

'Actup!' Theatre as Education and its impact on Young People's Learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings from a study which explores the role of theatre as a site for learning in a community context and how it can provide informal learning opportunities for young people experiencing social exclusion. The study involved ‘Actup!’ a theatre group for young people on Leicester’s Saffron Lane Estate and run by Speakeasy Theatre Company. Observations, interviews and visual records were used to explore practitioners’ and young people’s experiences of ‘Actup!’

The research findings suggest that theatre as education has a number of important functions for these young people. Using structured processes such as rehearsal techniques and exercises that involve the experiences of young people, theatre can positively contribute to the transmission of their skills development, influencing and supporting intellectual development, as well as empowering them to affect change in their own lives by opening up further education (FE) opportunities. This also highlights the importance of theatre as an art form and how its application outside of a formal education setting allows space for the exploration of personal experience and self-reflection through a kinaesthetic process.

The paper concludes by recognising the need to undertake a longitudinal examination of how theatre as education can support and transform young people experiencing social exclusion and the importance of developing links between FE and other types of educational providers in developing learning provision that can provide a pathway into further learning.

Key words: Education, learning, social ex/inclusion, theatre, young people.

***'Actup!'* Theatre as Education and its impact on Young People's Learning**

Introduction

This paper presents the findings from a research study that explores the use of theatre in a community context and how it can provide informal learning opportunities for young people experiencing social exclusion, both for personal and social development, and further educational achievement and progression. The research study examines theatre as education in which "...the participation of theatre professionals in extended simulations [calls] for maximum student participation in the 'drama' over a period of weeks" (Meath-Lang 1997:101).

The study involves *'Actup!'* a youth theatre group from Leicester's Saffron Lane Estate for young people aged between 10-18 years. A main point of focus for *'Actup!'* is to be an educational resource for the young people and the community. It is a means of informal education that supports the formal education these young people receive in their schools, whilst at the same time retaining a fun, voluntary and participatory nature for them. *'Actup!'* is run by Speakeasy Theatre Company which is based on the Estate, in partnership with Leicester City Libraries and Leicester Schools Development Support Agency. It began in February 2002 as a response for the need for out of school support for these young people for their studies of the play 'Macbeth.' There was also recognition by Saffron Headstart, a community education organisation for the need for an anti-bullying intervention which could be tackled at the same time through a combined educative project for the young people which culminated in a community-based arts event.

At present, there is relatively little in the way of systematic research that examines the importance of theatre provision for young people's learning and participation in community life, as well as tackling issues associated with social exclusion (Hughes and Wilson 2004). This paper will, therefore, be of interest to policy-makers looking to ensure that young people at risk of exclusion remain close to learning (Jackson 2003), and offers insights for those who wish to understand and offer effective learning opportunities for young people. As discussed later in the paper, there is already recognition of the need to raise the level of achievement of young people and increase post-16 participation in education and training.

The study was carried out between February and July 2004 and sought to examine the impact that informal learning has on young people who are educationally and socially disadvantaged by exploring the use of theatre as education in a community context. It aimed to identify the type of learning taking place for young people in this setting, including those areas of learning inherent in the drama activity, and the learning that occurs through indirect development. The study also aimed to identify whether theatre can empower young people to affect change in their own lives and open up further educational opportunities.

Following the introduction, the paper will draw on the literature relating to a tripartite categorisation of education and learning and the interrelationship between learner, activity and context. It will also explore young people's access to education in its broader social and economic context, informal learning in the context of theatre, and its impact on young people's educational and social development. It will then explain the research design for the study, followed by presentation and exploration of the data from '*Actup!*' The paper concludes by arguing that theatre as education can facilitate and motivate educationally and socially disadvantaged young people back into learning because it can hold their interest and stimulate them to achieve and develop. A number of recommendations for further research into how theatre as education can support young people experiencing social exclusion will also be made.

Formality, Informality and Non-formality in Education and Learning

Writers in this field have tended to focus on a three-fold typology of education that involves formal, informal and non-formal settings. As Jarvis (1987: 70) argues:

“Formal situations are bureaucratic, non-formal are organised but not necessarily in a bureaucratic environment and informal situations are ones where there are no-prespecified, although there are always covert, procedures of interaction.”

