

**NO STRAIGHT LINES:
Local Leadership and the Path from
Government to Governance in Small Cities**
Edited by Terry Kading

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No Straight Lines: Using Creativity as a Method to Fight Homelessness

Dawn Farough

Prologue

The following chapter was written in the summer of 2013. It is based on interviews with a local group of academics, community workers, and artist/activists called No Straight Lines (NSL) and theatre companies dedicated to working with and telling the stories of disadvantaged and marginalized people. The chapter focuses on the initial planning stages of a community-engaged theatre and research project involving NSL in collaboration with homeless and marginally housed individuals. This planning stage was prior to the recruitment of the homeless actors and writers; rehearsals had not yet commenced. Figure 3.2 (The Planning Stage) represents the memberships and social networks involved in this stage of the project. During the peer-review process for this chapter, the NSL project took shape and social networks expanded as individuals and groups entered the succeeding phases of the project. Figure 3.3 (Reflections from the Field: Inside the Rehearsal Room) and Figure 3.4 (Outside the Rehearsal Hall), illustrate the numerous individuals and groups who, at various times, contributed

No Straight Lines Presents:

Home/Less/Mess

bringing stories of homelessness out of darkness

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FIGURE 3.1. “Home/Less/Mess,” Bonnie McLean, illustrator, *No Straight Lines Presents: Home/Less/Mess* bringing stories of homelessness out of the dark. Production announcement courtesy of Bonnie McLean.

to this local initiative. I have attached an Epilogue in order to update the reader on the rehearsal and performance phases of the project.

Introduction

Despite public stereotypes about the homeless, those who find themselves without an address and often without any shelter come from many different backgrounds and have taken a variety of paths to homelessness. Solutions to homelessness are also varied. The belief that many paths “with very different corners and turns to navigate” (Genshorek 2013) lead out of homelessness has inspired the name for a group of community workers, academics, and activists—No Straight Lines (NSL). NSL is currently designing a very ambitious and somewhat unconventional method

of tackling homelessness in the small city of Kamloops, British Columbia. Using participatory research, the group plans to work with a group of homeless and marginally housed individuals who will create and then perform a play about their lives and their experiences of homelessness. This chapter focuses on the nature of and possibilities for collaboration between academics (representing the disciplines of theatre, literature, and sociology), community workers, and artist/activists. Three of Dubinsky's (2006) frameworks for collaboration (self-interested, mimetic, and normative) are discussed. Interviews with members of NSL highlight the diverse views of group members regarding the strengths, weaknesses, and challenges of their project. How will group members handle the process of collaborative research, differing opinions regarding personal and group goals for the project, possible power struggles, and varying definitions of social justice? Since one of the frameworks of collaboration is mimetic in nature, I will also draw upon existing literature in theatrical studies and the social sciences in order to ask what this group can learn from previous theatrical projects involving marginalized community members.

Background

NSL is one of several initiatives on homelessness resulting from a partnership between the United Way, Thompson Rivers University (TRU), and the Kamloops Homelessness Action Plan (HAP). This rather eclectic group, which began to meet on a regular basis in December 2012, consists of representatives from the Elizabeth Fry Society, the City of Kamloops, ASK Wellness Centre, the United Way, HAP, TRU faculty from Theatre, English, and Sociology; the Canadian Mental Health Association, White Buffalo Aboriginal Health Centre, Jubilee Urban Ministry Partners, and the Kamloops Arts Council. The group is very open and welcomes any interested individual from the community. Therefore, new individuals are constantly joining the project. My relationship to this project is as a member of NSL and a sociologist at TRU.

The ultimate goal for the group, a collaborative approach culminating in a live performance of a play written by and starring individuals who have experienced homelessness, was on the table right from the beginning. NSL has met on a regular basis to determine how to make that

The Planning Stage (prior to recruitment of the homeless writer/actors)
The *No Straight Lines* Development Team (NSL)
 The United Way, Thompson Rivers University (TRU), City of Kamloops
 Kamloops Homeless Action Plan (HAP), Elizabeth Fry, ASK Wellness Society
 Kamloops Art Council, JUMP, Interior Community Services
 White Buffalo Metis & Aboriginal Health Society, Community Volunteer



Interviews for the Chapter



FIGURE 3.2. Theatre Project Network 1 by Dawn Farough. Design by Moneca Jantzen, Daily Designz.

goal happen. As one might imagine, the group has a never-ending list of practicalities and logistics to sort out: appropriate spaces for workshop, rehearsal, and performance spaces; gaining support from local agencies in order to recruit from the homeless population; preparing for mental health contingencies and access to food, transportation, and daycare; budgeting for art supplies, props, costumes, and musical instruments; and addressing funding, media, and marketing. However, we have also tried to work out the academic, artistic, and “stakeholder” kinds of questions as to why we are involved and what we hope to accomplish.

Many of our discussions have considered power imbalances. We know that we have various agendas, that most of us have very different (and more privileged) backgrounds from those we expect to “carry” this project, and that the homeless will need (and should expect) to get a great deal out of this endeavour. And so, we have asked some difficult questions: “How can

we balance our own agendas with the needs of the participants?” “How can we show leadership without being overbearing, and what does leadership mean in a collaborative process?” “How can we remove intimidation every step of the way and work together in a trusting environment?” “How can we be sensitive to individuals who come from very different backgrounds from our own?” “How can we empower homeless individuals?” Some members of the group have worked on collaborative projects before and know the difficulties of “getting along” and working toward consensus on shared goals and projects. Others know the “literature” on collaborative projects from theatre studies or the social sciences. Within this literature, there are some helpful techniques that will be discussed later in this paper.

