(Never) Mind the Gap

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This paper considers how performance can bridge the gaps in social and personal knowledge created by a neoliberal education system. Gaps need not be intimidating entities but opportunities, a third space or an in-between space where ideas can be explored and celebrated outside of the limitations set by particular social standards. Gaps are the ideal space for performative inquiry, where theatre and all its characteristics can shine a spotlight on a different approach to meaning making.

I write as a Canadian, theatre-based researcher and educator. I go by he/him. My background consists of professional actor and playwright, medical educator and university instructor in Drama in Education, Applied Theatre and Social Issue Theatre for Community Engagement. I am president of a research and education theatre company called "Mirror Theatre". I have a master's degree in Social Justice and Equity and am presently pursuing a PhD in Curriculum Studies, investigating the benefits derived from two different performance pedagogies when training medical students in professional identity. All these elements influence my approach as much as my straight, white male North American demographic.

The in-between space fascinates me. It exists in our lives, hiding in plain sight, socially ignored in preference for positivist approaches to knowing. August Compte's legacy of a "naïve realism" (Ryan 2018: 17) still holds wide sway, mostly the result of primary, secondary and much of post-secondary schooling that positions learning in binary paradigms. With it comes the binary logic of right/wrong, pass/fail, guilty/innocent, yes/no, body/mind, with no sense of something more, other possibili-

ties that exist in the spaces between the binaries. Along with positivism, the neoliberal prioritization of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) has increased in many North American education systems (a comparable example is Germany's MINT- mathematics, information, natural science, technology), acting as a "rhetoric of educational 'preparation'" (Yanez/Thumlert/de Castell/Jenson 2019: 28). Neoliberalist education prepares students for employment as producers of products that they, the students, will ultimately consume. Notably, STEM subjects such as math and science have a firm grip on positivistic values, presenting themselves as agents of objectivity. For example, imparted upon students in the field of science education is the claim that science must "uphold the values of autonomy, neutrality and impartiality" (McNamee 2005: 15). The words 'autonomy', 'neutrality' and 'impartiality' have become lionized as the norms of all important education (which is code for STEM education). Blakely and Hemphill challenge this notion: "The widely accepted standard definition of learning is not neutral; it is part of the neoliberal discourse of commodification, which turns schools into producers and students into consumers of knowledge products." (Blakely/Hemphill 2021: 89) As a result of this powerful neoliberal pressure, other approaches to living in and understanding our world are overshadowed and attempts to transition from a STEM approach result in "'othering' non-STEM culture" (Oliver/Nesbit/Kelly 2013: 183). I argue that theatre (Applied Theatre, particularly) and other performance pedagogies such as role-play are educational tools that reside intercostally in the gap, the in-between space, and that they provide a way to celebrate all that is non-neutral, partial, and subjective. It is a way to celebrate the breadth of our shared world.

I first became aware of the in-between space as a youth, beyond the strict borders of school, in the pages of comic books. And while the illustrated panels—the series of squares (usually) that hold pictures and dialogue—dazzle the eye at first, it was the in-between-the-panel blank spaces known as the 'gutter' that ultimately grabbed my curiosity. As Wallner states, "[t]he gutter provides opportunities for readers to add their own narrative details, creating a story that transcends the panels and text" (Wallner 2019: 820). In the process of devouring comics, I

realized I had agency to add to the story, to fill in the ambiguous blank spaces, to create the mini moments that bridge one panel to another. I stepped outside of the limits set down by the comic book artist, however briefly, and took control of the story, imagining something more than what was perceptible to the eye. I found agency through a creative act. The little, invisible moments I introduced into existence strengthened my relationship with each story in each comic book, building—if you will—intimacy with the narrative and the artists behind it.

Years later I came to know the theories of Homi Bhabha, the Indian-British critical theorist who proposed the concept of the third space. In the third space one has freedom to focus "on power relations through the relational perspective" (Sterrett 2015: 654) without allying oneself with one side (positive) or another (negative). This space provides the opportunity to explore numerous relationships with the world. Indigenous (Opaskwayak Cree) researcher Shawn Wilson lists people, environment/land, cosmos, and ideas as important relational possibilities in the world (cf. Wilson 2008: 84–96). Remembering my beloved comic books, I recognized that art is one doorway to that third space and to my world relations. Bhabha argues, "to live in the unhomely world, to find its ambivalences and ambiguities enacted in the house of fiction, or its sundering and splitting performed in the work of art, is also to affirm a profound desire for social solidarity: 'I am looking for the join… I want to join… I want to join.'" (Bhabha 2004: 27)

