ACTING FOR ACTION:
Feminist community theatre-based research in Canada

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Structure

• Context of feminist, community theatre-based project
• The arts and research
• Theatre in/as research
• “Get A Real Job”
• Discussion and questions
Sudbury, Ontario

- Set in the Canadian shield
- A centre of mining industry
- French, English, First Nations
- Clutches of neo-liberalism and globalisation - decline and technologisation
- Growing poverty - un and under-employment
- Community desperate for jobs to remain
The human result…
People withdraw into enclaves, isolate themselves from one another, or engage in relentless competition for everything from jobs and services to dignity.

Greene, 1998, p.48

The neoliberal fix…
• Non-unionised call
The Question

We need to question whether call centre work actually offers new opportunities for women for skill development and career progression, or whether a more familiar trend is taking place in which women are being drawn into a highly routinised, 'de-skilled' and de-valued area of work.

Belt, Richardson & Webster (2000, p.366)
Acknowledging art’s place in qualitative and community-based research methodologies is, for some, long overdue – the argument unassailable, a ‘no-brainer’. For others, the union of art and research is nothing short of paradoxical.

Eisner, 2008, p.3
Labels/Terms

- Arts-based research
- Visual methodologies
- Arts-Informed Research/Inquiry
- Arts-based Inquiry
- Lyric Inquiry
- Image-based research
- Performative inquiry
- Storywork methodology
- Installation art-as-research
The Beginning…

...limitations and oppressive features of traditional scientific research, opening spaces for experimentation of alternative approaches that weave in aesthetic sensibilities and post-positivistic forms of expression.

S. Butterwick, 2002, p.243
And then some...

About writing outside of the lines, transgressing the rules, while staying within the lines of dominant discursive practices...[and is one of the] few ways we have left to disrupt the dominant discourses in society that silence and marginalise.

S. Ball, 2002, p.2
Two main areas

• Art-based research can be defined as the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts as a primary way of understanding and examining one’s own experience...[or] the nature of art and art creation.

  McNiff, 2008, p.29

• Arts-informed research is a mode and form of qualitative research...that is influenced by, but not based in, the arts broadly conceived. The central purposes of arts-informed research are to enhance understanding of the human condition through alternative (to conventional) process and representational forms of inquiry, and to reach multiple audiences by making research more accessible.

  Cole and Knowles, 2008, p.59
Psychological Framings

• Learning about self - Emphasis on exploring dreams, experience, the personal – “research participants to move into psychic interiors” (Dunlop (2001, p.12);

• Methods such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, journaling, and autobiography (Ball, 2002);

• Artwork (data display) is created by the artist from what she or he has learned from the study (participants) – single analysis;

• Findings most often disseminated through formal arts exhibitions (galleries, etc.)

• Emphasis on emotive/affective
Socially-oriented/community

At the heart of arts-based research is a radical, politically grounded statement about social justice and control over the production and dissemination of knowledge. By calling upon artful ways of knowing and being in the world, arts-based researchers...bring both arts and social enquiry out of the elitist institutions of academe and art museums and relocate them within the realm of the local, personal, everyday places and events.

Finley, 2008,p.71

• Participatory/collaborative process involving ‘community arts’
Community Arts

• A collaboration between ‘professional’ artists and self-defined community groups, communities or neighbourhoods to advance artistic and community goals using participatory, creative processes

• From creation to completion, the work is guided by a collective vision and the emphasis is on a social or environmental issue

• Re-positions culture from an object of consumption to an act of production
Theatre-Based Research

A staged presentation of qualitative data performed by...an ensemble of performers

Donmoyer & Donmoyer, 2008, pp.212-213

• Draws from the work Boal (1985) and/or Brecht (1992)

• Fiction (representational) and/or non-fiction (verbatim)

• Feminist approach—advances a public agenda, is therefore political/non-neutral, makes visible women’s experiences and voices (and others marginalised) (Hess-Bider & Levy, 2007)
Get a Real Job

Drama is always in some way a special event that provides motivation...It is also intimate - it speaks personally, communally and viscerally [and] sometimes people discover something through the language of theatre.

O’Toole & Lepp, 2000, p.20
• A dramaturgical process based in and on the experiences of women and men working in a call centre and attempting to unionise – initiated by union
  – Community-based artist/Laurentian university
  – Spoke with many; 7 agreed
  – Met every Sunday for one year
Get a real job! You hear that so often when you call people. We talked about this a lot because so many people do not understand it is a ‘real’ job. They just think it’s a fly by night kind of thing. We’re not considered real, legitimate workers.

Cheryl
But then...

• Things began to change
  – no sauna
  – no lockers
  – no free child care
  – no flexible working hours
  – no raises...no union
What happened?

- First unionized call centre in Canada
- Play went across Canada – standing ovations
- Playing to the ‘home-town’ crowd
- Took courage to share study results so physically and publicly
- Encouraged others to unionise (advanced a public/political agenda – Hess-Bider & Levy (2007))
Education and Learning

• Develop research questions
• Interview colleagues
• Share their own stories through a framework
• Analyse data
• Script write
• Perform
• Speak out
The play took on a life of its own. I don’t think any of us really realised where we were going with this play in the beginning.

Lorna
Theatre-based research provided...

• Visual counter-narrative/people’s stories
• Critical self reflection

The final product, it was something that was so amazing, so built on the knowledge of the telemarketers but so much more. It gave people [the audience] the opportunity to dialogue because what they had actually seen in the play, they had experienced, they had lived! We had one lady who spoke afterwards in tears saying, ‘I could see myself up on stage. I could see it and I could relate!’ (Sheryl)
Theatre-Based Research

– Critical distance/ethical practice
– Attracts attention and reaches out
– Public-ness is also a challenge (risk and courage)
– Fun
Imaginative responses are humanity’s greatest glory, and it is the height of self-delusion to believe that the human spirit can be subordinated to a tidy social vision.

Wyman, 2004, p.15