Here the school and classroom are seen as offering a formal setting of learning in which people take on clear roles within an official organisation. Contrary to this, non-formal settings are thus defined as an organised educational activity outside the formal system that operates separately or as a broader activity (Fordham 1993) but still provides learning objectives. In contrast, informal situations are defined as occurring in social interaction, for example between family members and friends (Jeffs and Smith 1990).

Definitions of learning have been used by many policymakers and practitioners in many different contexts, with different connotations. What has also emerged is a tripartite categorisation of learning, involving formal, informal and non-formal learning. The European Commission (2001:32-33) has provided the following definitions as outlined below.

Tripartite Categorisation of Learning

Formal Learning	Informal Learning	Non-formal Learning
Learning typically provided by an education or training institution, structured in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support. It is intentional from the learner's perspective.	Learning results from daily-life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured and typically does not lead to certification. It may be notional, but in most cases it is non-intentional or incidental.	Learning is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. It is structured and is intentional from the learner's perspective.

It can be argued that the distinction made in these definitions is largely administrative. Formal learning is linked with schools and training institutions, non-formal learning with community groups and other organisations, informal learning with interactions with work, family and friends. However, these definitions of formal and non-formal learning appear to apply to professional interventions and to educators sponsored by bureaucratic organisations (Jeffs and Smith 1990). They do not allow for the fact that professionals in arts disciplines may facilitate learning in all three categories through partnership with schools. Colley et al (2003) also comment that in adult and community education there is no overarching formal structure, little use of externally imposed syllabuses and negotiated content. Here learners tend to be volunteers who can leave at any time if they do not like the provision. In addition, elements of the learning activity may not conform to any definition of provision because they are self-organised activities undertaken by groups and communities for their own self-defined purposes.

Young People's Social Inclusion: Widening Access to Learning

Since 1997 a range of policy initiatives have been introduced as a means of ensuring that young people at risk of exclusion remain close to learning (Jackson 2003). These include initiatives such as New Start, New Deal, Gateway and Connexions. Reports such as *Transforming Youthwork - Resourcing Excellent Youth Services* (DfES 2002), *the White Paper, 14-19 Opportunity and Excellence* (DfES 2003) and subsequent work of the Tomlinson Working Group on 14 to 19 reform recognises that there is a need to raise the level of achievement of all young people, reduce the gap between various socio-economic and ethnic groups and increase post-16 participation in education and training. *Learning to Succeed* (DfES, 1999) also emphasises the need to develop innovative types of learning provision to develop routes out of poverty and social exclusion for marginalized groups.

Whilst *The Kennedy Report* (1997) has argued that FE is the key to widening access and participation to education and training, Macrae et al (1998) have demonstrated how social background can impact on young people's experiences of school and FE, placing education in the broader social contexts of young lives. This work reiterates Gallacher et al's (2000) findings about the barriers to participation in FE for young people. They recognise that these barriers are linked to the disadvantaged position that young people are placed in due to socio-economic structures, problems of unemployment, poverty and low levels of educational achievement. Gallacher et al (2000:39) also comment that associated with these problems are ones of attitude and motivation: "Together they create a complex set of issues which must be addressed if participation among excluded young people is to be increased." In their study, these issues included disrupted personal lives and negative school experiences which had left the young people doubting their own educational abilities.

This reiterates Jackson's (2003) point that there is a need to extend beyond the educational objectives of formal learning and provide greater flexibility for learners in informal contexts. As Eraut (2004:247) comments: "It draws attention to the learning that takes place in the spaces surrounding activities and events with a more overt purpose and takes place in a much wider variety of settings than formal education..." Gallacher et al (2000) have argued that young people can be encouraged towards learning through the role of agencies, such as youth and arts-based projects and as Jermyn (2001) remarks, such activities can be used to help to

develop individuals' potential and self-confidence and build links with the wider community. *The Green Paper: 14-19 Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards* (DfES 2002) has also recognised and given more value to wider activities such as citizenship and community based learning initiatives that focus on the learner, as well as recognising the diversity of young people. Informal educators in this context enter particular social and cultural situations, have an ability to think critically, and reflect-in-action as well as encourage dialogue between, and with people in the situation out of which comes thinking and action (Jeffs and Smith 1990).