Ambivalence and ambiguity can be frightening, however. Certainty provides comfort, familiarity. My Drama in Education teaching students display confusion in their eyes when I encourage them to fail. They are uncertain when I quote Samuel Beckett: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." (Beckett 1983: 8) They ask for rubrics to guide them precisely in the tasks they have been assigned so they can achieve the highest grade. They ask how to do things "the right way". They say they wish to explore drama and all its possibilities for teaching subjects to their own classes when they graduate, but they are hesitant. More precisely, they are ambivalent, torn between their reflexive desire for certainty (something trained into them for nearly twenty years by the time they reach me in university) and their curiosity about rule-break-

ing as a way to discover another approach in simply *being*. It is in this moment that the third space, delivered through the methodology of art and performance, can make its entrance so they can dialogue with fellow searchers and find new ways of being.

Joseph Schwab, the late 20th century leader in education and curricular studies, speaks of three operations that must take place in a collaborative, social setting to ensure a strong educational impetus. The operations are, "'discovery' of one another by collaborators, 'coalescence' of what is discovered, 'utilization' of the coalesced body of concerns for generating new educational materials and purposes" (Schwab 1973: 501). He also notes that the interaction between these three operations takes the form of a spiral. Rather than a scientifically modernist "linear sequence of logically related steps" (Blakely/Hemphill 2021: 16), the necessary movement for this kind of curricular, exploratory work is anything but straight-lined. Schwab, the educator, and Richard Schechner the performance theorist, are closely attuned to one another. In speaking about modern theatre Schechner (1988: 21–22) states:

> The dynamics of the theater of Beckett, Genet, and Ionesco (among others) are drawn from life-rhythms: eating, breathing, sleeping-waking, night-day, the seasons, the phases of the moon, etc. These rhythms do not have beginnings, middles, and ends in the Aristotelian sense. One rhythmic cycle is completed only to begin again.

Schechner recognizes circular and cyclical patterns throughout theatre presentations. I suggest that it is not merely the theatre presentations that exist in circular/spiral forms, but also the devising of theatre. Creation—such as theatrical devising—is as much about failure as it is about success. 'Fail again, fail better'. We know what works because through chaotic effort we come to know what doesn't work. Hammering a nail into a wall works much better when your thumb is out of the way; that is a lesson you need to learn the hard way only once, but you do need to learn it. I call these creative moments of uncertainty and ambiguity a 'magnificent chaos'. It is through the chaotic interactions between multiple elements and insights that artists/creators can discover a new sense

or meaning of the world. Stephen Nachmanovitch (1990: 106) would disagree with my assertion of chaos within the creative act:

> Creation is not the replacing of nothing with something or chaos with pattern. There is no chaos; there is a vast, living world in which rules for specifying the pattern are so complicated that after you look at a few of them you become tired. The creative act pulls out some more inclusive shape or progression that gathers an immense amount of complexity into a simple, satisfying notion.

Whether you buy into Nachmanovitch's hidden-pattern theory, or my magnificent chaos theory doesn't matter since we both seek the same thing: a simple, satisfying notion. And to reach that, one needs the time, place, and latitude. One needs a third space.

Before I move too far from Schwab, I would like to mull over his three operations for curriculum development: discovery, coalescence, and utilization. Schwab makes it clear each of these operations "must be done in collaboration" (Schwab 1973: 501), requiring a social gathering of learners/devisors/participants/curriculum-builders, however you wish to designate them based on context. Within the gathering there is an inevitable dialogic encounter, an exchange of ideas and a shared meaning-making leading to some sort of growth in knowledge. Schwab is not alone in this thinking. Vygotsky speaks on how knowledge is co-constructed through human interaction and dialogue (cf. Churcher/Downs/Tewksbury 2014; cf. Vygotsky 1978). Augusto Boal, founder of the "Theatre of the Oppressed" outlines four stages of knowledge development in theatrical form that include knowing the body, making the body expressive, theatre as language and theatre as discourse (cf. Boal 1985: 126). In their theatre-making, Perry, Wessel, and Wager identify six steps including Reflection, Inquiry, Development, Framing, Rehearsal and Performance and note that Inquiry can be repeated several times in different ways: Inquiry (observation and discussion), Inquiry (automatic writing), Inquiry (scene work) and Inquiry (monologue writing) (cf. Perry/Wessel/Wafer 2013: 651–652). Some of this reflexive, creative work might be carried out as an individual's enterprise but, in this

theatre-making context, the group of individuals will always reconvene to share their accomplishments once they enter into dialogue with each other. Norris, when devising theatre through a Playbuilding methodology, emphasizes how critical an interpersonal skill set is to create a cohesive atmosphere in the group, and argues for faithfulness to the creative concepts of trust, spirit of play, safety, risk, and co-ownership (cf. Norris 2009: 59–63).