Self-Interested and Normative Collaboration

For the academics in the group, the necessity of asking “What is unique about this project?” is not just academic. Our participation does include elements of self-interest. We require grant money and we have scholarly activity and research elements of our jobs that need to be satisfied. Therefore, we need to prove that we will be conducting research that is in some way “unique” and contributes to the knowledge creation of our various disciplines of theatre, literature, and sociology. Academic collaboration is not easy, and it can take one of three forms: multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary.¹ During this planning stage, it is not clear which form our collaboration will take.² Disciplines have their own built-in vocabularies, concepts, theories, and methods. Each field has an “epistemological style”—a distinctive approach to producing and evaluating knowledge (Lamont 2009). In addition, “epistemic or disciplinary cultures” (Cetina in Lunde, Heggen, and Strand 2012), referring to ways of interacting based on education, training, and work environment, develop in conjunction with epistemological styles. Power relations are an important component of disciplinary cultures where hierarchies of academic prestige determine allocation of important economic resources. In their examination of a large research project involving academics from a range of disciplines and faculties (natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities) as well as clinicians, Lunde, Heggen, and Strand (2012) analyze conflicts and misunderstandings that led to profound weaknesses in

the academic collaboration. These included: research questions not agreed upon and therefore defined differently by various groups; qualitative researchers felt disempowered by quantitative researchers and often tried to “mobilize ‘moral power’” (207); clinicians favoured applied knowledge and therefore were unable or refused to communicate with academics who valued theory and methods, while those in natural sciences dedicated to the relationship between hypothesis and method had little in common with humanities folks who emphasized the importance of “verbal clarity, openness, and level of verbal reflection” (202). Perhaps most importantly, no obvious leaders emerged since no one felt that they could or should lead the project.

University ethics boards have become an institutional reality for most academic researchers, and they have the power to redirect social research. Van Den Hoonaard (2011) argues that ethics boards have a positivist bias built into their expectations and judgments because they were originally structured for biomedical research. Therefore, disciplines with epistemic styles which do not fit neatly into the positivist research model often move toward methods of data collection promoted by the ethics boards. In sociology and anthropology, for example, the methodologies of participant observation and fieldwork are in decline while proposals using interviews and focus groups are rapidly increasing. Van Den Hoonaard (2011) notes that these methods are favoured because they have “a clear beginning and an end, the interview can be encapsulated by an interview guide or protocol” (267, 268). One of the surprises awaiting the NSL academics was the extent to which the normative requirements for research as ascertained by the TRU Ethics Committee would create a kind of artificial separation within the overall project. The sociological research was subject to much more rigorous standards than the theatre component. To clarify, the homeless / recently housed participants do not need to formally consent in order to participate in theatre rehearsals or the play itself, but they do need to fill out consent forms and be warned about issues of anonymity and confidentiality when formally interviewed by the research team about their experiences in the collaborative rehearsal process. The ethics committee is not concerned with how the homeless / recently housed are recruited for the purposes of the “artistic” side of the research, but it is concerned about recruitment for the purposes of ethnographic observation

and formal interviewing. Since the same participants are involved, this has left members of the research team scratching their heads as to how to comply. A letter of instruction from the ethics committee states: “This application would be far easier for the PI [Principal investigator] and for the REB [Research Ethics Board] to manage if it was focused only on the research component instead of being interwoven with the theatre section.” Apparently, “art” is not research and “artists” are not researchers. Therefore the theatre faculty can decide for themselves how to proceed “ethically,” without bureaucratic guidance or interference.

One of the questions asked of the NSL members was “Do you consider yourself a volunteer?” “Why or why not?” Because so much of the collaboration is based at least partially on self-interest, most NSL members answered “no” to this question. For example, one of the community workers stated: “Not myself, no. Luckily we do have that piece where I’m paid to follow through, carved out. Several hours a month out of my paid position to keep with this project.” In a similar vein, an academic member told me: “I look better on paper when I’ve done this and I feel like projects like this are expected of me from my institution because they pay me for those three months that I don’t have to come in every day. So I feel like it’s a lovely way to pay back to keep working for my professional activities.” The artists/activists were divided on this question. One said: “Well I’m not interested in getting paid. I am doing this. As I understand, volunteerism is a service that comes with some personal sacrifice. So yes, service and sacrifice are two activities that human beings should have in their lives.” However, another felt that the concept of volunteerism reeked of “charity” and a “one-way street” and therefore didn’t capture her reasons for participating in the project: “But from my own personal side of it, it’s like I’m glad that I get to see something in action and see how it works because I will learn from it. So for me personally, it’s an educational experience. It’s something that I’m going to get something out of, no matter what happens.”