In this sense, informal learning also has at its core the objective of social and personal development and draws on four sources:

- (i) It connects with young people's interests, since their engagement is voluntary
- (ii) It provides activities which can supplement the formal learning of school/college by offering different contexts for self-expression and active citizenship
- (iii) It offers programmes which engage with current social issues that preoccupy young people such as crime or drugs in their neighbourhood
- (iv) The work reflects and address the tasks and needs that confront young people as they progress through the transitions of young adulthood (Young Adult Learners' Partnership 2003:17)

Such arguments attach significance to the social context of learning and to the interrelationships between learner, activity and context (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000). Raising levels of young people's participation and achievement in learning can include settings, processes, purposes and content that involve components of both formality and informality. Beckett and Hager (2002) who have focussed on workplace learning have rejected any conception of formal and informal learning as distinctive types, arguing that all learning processes experienced within or outside specialised educational institutions can be characterised by formal and informal attributes. They see informal learning as organic, contextual and experience-based. This approach focuses on the interests of learners and their motivation to learn and is seen as taking place in environments in which they can take ownership of the learning.

This links to the notion of learning as ‘participation’ and recognises that informal learning can represent the diversity of situated and context-dependent learning available to the learner outside the formal education setting. This challenges the notion of formal learning. Engeström (2004) has taken this argument further by emphasising ‘learning construction’, which can be used to capture the meaning of deep learning and takes into consideration the learning, the learners and the environment in which the learning occurs. His focus has fundamental importance for young people’s experiential learning outside of a formal education setting.

Theatre as Education: a Site for Learning

Literature on the use of theatre as a site for learning has tended to focus on formal learning where learning is typically provided by an education or training institution and is structured in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support. In this formal context, writers such as Brizendene and Thomas (1982) have argued that teachers utilise drama as an important aspect of the curriculum. Both Bolton’s (1986) and Nixon’s (1987) work on teaching drama in schools has also indicated the need to look at other broader learning as well as that which is inherent in the drama activity. This includes social skills and awareness, language development and communication skills, thinking not yet finished and selecting and shaping.

Bolton (1986) has specifically made a distinction between internal and external features of the drama activity. He argues that the latter (external) are a potential source of learning of facts and refining skills related to external action (motor, memory, simulation), and refining aesthetic skill which can lead to the development of communication skill. The former (internal) are a potential source of learning about value-laden concepts and social skills which may be independent of the drama activity. However, the two are also co-dependent and the drama becomes the pretext in which social learning can take place.

It has been argued that theatre as education provides a site for informal learning, positively contributing to improvement in academic achievement and young people’s attitudes towards themselves (Kalland Wells 1994, Taylor 1995). The additional benefit that theatre as education may bring for young people who are socially excluded and economically marginal (Macdonald and Marsh 2001) is the possibility of affecting change in their own lives and opening up further educational opportunities. Encouraging young people to take part in youth theatre can move them away from exclusion and provide them with choices as well as support their career aspirations. As Mathews (2001:315) notes: “...promoting self esteem and a sense of greater control over their lives by enabling participation is part of this developing agenda.”

Linnell (1985:84) has also commented upon the educational impact that theatre has in developing 'life skills' such as increased confidence, development of voice and deportment, commitment to a group activity and the ability to communicate with others:

“As well as providing artistic satisfaction in a piece of living fiction, there is the opportunity for discussion, role-reversal, movement, effective speech and work in group: all perfectly adult pursuits...”

It can be argued that through involvement with youth theatre, young people develop a number of skills as discussed above - both technical and personal skills which aid their human development. Hence theatre can be placed within a broader framework of learning that occurs simultaneously at conceptual, personal and social levels. Rosen and Koziol's (1990) research has demonstrated the importance of theatre in young people's learning. They found significant increases in communication skills and attitudes towards self after 18 planned rehearsals. The nature of the improvement included oral expressiveness and knowledge and comprehension of the play.

Theatre skills can be developed not only to aid memory in learning lines for example, but to increase awareness of how an individual's response to emotion and experience feeds creativity, and how creativity in turn feeds performance. It can be argued that once learners are aware of the importance of their own roles in the creative process, then their confidence in the outcome and their ability to succeed increases remarkably. Their success is largely due to who they are, as well as what they have learnt. This self-reflexivity is consistently the result of theatre work, where personal creativity and kinaesthetic processes combine. In this context theatre can enhance interpersonal learning (Ferszt 1984), increase self-awareness (Deeney et al 2001) and assist in personal growth and development (Weil and McGill 1989).