In my work as a teacher of Applied Theatre or as a theatre-maker through Mirror Theatre, I pick and choose from the examples above, curating elements to establish the strongest theatrical approach to a particular subject, but always focusing on those three essentials of discovery, coalescence and utilization. Let me provide you with an example. In the research for my master's degree in Social Justice and Equity, I worked with members of Mirror Theatre to devise a series of dramatic scenes that illustrated the struggles and triumphs of family members and medical professionals when caring for people with dementia or traumatic brain injury (TBI) in a long-term care setting. I have fully outlined the process in my thesis "To Know Their Stories: Using Playbuilding to Develop a Training/Orientation Video on Person-Centred Care" (Hobbs 2019), but for the purposes of this paper I provide a brief sketch of my work. The cast of Mirror Theatre—Actors, Researchers, Teachers (A/R/Tors)—pored over numerous transcripts of interviews with caregivers. What we discovered were many instances of conflict between healthcare professionals and family members, both seeking the best for the individual with dementia or TBI. The polarities between the workers and family were considerable. As theatre creators we problematized the issues we gleaned from the interviews by bringing in our own experiences and mixing our stories with the stories in the transcripts, then we devised short dramatic scenes that presented an issue without judging the participants in the issue[1].

1 The scenes were videotaped and placed on Mirror Theatre's website: https://mirrortheatre.ca/performance/understanding-person-centered-care/

We then engaged in Forum Theatre, Boal's theatrical intervention, to bring forward in a live public performance the polarizing issues between the family and healthcare workers. Through the performance and the subsequent facilitation of discussion and activities with the audience—known as Jokering (cf. Prentki 2015)—we shone a light on the conflict and dialogued over how the conflict might be resolved.

That was the process of this inquiry. Where was the third space in all of this? It could be found twice in the process. The third space appeared the moment the A/R/Tors—inspired by the transcripts—began sharing their own experiences with the healthcare system, introducing contradictions and affiliations between all the stories. This is a dialectical activity in which one story (thesis) may encounter (and counter) another story (antithesis), leading to the generation of a new, third story (synthesis). The third stories—both complicated and simple—were devised to provoke audience members (healthcare workers, family members) who had watched our performance into thinking and talking about their own experiences immediately after the performance concluded. It was during that 30-minute post-performance time of 'thinking' and 'talking' between A/R/Tors and audience that another third space appeared. New stories, which were shared by audience members, emerged. From those stories, new scenes were improvised by the A/R/Tors leading to even more responses from the audience. People were given space not only to talk in public about what happened to 'them' in a non-neutral, partial and subjective manner, but also to assist in creating new theatrical scenes. It was as if they gained agency by imagining what happened between the illustrated frames of a comic book.

In another context, when I work with teacher candidates in my Drama in Education class—students who have been exposed to a neoliberal education—I give space and opportunity for them to theatrically work through their anxieties and consternation over entering the education profession by devising scenes that implicate and celebrate them. And, on behalf of arts educator and curriculum theorist Elliot Eisner who said, "Imagination is the source of new possibilities" (Eisner 2009: 9), I encourage the students to put aside notions of neutrality and impartiality and take a leap of faith into that in-between space of right

and wrong. I have found that the students who take that chance find out what Irwin and Reynolds mean when they say: "Framing teaching and learning through an aesthetic lens shifts our perceptions to time, space and place as a way to create teaching and learning practices that are personally meaningful and socially active." (Irwin/Reynolds 2010: 161)

I will take this moment to spiral back towards the beginning of this article when I implicated myself in the third space through the 'gutters' of comic books. In doing so, I now move deeper to share my ongoing process to locate and relocate myself in the third space. Like many, my schooling (early years and undergraduate) indoctrinated a sense of certainty in knowledge and methodology, something finite (i.e., no need to keep on exploring) and at the time, comforting (i.e., thank God I don't have to keep exploring because it is hard work, and I might get things wrong!). In science class I was trained on the process of a positivist scientific methodology, and in creative classes such as drama, art, and literature I learned how layered colors were coded and that words were metaphorically and symbolically specific to one meaning only. Imagination may have been lauded in these educational forums, but the enthusiasm for it felt more like lip service when faced with restrictive contexts that demanded a 'correct' answer.

It was after I completed my undergraduate studies and delved into the world of theatre that I began to sense dissatisfaction within myself, particularly with the use of language. Does a rainbow, I asked myself, always have to represent hope, or an owl wisdom? Instead, can rainbows and owls take us to different understandings if we free ourselves from imposed structures? I did not know it, but at this time my thinking was skirting the edge of a posthuman paradigm—one that to this day I still haven't fully engaged with—in which the "human and other-than-human" (Aslanian 2018: 420) participate in moving away from language as a corresponding descriptor of reality to focusing on "matters of practices/doings/actions" (Barad 2003: 802). I'm not there in my thinking and practice, but I am close.