It would be incorrect, however, to view self-interested collaboration as always connected to job requirements. When asked about their personal goals for the project, some members of NSL linked their self-interest with giving back to the community or a sense of the need for social justice or social change. As one member declared:

Number one, I think that theatre has the potential to change lives. I think that we always have the potential to do good, and I don't think that there's enough of that. . . . As a society, our society of theatre can change lives for the better and I wanted to be involved in a process like that. Also, and quite intimately, two years before I got this job I was receiving Christmas hampers from our local good will agency because I was in school and we were very poor. I got handouts from our community and it was shaming. It felt horrible at the moment, but I believe in paying it forward so I'm in a position now, where I can pay it forward.

Mimetic Collaboration

Dubinsky (2006) defines mimetic collaboration as that based on emulation: the “guiding maxim ‘if it worked there, it will work here’” (9). Canada has a history of collective and alternative theatre. The work of theatres such as Headlines Theatre in Vancouver, as well as Passe Muraille, Mixed Theatre, and Theatrefront in Toronto, was known to many of the original members of NSL. For over 35 years, David Diamond and his company, Headlines Theatre in Vancouver (now called Theatre for Living), have produced plays with various community groups on issues such as gang violence, substance abuse, residential schools, refugees, prison life, and homelessness. Diamond's work has been cited as a model for the NSL project. Ironically, the very first play by Headlines Theatre (in 1981) dealt with the shortage of affordable housing in Vancouver.

When discussing the uniqueness of the project, NSL members agree that this project is unusual as an approach to homelessness because, typically, academic research on poverty and the homeless, as well as public policy approaches to rectify the social issue or “problem” of homelessness, have very little to do with creativity. Quantitative methodologies and policy papers rule the day. The project is also unusual in that it will take place in a small city, whereas similar theatre productions have been located in large cities such as Vancouver or Toronto. What NSL proposes to copy or emulate is the use of theatre and collaborative techniques to empower

members of disadvantaged community groups and draw public attention to their situation and experiences.

In looking at relevant literature, in both theatrical studies and the social sciences, I found Filewod's categorizations of "popular theatre"³ to be helpful. Filewod (2011) comments that popular theatre consists of two broad yet overlapping sectors: "One sector is the continued use of theatre as a form of community mobilization, political dissent, and radical challenge in movements for social justice. The other is what is known as 'applied theatre,' which works within institutional frameworks (schools, prisons, health care, and development agencies) to produce collaborative knowledge and analysis. Often these applied theatre applications work in concert with government programs" (257).

The NSL project plans to combine elements of both of these sectors. As is the case with the first sector, the NSL project will take place in a community rather than an institutional setting; the notion of social justice may be interpreted in different ways by NSL members, but individual empowerment as well as community mobilization and awareness are key objectives. However, the project will also use the social science methods more commonly found in applied theatre to produce and analyze collaborative knowledge.

Both sectors of popular theatre as defined by Filewod tend to use a method of collective creation. Whereas most plays are authored by a single person, collective creation simply refers to a process wherein a group develops and writes a play (or a series of scenes or episodes) with the intention of performing in front of an audience (Wallewein 1994). In popular theatre, collective creation typically takes two forms. Members of a community group (often disadvantaged) write and perform a play in a collaborative effort that also involves at least one theatre professional (see, e.g., Diamond and the work of Headlines Theatre/Theatre for Living) or academic (see, e.g., Conrad 2009 and Valentine 2006). Or, alternatively, actors are hired to perform the script developed collaboratively by the researcher and/or theatre professional and community members (see, e.g., Kazubowski-Houston 2010). The NSL project will use the first form of collective creation.

In addition, because audience reaction and mobilization is as important for NSL as participant empowerment, NSL members have been

considering the use of audience discussions after the play, focus groups, and audience surveys. These techniques are often used in applied health research studies such as those by Cox, Kazubowski-Houston, and Nisker (2009), which hope to engage the public/audience with respect to health-related issues and policies. Finally, the NSL project will be ethnographic⁴ in nature and will therefore involve extensive fieldwork and participant observation of rehearsals as well as the final play or plays. In this way, the project will mirror the work of Kazubowski-Houston (2010).

NSL has determined that a series of “non-threatening” workshops designed to “break the ice” and awaken the creative and artistic talents of the homeless must precede the writing and rehearsals leading to the final show. The art activities within the workshops may be led by TRU faculty, Kamloops Arts Council contacts, musicians in the group, and friends (Genshorek 2013). It is hoped that the workshops will deliver a core group of homeless individuals who will then work together with theatre faculty from TRU to write and perform a play about their experiences with homelessness. The play will then be performed before a live audience in Kamloops. The entire process will be documented.

The Process of Collaborative Research and “Empowerment”

Many of the NSL members have had experience with a collaborative process—whether in the form of a collective creation in theatre or other art fields, collaborative research in an academic setting, or job-related teamwork. While they all acknowledge that collaboration can be painfully slow and cumbersome, the benefits of collaboration are seen to outweigh any drawbacks. Why is collaborative research important to the members of NSL? The answer is that collaborative research is tied, in the minds of NSL members, to notions of teamwork, community, creative freedom, idealism, trust, confidence building, and most of all, empowerment. Empowerment is seen as especially important when dealing with disenfranchised populations. As one group member explained:

We need to give them power right from the very beginning and . . . when you are talking about a disenfranchised

population . . . they understand hierarchy, even in sharper focus than we do. And . . . on the street there is a hierarchy and . . . in a seniors' home, there's a hierarchy. In whatever population we are talking about, we need to lift them up power wise, or they won't have a voice and . . . we are talking about people who are tramped down to the degree where they don't usually feel like they have a voice. I do feel like we do need to empower them. And I do think we need to empower them by feeding them and taking them there and telling them, and letting them know, by our gestures, that they are important. And by sharing and letting them know that we are all there together as one—a lot of the theatre kind of team building we talk about. But, yes, I think empowerment is absolutely essential. But I think we need to empower the group too through ritual. Ritual, I think, is extremely important with the theatre experience like this. That if they get used to the way that things work, and if they are working the same way every time, that we build trust that way. So I think it's empowerment plus trust. I think they are all tied together as one.