However, what is of fundamental importance to this learning is the art form itself; in this case theatre and its application outside of a formal education setting. What theatre offers uniquely as an art form is a level of involvement which draws directly on the experiences, the character, the very persona of the participant. As Miles (2003) also comments, young people's interest in performing art at an informal level can play a key role in shaping their identities and lifestyles, in which they develop knowledge and skills in these aspects of their lives. In this sense theatre becomes a "...powerful, creative vehicle, where emotions are concentrated and intensified, offering a rich educational experience" (Ferszt 1984:65). The individual's thoughts and emotions go to help develop a character or series of characters, sometimes expressly through rehearsal techniques and exercises, often more organically through the process of 'just doing it.'

What is created in making theatre is a process where each individual has an enormous amount to give. It can be argued that educationally, the benefits and potential for this process are vast (Macdonald and Marsh 2001) as the young people can find a level of involvement likely to go way beyond what is found in more formal sitting and listening learning scenarios. This is because no-one is excluded, as the experience of exploring emotion requires initially only that any participant has experienced something, at some point, in the most basic way. Theatre can, therefore, become a mode of experiential learning which involves young people in active participation as they identify with imagined roles and situations (O'Neill and Lambert 1984).

This exploitation of personal emotion or experience is common to other art forms, although there is a sense in which any forum which allows self-expression will have educational potential. What makes theatre such a vibrant learning tool is the experience of doing it - the kinaesthetic process of transferring thought into action. In performance (here the term includes the process of beginning, rehearsing, exploring, as well as the finished presentation) the need for physical action is central. When this action is married to other educational aims a strongly supported process of learning is the result. As Deeney et al (2001:102) argue:

“It [theatre] builds upon the knowledge, skills and experiences that students can bring to the learning situation...”

Research Design, Methods and Analysis

The overall methodology for the study was grounded in the setting of the drama activity. This involved the methodology of critical theory (Carroll 1998), a research model that deals with interpersonal relationships, role, power and context and attempts to understand social reality. The study was designed and implemented according to a set of guiding values and principles. Foremost amongst these was a commitment to the involvement and active participation in the project of the young people as key stakeholders as well as the workshop leaders. The research design was split into three phases and included a broad range of methods. Firstly, non-participation observation of the young people by means of a structured set of observational categories was undertaken as detailed below:

The support of the workshop leaders

- (i) How do they prepare the young people to enter a drama setting?
- (ii) How do they deal with the young people's attitudes to learning?
- (iii) How do the young people respond most positively to the workshop leader?

The impact of theatre on the young people's learning

- (i) Do they express any favourable/unfavourable attitudes to learning at the beginning of the rehearsal?
- (ii) How do they experiment with ideas, improvised suggestions and assigned tasks and responsibilities?
- (iii) What skills are they learning?

Notes made up in the field of observation were written up shortly after the experience so that missing elements stimulated by reading notes, amplifications and corrections could be made. Data collected from the observations of the young people was analysed using effects data matrices (Miles and Huberman 1984) in which the data was displayed based on outcomes i.e. dependent variables to pull out themes and categories. Data from feedback questionnaires and evaluations of previous workshops was also examined using content analysis to compare with findings derived from the observations.

Secondly, unstructured interviews were also conducted both on a one-to-one and small group basis, shaped by a schedule of selected themes and issues, to generate narratives of the young people's and workshop leaders' experiences. The young people were encouraged to describe how theatre and other variable factors influenced their learning. All interviews were transcribed and analysed using conceptually clustered matrices in which the data was displayed to bring together variables and pull out themes and categories.

Finally, digital photographs were taken to create a visual record of their learning. This included images of the young people working during the rehearsals and at the end of product of their work i.e. the final performance. The photographs were indexed as a record of the event according to the subject matter analysed in the observation categories.

***'Actup!'* Findings from the Case Study**

I now draw on the case study as a first step in illustrating these issues and addressing the way in which youth theatre provides informal learning opportunities for young people experiencing social exclusion, both for personal and social development, and further educational achievement and progression. As outlined above, *'Actup!'* is run by Speakeasy Theatre Company to support and enhance the learning of young people between 10-18 years who live on the Saffron Lane Estate in Leicester, and face are social barriers and obstacles to learning. At the time of the research study there were 22 members of *'Actup!'* and those who took part came from schools where little formal provision was made for any theatre activity. In fact many of them were under-achievers in their schools.

