of the development of Cmy skilful coping with the people (and the interplay within their own lives). This "coping" (Varela 1999, 19) happens in our day-to-day lives. So, as human beings, we bring something to this encounter. When there is a breakdown in the "chain of habitual thought patterns and conceptions" (Varela et al 1991, 27), new possibilities emerge. As we have seen, this type of breakdown in a lived situation is a creative moment, where concrete action is born. Because this happens with such immediacy, we don't see this, nor are we aware that we do not see it. This process involves a re-sensitization (through "mindful, open-ended reflection" [Varela et al 1991, 27]) to our living in the world.

This is an intimate process that has left my living experience of facilitating theatre open and unresolved,

Stumbling in ambiguity (Grumet 1988, 470)

and, at the same time,

giving it a voice (Jardine 1992)

Notes

[i] *Bodymind* draws from, among others, John Dewey's hyphenated linking of the two words: "Body-mind simply designates what actually takes place when a living body is implicated in situations of discourse, communication and participation" (Dewey 1929, 232). For a more comprehensive exploration of the term, see Hocking, Haskell and Linds (2001).

[ii] The camaradie where normal roles are suspended. Victor Turner (1982) has defined three types of communitas –

spontaneous, which is temporary and intense; *normative*, which is a preservation of the spontaneous but with a system of rules; and, *ideological*, which involves a utopian blueprint for the reform of society. The educational practices of a drama workshop bridge the gap between the *spontaneous* and the *normative* communitas. Initially a temporary phenomenon, it also crosses over the in-between of liminality "where it has the potential to free up human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc" (44) from normal boundaries, thus unfolding new possibilities for forms of relationships and understandings.

[iii] Like Varela (1999) I am not denying the importance here of principles and analysis. But I am adding to this aspect of ethics the need for drama facilitators to be aware that we have ethical expertise that emerges as "know-how" in our responses to situations.

[iv] Freefall is an embracing of unexpected moments that happen when what we do challenges us. These events regularly occur in our lives, but often our smell, sight, feeling, touch or hearing are not sensitized to them when they occur. We need to open our senses to, and welcome, these moments that "open up a 'space' for arousing insight or possibilities" (Haskell 2004).

[v] "Obligation happens" (Caputo 1993).

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