There is a long tradition of using theatre to empower disadvantaged and marginalized people. The work of Brazilian director Augusto Boal and his “Theatre of the Oppressed” is central to this tradition. Inspired by the Marxist educator and fellow Brazilian Paulo Freire, as well as theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht, Boal advocated a community-based model designed to give voice to groups that were marginal within society. Boal, using the Marxist terminology of “oppressor/oppressed,” argued that only the dominant groups within society (the oppressors) had a voice. “Monologues” existed to the benefit of a few, but no actual meaningful “dialogue” existed between people. Boal’s interactive political theatre techniques were designed to create “counter-narratives” as well as interaction and community between the performers and audiences. The techniques force performers and audience members to become active learners rather than passive entertainers and spectators. Knowledge is created through the interaction of both parties. Further, both participants and audience

members develop a much-needed critical social consciousness about their communities and their place within them and therefore become active in promoting social change.

Canadian David Diamond practises his own version of Boal's work in his "Theatre for Living." Diamond has moved away from the more Marxist elements of Boal's work (what Diamond calls the "oppressor/oppressed" model).⁵ Instead, Diamond envisions communities as a series of fluid and dynamic networks of communication which can, over time, produce shared systems of beliefs, values, and goals (2007, 16). As our patterns of behaviour change, our societal structures will also change. For Diamond, theatre is "a symbolic and primal language" and therefore the perfect "vehicle for living communities to tell their stories" (2007, 23). The processes involved in interactive theatre allow people from disadvantaged communities to discover that they "are experts on their own lives" and that they can "create art" as well as their own realities. Diamond's work mirrors that of Boal, in that the ideals of individual and community empowerment, the development of a critical social consciousness, and the ability of the ordinary person to create knowledge and become an expert on his/her own reality are as important to Diamond as they were to Boal.

Within the social science literature, the perceived benefit of collaborative research between academics and community members is that the power imbalances between the academics, who are "experts" in their fields, and the research participants, who are "studied," is addressed. In theory, both parties learn from one another as they create knowledge together. In sociology this comes across in the notion of "public sociology,"⁶ and in anthropology "collaborative ethnography" is a good example. In both cases all participants are supposed to be equally involved in planning and decision-making processes. Of course the ideal is often not met; articles abound on the difficulties encountered in these kinds of collaborations.

Many social scientists see the value in performance as a tool for knowledge creation. As in the history of political theatre, self-expression is tied to consciousness raising and subversion. Sociologist Norman Denzin (2003), who uses theatre as a method to challenge racism and produce race awareness in the United States, believes that when performance is used as a sociological method, it allows for the kind of critical self-reflection and consciousness raising that challenges mainstream thinking and

common-sense knowledge. Disadvantaged people become less submissive and start to envision a different kind of democracy. For anthropologist Dwight Conquergood, academic research connected to performance should contain a “triangulation of three perspectives—accomplishment (the making of art and culture); analysis (the interpretation of art and culture); and application (activism, the connection to the community)” (in Roberts 2008). However, as Roberts (2008) cautions, advocacy is not an easy issue for social scientists dedicated to performance studies and social change. Social scientists are well aware that mainstream society teaches the value of common-sense knowledge to individuals. The concept of “false consciousness” is foreign to most people. Therefore the challenge becomes how to be respectful of community members and allow their experiences to guide the research while, at the same time, being faithful to the theories, critiques of society, and methodologies of one’s academic discipline (Roberts 2008).

The literature shows mixed results when analyzing projects similar to that proposed by NSL. On the positive side, academic and activist Kristin Bervig Valentine is confident that her performance classes (and resulting plays) for women in prison were beneficial both on a personal and a broader societal level. She states: “My hypothesis is that mind-liberating activities generated by performance and creative writing programs . . . increase effective communication skills that help women avoid actions harmful to themselves and others. By acquiring these skills they increase their abilities to avoid reincarceration when they are released from prison, thereby benefiting themselves, their families, and their communities” (2006, 321). Diane Conrad produced a play with “at-risk” high school students in order to better grasp their perceptions of their behaviour. Like Valentine, Conrad is very positive about what she was able to accomplish using participatory performance ethnography with the high school students. She felt that she was able to cultivate their awareness of their risky behaviours and help them look for solutions or responses to their issues, and that the process gave them agency in and responsibility for their behaviour (2009).