'ActUp!' mounts four productions a year on the Saffron Lane Estate local library and also one outdoor performance each summer. Over a one-week period in the May half-term school holidays, I observed *'Actup!'* in rehearsals for their production of *'Dr Faustus,'* to be performed at the Phoenix Arts Centre in Leicester.

The support of the workshop leaders



Prior to the rehearsals, the workshop leaders had a very clear definition of their expectations of the young people and what the aims of the week would be. An edited version of the play 'Dr Faustus' provided a useful starting point for the rehearsals and served as a springboard for active learning. The aim was to ensure that the play would provide a sense of visual detail which was valuable and powerful as well as a means of defining tasks within the play.

'Well, what basically...we've done is to edit the play down to what I think is about half an hour's worth of material. We've scripted lines for the two central characters, played by adult actors, and also for many young people, but it's not been cast...in that script there is delineated room for devised ensemble pieces, so for example, it will say something like 'the devils enter and menace Faustus,' so that basically there is room for a created scene where we can use as many kids as we might actually have...'

Task setting took place each morning of the rehearsal and was a vital ingredient of the drama rehearsal, demanding careful preparation, clarity of expression, and a judicious choice of teaching strategies by the workshop leaders in ascertaining the young people's capabilities.

'What we're going to be doing is concentrating on... the young people, getting them to understand what an ensemble performance is...getting them to look at the importance of visual production in such circumstances, and also of course hoping that they will make some advances in terms of performance and to their behaviour...'

Achieving the right balance in terms of task setting depended upon the workshop leaders making careful judgements about three key areas.

- (i) *Role:* in which the workshop leader stipulated the roles to be adopted within the drama
- (ii) *Relationship:* in which the workshop leader determined the kinds of relationships to be explored within the drama
- (iii) *Situation:* in which the workshop leader defined the situation whether this was related to the performance or to improvisatory work

‘I want them to develop their learning about the play, about the style of the acting that we’re using...get them moved around the performance space...so there will be periods of activity...getting them to actually have some input into what’s happening. Other periods where they are working simultaneously on different bits.’

On the first day of rehearsals, each young person was given an individual learning target to achieve throughout the week. These included targets such as improving listening, being focussed or developing a character. This was particularly significant because the targets were related to the young people’s previous experiences of theatre. These targets were central to their progress, because it affected the difficulty and challenge of performing, the extent to which it was individual or collaborative, and the opportunities for meeting, observing and working alongside other members of ‘Actup!’

In preparing the young people for the theatre setting, the tasks were introduced through warm-up exercises and games at the start of each rehearsal.

‘We start off with games, warm-up stuff, that helps us lay some ground rules down, helps them start to work as a unit...we’ll be looking at things like their focus, looking at that ability to basically use a bit of stage presence...so looking at exercises to do with that...’

This work was undertaken from outside the play, reinforcing the importance as professional actors to work well together as a team as well as taking on a role as an actor. It enabled the workshop leaders to deal with the young people’s attitudes to learning as well as find some common ground from which they could begin to move into their roles for the performance. The advantage of this approach was that it allowed the young people to participate in the decision-making process about their roles and the scenes performed by others, whilst providing them with direction and support in terms of their understanding of the scene they were performing.

‘...we’ll always get the young people to comment on each other’s work, so we’ll always get them to give constructive criticism...we’ll always say what did you like about that? What was good about it? What did we see in that scene that we could perhaps use in the play at the end of the week.’

One of the key tools in theatre which the young people were alerted to was the importance of exercising a range of listening skills and being focussed on what they were watching, listening or in participation whether in a scene or off-stage.

‘Every five seconds in *‘Actup!’* we’re asking the young people what happens if we all speak at the same time. They all make the connection that nobody is going to get heard because we can only hear one voice and they do learn that, we enforce that on them a lot, you know? Because listening is a very important skill to have, just so you can create the drama really, but also as a part of respect for each other.’