What does this mean? It means that over the years I sought the time and place to be playful, to challenge my assumptions and the assump-

tions imposed by the world, to fail in a most marvelous way only to discover something new. Theatre allowed me to do that. Stage rehearsals provided me an opportunity to transform words into movement or other visuals or non-verbal sounds. Theatre was that third space where a chair was permitted to not be a chair but a horse. It was exciting to discover that the phenomenon of the chair need not be bounded by its 'chairness'. In that context of playful theatrical exploration it was okay to ask, "what if…"? I suggest that this process is akin to the hypothesizing stage in scientific methodology. Yes, scientists thrive on imagination. According to Stuart (2019: 712):

> […] all experiments begin with hypotheses generated by imagining different ways the world might be. Before testing them, we explore these hypotheses by imagining what else would be true if they were. When it comes time to experiment, we take the real-world system we are interested in and recreate it inside our minds, laboratories, or computers by imagining analogous systems that could be investigated. And even though our idealized experiments remove confounding real-world factors, we imagine that the natural world also instantiates the regularities observed in experiments in order to refine our theories. Different though they are, each of these uses of imagination is necessary for scientific progress. If we want to understand science, we have to understand scientific imagination.

Stuart's in-between space is in his mind or laboratory or computer; that's where his imagination flourishes. Yet, I have encountered academics and artists who diminish the role of imagination and praise adherence to established rules as the way to build new meaning. One example of artists selecting rules over imagination can be found in Shakespearean rehearsals where some actors religiously dedicate themselves to the meter of the verse without allowing for vocal variation through personal interpretation. Those actors miss the possibilities that can emerge when relationships with humans and non-humans are able to occupy the in-between.

I carried the idea of relationship into my work as a medical educator. I used the performance pedagogy role-play as a tool to assist healthcare students in finding new perspectives and approaches to being a medical professional. I wrote case studies (the guiding story that role-players would learn for their portrayal with students) that undercut stereotypes often taught in health education (cf. Hyett/Gabel/Marjerrison/Schwartz 2019; cf. Ly/Crowshoe 2015). For example, many case studies that came across my desk indicated Indigenous patients as diabetic, traumatized, or alcoholic. That's it, nothing more. These are deficit-based cases, highlighting only problems in the Indigenous community. I countered with my own cases that celebrated the Indigenous patient. This can be done in any number of ways, such as writing cases about successful pregnancies or positive, caregiving inquiries. When the roleplays took place, they were essentially the third space where students could imagine a different kind of patient in front of them, someone not stigmatized by the stereotypes reinforced by the teaching and administrative community. In tandem with the role-player, healthcare students could perform (i.e., rehearsal) affirming relational interactions.

A reader of this article might well ask how can one ensure that students imagine possibilities that inspire growth and understanding? Will they get to the realization that I, the teacher/performer, wants? The answer is: you can't make that guarantee. As such, it is anxiety-making for any teacher, any performer. Will they—whoever 'they' might be—get it? The third space is always accompanied by ambiguity. Goals and Objectives have little to no place in the third space. This, of course, is heresy in a STEM-based education system because imparted predetermined knowledge is the status quo. I mentioned earlier that my students exhibit confusion and concern when I tell them to try and fail and hesitate to provide rubrics. Frankly, I also get nervous at times when faced with the same fog of ambiguity, when I ask nothing but questions of my students and audience and avoid all statements of personal/academic/aesthetic belief. It is during this time that I remind myself of an adage a close friend and colleague says, "I don't know where we are going but I do know how to get there" (Norris/Saudelli 2018: 3). By following a highly flexible process of asking questions, being curious, trying different ap-

proaches, embracing failure, and trying again, this approach guarantees something—an insight, an experience, an emotional encounter, a new relationship. I simply can't tell you in advance what the benefit will be. Such is the joy and trepidation when working in the third space.

Connelly notes that "educational reform in the middle of the last century focused explicitly on recognizable curriculum matters. It did so by marginalizing curriculum scholars in favor of disciplinary scholars" (Connelly 2013: 624). Once the disciplines of education (e.g., sciences) took hold there were fewer voices raised in favor of other approaches to knowing. It is for this reason that I lean so heavily into arts-based research and pedagogy. By employing theatre and performance pedagogy as a tool in the gap or third space, I resist the tidal wave of STEM and positivism paradigms. I encourage others to take a chance and do the same. Gaps are not to be ignored or feared. They are exactly where we need to be right now.

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