Power Struggles

However, not all academics and artists are positive about their collaborative projects. One of the most compelling tales of power struggles in this area of research comes from the work of Magdalena Kazubowski-Houston (2010). Kazubowski-Houston is from both a theatrical and a social science background (she is a performer, director, and anthropologist). In her book *Staging Strife: Lessons from Performing Ethnography with Polish Roma Women*, Kazubowski-Houston reflects upon the process of writing and staging a play with the Roma women of Elblag, Poland. Initially Kazubowski-Houston's goal was to draw public attention to the ethnic, class-based, and gendered violence and discrimination encountered by the Roma women, and she hoped that "her project would constitute consciousness-raising of both participants and audience" (2010, 15). Kazubowski-Houston wanted to do serious political theatre that would speak out against racism and sexism and not perpetuate stereotypes; however, she encountered many setbacks and surprises. Although she collaborated with the Roma women during the writing and rehearsal periods, the women refused to act in their own play.⁷ Kazubowski-Houston was forced to hire non-Roma Polish actors and thus was faced with three different factions with three different agendas. The Roma women had a vision of theatre that was like a "soap-opera." They wished to show the joyful, positive aspects (as they saw it) of Roma life. They wanted their potential audiences of non-Roma and Roma to think "well of them." The actors were scornful of this, believing the Roma women to be "passive" about their oppression and lacking any understanding of true "art" and critical, realist, political theatre. The Roma women were also critical of the actors; they didn't trust them and they had their own stereotypes of the non-Roma. Kazubowski was stuck in the middle and forced to mediate between two groups, a process she often quite disliked. Dealing with many of the same issues NSL has discussed in our many meetings, Kazubowski-Houston struggles with how to balance the various agendas of her participants, how to conduct collaborative research that will be respectful to her participants but also lead to a PhD dissertation, and how to be sensitive to the different backgrounds of herself, her actors, and the Roma. Many times, the power games threatened to derail the entire production. In the

end, the play did go on, but Kazubowski-Houston was left to contemplate whether her project had the desired outcome of social change: “On the one hand, I had accomplished what I had to do. I had produced a play with the Roma women, and everyone seemed reasonably happy with the outcome. On the other hand, it hadn’t set Poland ablaze, and the women’s lives seemed no better for it” (2010, 177–78). Although it is true that the Roma women did not perform in their own play and this led to many of the power struggles, Kazubowski-Houston notes that she did develop two other ethnographic performances in Poland where the participants performed on the stage and yet power struggles were still very much a part of the rehearsal process (2010, 193).

I asked the NSL members for their views on potential power struggles within our research project. For the most part, NSL members are positive about the group’s ability to get along with each other:

I think that everyone seems to be very respectful of the different lenses that people are viewing the project through. Just in the several meetings that we’ve had, it’s clear that—you know [name of group member] would have a clear theatrical lens. She understands it in terms of performance and the arts and theatre. But she’s also very willing to listen to someone who actually works with our clientele and understands that that’s not going to work for them or there’s no way that that will apply. So I think, in that way, everyone’s been very responsive, which is great.

The participants, however, are the “great unknown.” One member expressed the following:

I guess in terms of a power struggle between ourselves and the participants, I guess my only trepidation there would be that we have a clear goal in mind for what we would like to achieve and there might not be a complete buy-in from the participants that are involved. There might be, I don’t know if a power struggle maybe is the right term, but there certainly could be a difference of opinion in how we are going

to get there or what it is they would like to achieve. At times, working on a project like this, it can be like herding cats and so trying I guess to be respectful of the participants' circumstances and their knowledge, I suppose. And trying to lead them where we would like to be.

Strengths, Weaknesses, and Challenges

Every project has strengths and weaknesses. In this section, I use interviews with NSL members to highlight the views of the group regarding the strengths, weaknesses, and challenges of the project.

Strengths

This is a very exciting project. A part of what is exciting about it is the unknown. I have no idea. With any collective, even with a bunch of seasoned professionals who have all done it before, part of the attraction of doing such a project is you have no idea where it is going to end up. (NSL member)

Every member of NSL described the “unknown” elements of the project—would we have enough participants, would they show up on a regular basis, what would they want to write about?—as its strengths and, potentially, its ultimate downfall. The unknown is exciting and liberating but also terrifying. Other strengths cited by NSL members included the composition of the group, the size of the city of Kamloops, and the belief that this project was a “leaping-off point” for projects in the future.

As expressed in the section on power struggles, the group itself is viewed as an asset. Members mentioned that “we are respectful of one another in this talking phase of the process” and that there is an “open-mindedness” and “creativity of everybody involved.” The composition of the group is seen as providing solid strengths with a great combination of education and experience. One member commented:

Well I think the group we have around the table is tremendous. . . . Partnering with TRU has just been incredibly exciting so we have a lot of strong educational background around the table. It's just thrilling to see that combined with the people, like I said, who work front line with these people who live and breathe what that experience of being on the street is. That mixture of education and experience is great. I think that's going to be a real strength for us.

The size of Kamloops was also seen in a positive light. Group members believe that closer proximity leads to better and closer connections between community members:

I feel like we have the right size of community where it's easier for people to feel connected. We are only a very few degrees from everyone else in the community. You know someone who knows someone who is related to someone. So I think we are in a good position where everyone will feel—no one is too far away here I guess. For me I feel like it's a good sized community for us to be able to launch something like this, because of the proximity.