Developing these skills often took the form of small-group planned presentations in which young people working in small groups would work with a workshop leader to plan and show a small sketch or scene from the main play. This provided the potential for them to consolidate their own learning. It reinforced the need to work cooperatively with a small group of peers, to develop their collaborative skills, to listen and to extend the ideas of others, to express their own views and reach agreement with other members.

‘This reflects in any sort of social circumstance, because you know, if they play a character that’s going to be liked, then they know the different qualities that the group has mentioned for that character to have...and so that obviously transfers into their own minds and to the social skills that they’re picking up because then they can understand what qualities that they might need if they want to be working well in a team, or getting on in society.’

There were occasions when workshop leaders had to change the focus of attention on a regular basis. This was because several groups were working simultaneously, at different paces and making their own sets of demands on the leaders. However, in this context, the young people were moving in and out of role, backwards and forwards between discussion, self-reflection and the play.

“...the older group of *‘Actup!’*, they’ve just been given the ideas of fears – what are your greatest fears? And through discussion of how we are ourselves, in our own characters, of ourselves, that just brings out ideas and imagination then starts to run, and we just let them run wild with it, so we’ll praise them for using their imagination...So we ask them lots of questions to try and encourage their imagination to go a bit further.”

What this format provided was the opportunity for the young people to step back from the drama and talk about what they were doing, how they were doing it as well as asking questions about the play itself. This helped them adopt a more thoughtful approach to performing, as they were encouraged to think and reflect as they rehearsed.

The impact of theatre on young people's learning

Nearly all the young people had done drama before in previous '*Actup!*' work. This factor created a more positive attitude to learning because they were more aware of the purpose and role of drama within this educational context. Many of the young people interviewed linked what they were learning to theatre as a kinaesthetic process.

'Drama is much better here cos I'm able to come up with ideas. Also you're listened to and learn to work with others who like drama. I like the play and find it interesting. I'm learning to act as well as skills such as group work and communication.'

'I learnt how to listen and communicate with others. Drama is better here... because you're able to come up with ideas, be listened to. Also the workshop leaders praise you and encourage you so you work harder.'

During the rehearsal period, this learning included not only acquiring/refining facts in relation to the play '*Dr Faustus*', but also acquiring and refining aesthetic skill, which led to the development of social skills. This is illustrated by the episodes of learning which occurred throughout the rehearsals as outlined below and involved social skills and awareness, participation in group activities, teamwork and being focussed, and language development and communication skills.

Social skills and awareness



During the first rehearsal, one of the Group members called John¹ became disruptive, shouting abuse at another member because he had been made fun of. He became angry, lost his temper and walked out of the rehearsal. However, later in the afternoon John returned. The workshop leader encouraged him to rejoin the rehearsal and got him to think about the part he was playing. At tea break, the workshop leader reminded John about the expectations of each member of 'Actup!' and the importance of behaving professionally even when other actors do not.

Following this chat, John focussed on acting his part, discussing with the workshop leader how he could develop his character. His ideas were constantly encouraged. In talking to John, he remarked upon how his poor attention span and anger management problems had improved considerably since coming to 'Actup!' and he was learning to communicate better and focus much harder on his acting. The experience of drama for him was about the content of the rehearsals which gave him the confidence to communicate his creative ideas because they were listened to. This was enhanced by the support he received from the workshop leaders which went beyond the rehearsal.

Participation in group activities



Part of the rehearsals involved working in small groups with a workshop leader to plan and show a small sketch or scene to be included in the performance. On day two of rehearsals members of 'Actup!' were divided into smaller groups to work on such scenes. One small

¹ Names of 'Actup!' members have been changed

group included two boys and a girl called Amy². For their first sketch, they were required to make a three-dimensional structure. However, Amy did not want to be in this group but wanted to be in a group with her friends so she deliberately sat out of the group and moaned that she was bored. The workshop leader asked the group to demonstrate their sketch, commenting upon the importance of team working and communicating with each other.