Furthermore, assistance from the local theatre company will be readily offered: “For example, if we need or want help from Western Canada Theatre, enough of us know people at Western Canada Theatre well that that might happen. It might not happen in Toronto, for example.” There is also the belief that culture is not considered to be as elitist in Kamloops as it might be in larger centres:

I don't think culture is particularly scary here. Maybe it is for some level of the population, but I think theatre is not seen here as being elitist. That you have to dress up to go to and only the upper 10,000 get to go. So I think it will have, I hope it will have a bigger impact on the city as a whole, or on the population as a whole, than a similar project would

do in Vancouver because it's so hard to reach the entire population in a giant city. And I know we are not going to reach the entire population, but it seems like it's more contained and more controlled.

Lastly, the size of the city seems to mean that Kamloopsians may not be as jaded as those in big cities and may look forward to something new and challenging:

It's the first time we've done something like this here. So I hope people get really excited and engaged and that we won't have a problem selling tickets, because it's so new and different. People are always looking for stuff to do in Kamloops, and, hopefully, even a few people from around the district might show up, but I'm not going to place any goals there. The size of the city is key, for sure. Because to my knowledge, this is the first time anything like this would have happened here.

Finally, the last strength mentioned was the possibility that this project may lead to many others:

I think a lot of things are pointing to this development group wanting to do other things and more things. Lots of energy, lots of excitement, lots of ideas. I think the timing is good for a group like this in Kamloops to come together and address these issues in a creative light. And I think that this project is just going to be the beginning. I think there will be more fun projects and more things will build off of this and this will be an awesome first project.

Weaknesses and Challenges

What if nothing happens? That's like the worst case scenario.
(NSL member)

What if nothing happens? What if, after all the philosophical discussions, planning, and organizing, nothing happens?! We do not know who the participants are going to be and we do not know what they may or may not be willing to do. As one member acknowledged, “We are working in the dark.” Any project that focuses on human subjects needs to deal with the fact that “people are changeable and people are fluid and mercurial. So one day they may say A and the next day they may say Z” (NSL member), but this project also deals with a population thought to be challenging. On the one hand, NSL members are trying to be careful with any biases or prejudices they may have about the homeless or recently housed population. On the other hand, they readily admit that it would be foolish not to discuss and worry about the challenges they may face in dealing with this disadvantaged group. The following two quotations illustrate this dilemma:

I’m nervous that our biggest challenge will be the reliability of the people that we will be working with, based just solely on their circumstance, not on who it is that we are working with. I think there could be challenges there. Like I said, having them adapt to a new type of environment like this and their comfort level and overcoming any barriers that they might have to participating.

The process might be made difficult by their own issues, which might just be maybe they would lose interest. Because they would find out what is expected of them and they might just think that that is too much for me to give or I don’t know if I can do this. Or maybe I don’t have it in me—maybe I’m not talented enough to give—I’m not that kind of person. The other thing could be that maybe they would just get tired. They just physically get fatigued by it. That they might anticipate something else. They might not understand the depth of what we are doing. Maybe they would think, “Oh we are just going to do a little skit,” kind of thing. And so just learn some jokes and sing a few Johnny Cash songs and that will be enough. And then there’s the other side of it: that maybe it would bring things out of people; the creative process might bring out disturbing feelings

or just make them feel too raw. That might be a problem too where they would need to have somebody help them through that and maybe it would scare them off. The worst case scenario? I guess “it’s too intense. I just don’t want to do this.”

The level of commitment required when working on a theatre production would be difficult for anyone. As one NSL member commented:

You need a really high commitment level. Theatre is not brain surgery, but you need kind of an inappropriately high commitment level to make it work because it’s a group project and every member of that group has to be there. Has to be contributing. Has to care as much as everybody else . . . which is why people in theatre will work through pneumonia and just crazy things. . . . If there isn’t that level of commitment then it just implodes. From the outside it looks kind of crazy, but it’s the only way it can work.

Other projects have dealt with the level of commitment in various ways. Theatre for Living, for example, has potential cast members go through a real interview process. They sign a contract and are provided an honorarium. If they do not show up for workshops or rehearsals, they get one warning. If it happens again, they are “fired” (Interview with David Diamond and Liza Lindgren 2013). On the other end of the spectrum, Savannah Walling, who has directed plays in Vancouver’s East End, tolerates missing cast members to the extent that typically not everyone shows up until the dress rehearsal. People read their lines on stage if necessary (Interview with Savannah Walling 2013).

Group Goals

I think they are rather lofty and I’m all for lofty because if you shoot for the moon you are going to hit harder, you are going to go further than you thought you would. (NSL member)

Although each member of this group inevitably has his/her own priorities and agendas, NSL has agreed on a preliminary list of goals used to guide the project. These goals address themes of therapeutic creative expression, life skills, public awareness, community involvement, knowledge creation, and documentation.

Therapeutic Creative Expression

No Straight Lines wants to make a difference to the quality of lives of the participants through artistic expression. This is an important goal for the group. According to the Committee Minutes:

One of the central objectives of this project is to put at risk individuals in touch with themselves and other like-minded individuals, through a variety of creative media and methods of expression. The challenges and emotions associated with homelessness are complex, and they are different for each person who experiences it. Creative expression can help people access and share these complex emotions to begin to come to terms with difficulties, challenges and trauma in their lives. (Genshorek 2013)

Yet this goal is not straightforward for group members. The community workers expressed the strongest enthusiasm for therapeutic creative expression. One said, “I know art is key to your sanity for a lot of people so that’s personally why I’m really passionate about this project.” Another pointed to the fact that those who experience poverty often do not have access to the kinds of resources that are needed for creative endeavours and therefore were being denied therapeutic outlets available to more affluent individuals. Other group members were more reserved in their enthusiasm and felt the need to qualify their remarks. For example, one NSL member said: “I don’t like theatre as therapy, as a rule” and “I don’t think theatre has to be ‘masturbatory.’” Another, while acknowledging that “the ability to speak your truths is more empowering than you can imagine,” said that the first goal had to be “a good show—artistically a good show” and therefore the art form had to be the priority. Placing therapeutic creative

expression too high on the list of priorities could result in a “self-indulgent” end result, something that most audience members would not want to see. According to this member, the “reality of theatre is that it’s live and therefore there has to be someone on the other side to receive the live things. If it is to have an audience, it has to have value to that audience. And watching somebody else’s therapeutic wank is not of interest to an audience.”

This member’s comments echo David Diamond’s assertion that Theatre for Living rehearsals and productions are never allowed to be group or individual therapy sessions. In an interview Diamond stated that his actors are actors first and foremost. They never play themselves on stage. He makes it clear to them that they are playing characters and that their expertise and creativity is in aid of making art and serving the larger community. The notion that actors from disadvantaged groups are “broken” and their involvement in the creative process is because we’re “going to fix you somehow” is, in his view, “disrespectful,” “presumptuous,” and “makes for really bad theatre” (Interview 2013).

Life Skills

The life skills required to maintain housing are complex, and they are different for each individual. By utilizing different forms of creative expression people can begin to build skills and confidence that help them with the complexities of maintaining housing and/or employment. (Genshorek, NSL Minutes 2013)

The community workers in the group use a UNICEF definition of life skills as “psychosocial abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life” (HAP 2012). The Kamloops Homeless Action Plan report on life skills considers the following to be essential life skill considerations for those who need to obtain and maintain housing: “financial management, family management, health and wellness (including substance abuse and mental health), self-management (including employment readiness) and social skills (such as communication and conflict resolution)” (2012). Kamloops

has a life skills network that meets monthly “to discuss life skills-related community information, collaborate to improve service and share expertise” (HAP 2012).

NSL community workers speak of “hard” and “soft” life skills. Hard life skills refers to the use of concrete techniques and knowledge that allow an individual to successfully complete an activity such as paying bills or budgeting. Soft skills, on the other hand, refers to “people” skills: skills revolving around interpersonal relationships and communication. The majority of NSL members hope that the project will provide soft life skills. For example, one NSL commented:

Being able to confidently speak in front of people. Feeling like what you have to say is important. Being able to work in a group. Being able to meet deadlines. Being able to think creatively . . . the hope is that the group together will go, “Ah, this works better this way. Let’s try this and find out what we think about this.” So they will have this opportunity to creatively problem-solve. And meeting a goal. Just setting a goal and then meeting it. That’s a skill that three-quarters of people coming out of high school don’t have.

The Kamloops Homeless Action Plan report on life skills does not mention hard life skills in conjunction with the NSL theatre project. Only soft life skills are mentioned: “Some of the skills that are anticipated to be developed in the Theatre project include communication and teamwork, time management, stress management, respect and empathy” (HAP 2012).

Occasionally there have been discussions around possible hard skills, in particular, skills leading to employment. These discussions worry some members of NSL. The following two quotations illustrate this concern:

This isn’t training them to be actors. God help us. We don’t need any more actors. That’s an awful life. Especially for somebody who has not got their shit together. Acting attracts people who are unstable and then it beats them up. It’s awful.

People who have trained for years and years and years in theatre don't get work. It's the dumbest career to think that you think you are going to get into, especially if you think that's going to get you off the streets. That will drive you to the streets probably.

One NSL member quipped: "It would be great if we could give them an over-the-counter prescription of life skills, right? And after ten days of taking them faithfully you are cured." In his mind, life skills is about helping people integrate into the community, but he also questioned the "functionality" of mainstream North American life, asking whether the mainstream was just as "dysfunctional, if not more dysfunctional at a systemic level than the individual lives" of our homeless participants. Still, this member had success in past projects (one dealing with young people who had dropped out of school and were living in shelters and on probation) where hard as well as soft life skills had been improved:

There wasn't really anybody in this project that had any kind of normalcy or regular life. So what we tried to install in them was life skills. Yes they were getting paid to be in this project. They had to get to work on time. They had certain tasks and responsibilities that they had to carry out. But we said to them, "Okay now that you think you are really hot shit because you know how to paint, act, and work as a group, what are you going to give back to the community?" So that was the main life skill that we wanted to put on the table—before anything else, before how to manage a budget. We basically said okay "are you feeling better about yourselves?" You feel like you've had a voice? You've got something to offer? What are you going to do with that? . . . So in the end, yes, they became more aware of the community at large. They became more aware of other community issues, as well, they learned to pick up the phone. They could cold call, build a set, do a budget—all that kind of stuff. I would say the main thing was, this is about making ties with your community.