For the second sketch, the group was required to make a structure in the park. Amy still did not want to work with the others, again sitting out or wandering over to see her friends. The workshop leader asked her to think about why she did not want to join in with the group work and pointed out that there would be occasions when as actors they would have to work with people they did not know very well. Finally, the group was required to work on a scene from the play by improvising 'hell.' The workshop leader reiterated that he wanted to see them working together, being visual and creative. Amy then began to contribute to the group work, coming up with ideas about how to make the scene work. The workshop leader explained that they were learning to work together and emphasised the extent to which drama involved working collaboratively. The workshop leader praised Amy for her efforts. At the end of the day, the workshop leaders asked each 'Actup!' member what they felt they had achieved in the rehearsal. This question reiterated the importance of the educational targets. Amy commented upon how she had learnt to work with people she did not know and in a group that she did not want to be in. She had become aware of what she was able to achieve.

Teamwork and being focussed



² Names of 'Actup!' members have been changed

On day three of rehearsals, the workshop leader worked with a smaller group to rehearse the final scene. In getting their focus and attention, the workshop leader arranged them into a circle and found a common ground from which they could move on as group. He then asked them to listen and to carefully watch the actor play Dr Faustus.

The group was alerted to the importance of working together and listening carefully to direction, in order to refine the final scene. Such direction included their facial expressions, having their props ready, being in the right place, timing and keeping quiet. The group began to focus, asking questions about their technique i.e. ‘what if I came on here?’ or ‘shall I stand like this?’ By working together, the scene was improved considerably.

The small group was then required to perform the final scene to other ‘Actup!’ members who were asked to provide feedback. They commented on how the performance was let down by the fact that the group was not working together because they were messing about on and off-stage. The workshop leader paused the scene and the group was again reminded about working as a team and focus. This gave them the space and time to think and reflect about what they were doing and to work together as a team.

Language development and communication skills



An important part of the rehearsals involved warm-up games which included some level of improvisation. The games involved the use of acting skills as well as communication skills. Playing these games encouraged the young people to use language, gesture and action in role under a particular situation with a range of expressions that they did not normally use and a degree of understanding that was outside of their everyday experiences. This was reinforced by the workshop leader reminding members about the importance of what they were doing, encouraging them to work with others and to be respectful to each other as actors.

The impact of theatre on young people's educational achievement



In exploring how youth theatre had empowered the young people to affect change in their own lives, I discovered that five older 'Actup!' members had gained places at a local FE college to study performing arts. They had all left school with a record of underachievement. One had been doing a course in plumbing which he hated. Another had not achieved in school and had in fact stopped attending almost completely. The others were unemployed. For all of them, they had received an unsatisfactory experience of theatre in school:

'I mean 'Actup!' gives you the opportunity to, you know, have a second chance, if you don't get it right the first time, there's always a chance you can upgrade it-if you keep trying. Where as in school, you only got the one chance and if it wasn't good enough, well that were it...'

‘I didn’t really like it [drama] at my school that much because, there were certain reasons, one of them was that I thought I was being held back...we never actually done any real acting, we were always usually just writing things down...’

The key barrier to enabling this group of young people to develop educationally was a lack of confidence and ability to interact with other people as noted by one of the workshop leaders:

‘...I think **** has always wanted to do drama, he’s a very creative person but I don’t think he would have made that shift from plumbing to drama had it not been for ‘Actup!’...because...he didn’t have the self-belief until he actually tried it.’

Through participation in youth theatre, they had become interested and stimulated enough to the point of developing a range of social skills and the self belief that they could achieve:

‘...confidence wise it’s built me up, ‘cause I’ve been playing different characters...and I can put me ideas across, I can change my idea and if someone’s got another idea and I’ve got another one, we can mix it up and put them together to make a whole new one. And, I think I’ve done better ‘cause of ‘ActUp!’... I have to work with strangers if I’m going to be an actor, but I was a bit wary to work with someone I hadn’t worked before. Where as now I just go in and say ‘Oh, my name ****. What’s your name?’

‘The main thing that ActUp done for me, it gave me confidence, a lot of it. Like ‘cause I’ve got acting skills I never knew I really had until I joined Act Up. ‘Cause they gave me the confidence to open up and just, you know, in front of an audience-like first time I was quite scared and nervous, but you know, they told me to just relax and think about something else, and that’s what I did and that’s given me a lot of confidence and now I would do anything, anywhere- in front of anybody... I’ve got enough confidence to do that.’

This positive experience, combined with the support of the workshop leaders in which references, advice and practical support with applications was available, had encouraged the young people towards learning to the point where access to and participation in FE became a real possibility.

‘I mean, it’s like I’ll incorporate things that I do in ‘ActUp!’ and put them into college, it’s the same as I’ll take-I’ll take things from college and I’ll incorporate them with ‘ActUp!’... There’s this thing we do at college called the impro circle, where you all stand into a circle and I don’t know if you noticed it, but when we did ‘Dr. Faustus,’ me, **** and **** brought it in to them.’

'I learnt to build up on them skills....Projecting me voice, listening, communication, all the essentials of acting. I wouldn't be able to get into college if it weren't for *'ActUp!'* cause I didn't have a drama GCSE...It actually gave me the experience that I needed to...get into college. At first, I had a recommendation from ****, to go to Drama College, but that was too late 'cause I'd applied to another one. But this year... I had all the experience to be able to go...'

Is Theatre Built on Informal Learning?

Jackson (2003) has argued that informal learning has a significant part to play in developing skills and achievements for young people, particularly those who are not actively participating in formal education. Informal learning in the context of youth theatre such as *'Actup!'* had positively contributed to the development of skills, attributes and an improvement of the young people's attitudes towards themselves (Harman 2001). During the rehearsals and performance for 'Dr Faustus,' the growth in confidence that had developed amongst these young people was evident - they had developed the ability to be focussed and to listen as well as command attention in their performance. Key to this success was the way in which theatre was built on informal learning, "... in terms of the open character of learning processes and the nature of skills young people acquire in such contexts" (Miles 2003:165).

The setting of educational targets for each member of *'Actup!'* was also an important aspect, providing a further context in which the young people could take some responsibility for their own learning. However, these targets were dependent on the flexible nature of informal learning (Miles 2003), focusing on the interests of the learner and their motivation to learn through an accessible and supportive environment. Learning in this context also involved construction (Engeström 2004), drawing attention to the relationship between learning and the context in which it took place, and structured processes such as rehearsal techniques and exercises that connected up to the experiences of the young people. Whilst these processes imposed certain structures, theatre's application outside of a formal education setting still provided the creative space for the exploration of personal experience and self-reflection through a kinaesthetic process, motivating the young people to learn.

The additional benefit that informal learning opportunities such as theatre brought to these young people, was the possibility of affecting change in their own lives and opening up further educational opportunities and a route back into formal learning. This emphasises how youth theatre can lift the barriers to learning and minimise the disadvantaged position that young people are placed due to social exclusion and low levels of educational achievement (Gallacher et al 2000) as recognised by this workshop leader.

‘It’s about allowing kids to turn up, take part in an arts activity, support their education, improve their skills, but we also have now a more tactical aim to make links with the local schools and also support the young people beyond the weeks that they might be actually doing acting and stuff with us, and into their educational career as appropriate.’

Conclusion



Theatre as education has a number of important functions for young people experiencing social exclusion, positively contributing to the transmission of their skills development, influencing and supporting intellectual development, as well as empowering them to affect change in their own lives by opening up FE opportunities. It provides strong positive motives for young people to (re)engage in the learning process because theatre as an art form involves giving of themselves, contributing ideas and developing skills, as well as stimulating them to achieve and progress.

It can be argued that young people's engagement in youth theatre is a worthwhile activity because of the impact this also has on the community, as young people become role models to others inside and outside *'Actup!'* Furthermore, as some of the older members of *'Actup!'* have gained confidence, learnt more about themselves and realised their potential, this has led to the realisation that participation in FE is possible. This highlights the importance of developing links between FE and other types of educational providers in developing learning provision that can provide a pathway into further learning.

As a result of this study and through the narratives of the young people and practitioners, it is possible to identify the importance of theatre as a site for informal learning in which young people are able to develop and achieve. In order to take this work forward, three key recommendations are made:

- (i) There is a need to undertake a longitudinal examination of how theatre as education can support young people not involved in formal education and experiencing social exclusion, and can transform their development and engagement in the community.
- (ii) As part of this longitudinal perspective, there is a need to explore how theatre as education can empower young people to affect change in their lives and open up access to FE as a realistic goal. There is a need to find ways of responding more creatively, and to a more informed extent both at the appropriate level of local practice and wider policymaking in terms of social inclusion and widening access to FE.
- (iii) There is a need to examine more closely how theatre as education can have particular relevance to practitioners working with young people, including those already using theatre as a tool for learning, and those seeking new methods of engaging and working with young people.

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