Another member argued that integration into the community and the development of soft skills are prerequisites for the hard life skills: “Teaching life skills isn’t going to work if you haven’t got the feeling of being part of the bigger picture of the community at large, of being part of the society at large” and “you need to have the personal confidence in yourself before the life skills are really going to have any effect. So you can teach people how to balance their finances or whatever life skills you are going to teach them, but . . . until they get a sense of themselves and the confidence that money is not a scary thing, it’s not going to work.”

Public Awareness and Community Involvement

No Straight Lines wants to increase community awareness and knowledge of homelessness in Kamloops. The homeless play project is seen as an innovative way of engaging the public. The hope is that awareness will lead to participation and active support for local initiatives to end homelessness. The Committee Minutes note that:

Homelessness can be a difficult topic to approach for the general public who may not have past experiences. It is our hope that by offering the issues of homelessness in a new, and perhaps more approachable way, we will be able to reach a variety of members of the public with meaningful messages that change their perceptions and grow their knowledge. Mechanisms such as surveys will be developed to measure changes in perceptions about the issues of homelessness. (Genshorek 2013)

Furthermore,

Our goal in documenting the process is to have a physical record of the project that can be shared with participants, project partners, other interested groups, and the general public. Our goals to increase awareness about homelessness, theatre and the arts will connect with this goal in a

survey of the audience at the performance to understand perceptions. (Genshorek 2013)

Both sectors of popular theatre (discussed earlier in the chapter) involve the audience in a manner not found in traditional theatre. However, there is a profound absence of data about the audiences who participate in the interactive productions. Most of the data available on audiences (demographic and opinion based) comes from the applied sector of popular theatre. The applied sector is much more conventional in its use of audiences but is also much more likely to use social scientific methods in its approach to understanding the nature and opinions of the audiences who attend these productions. On the other hand, the *theatre of the oppressed* sector involves the audience in a more creative manner.

The Theatre of the Oppressed, as developed by Boal, and the adaptations by Canadian theatres, such as Headlines Theatre/Theatre for Living in Vancouver and Catalyst Theatre in Edmonton, use techniques that allow audience members to intervene and change the course of a play. In popular theatre, divisions between audience members and actors are deliberately blurred. For Boal, audience members are “spect-actors.” They are not just passive spectators watching a finished and polished production over which they have no control or voice. Instead, the audience is invited to act and to help re-create various scenes in the play. In Boal’s model of “forum theatre,” the show plays through as written the first time around. Then, the actors re-start the play, and at any time an audience member can yell “stop,” come up to the stage and re-create the scene with his or her solutions to the problem presented. If the audience disagrees with the spect-actor’s solution, a member shouts “magic!” and a general discussion ensues. For Boal, the forum model helps the audience understand that their ideas are important, that interactive dialogue between many people can disrupt or disturb “fixed categories of social power” (Halvorson 2010, 124), and that social change is their responsibility.

The Legislative Model is a version of forum theatre designed “to bring theatre back into the centre of political action—the centre of decisions—by making theatre as politics rather than merely making political theatre” (Boal in Halvorson 2010, 125). A play by Headlines, *Practicing Democracy* (2004), is said to be the first example of legislative theatre in Canada.

The writers/actors were people affected by cuts in welfare in the city of Vancouver. The suggestions and comments by audience members were formalized into a legislative report presented to Vancouver City Council after the final performances. The goal of legislative theatre is to change laws and policies.

A more conventional way of involving audiences and promoting awareness can be found in the many health performance studies that seek to engage the public on policy issues and establish empathy so that audience members understand what it feels like to walk in the shoes of someone who has a mental illness, cancer, Alzheimer's, or cystic fibrosis, to name just a few of the issues covered in Canada (Alvarez and Graham 2011). After the play, audiences, in large or small groups, are invited to discuss the issues presented.

Geographers Geraldine Pratt and Caleb Johnston used talkback sessions and audience feedback surveys for their play on immigrant nannies. Based on Pratt's interview transcripts, *Nanay* explores issues around the shortages of childcare in Canada and the experiences and challenges of women who come to Canada from the Philippines as temporary workers under the Live-In Caregiver Program. States Pratt, "Perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of the eventfulness of theatre is the opportunity it creates to stage public conversations between people who would not ordinarily speak to each other on an equal footing: domestic workers with employers, nanny agents with community activists, childcare activists with Philippine community activists, local government officials with domestic workers" (Pratt and Johnston 2010, 177). *Nanay's* audiences reported that they had learned from the play and the audience discussions. As well, the play generated meetings between various advocacy groups (2010, 178). Although Pratt does not mention legislative theatre in her work, it is clear that new policy initiatives could be a possible outcome of *Nanay*.

Cox, Kazubowski-Houston, and Nisker discuss and evaluate their methods of audience engagement in "Genetics on Stage" (2009). The authors used large audience discussions as well as smaller focus groups following their play *Orchids*, which investigates a complex and controversial technique called pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD). PGD is used to decide whether embryos created through in vitro fertilization are viable. Canada currently has no legislation or policy guidelines on this

technique. The researchers wished to educate the public on the various scientific, clinical, ethical, and social issues involved with PGD. They wanted the audience to feel empathy for the actors and the difficult decisions involved in various scenarios and to leave the theatre with informed opinions on the issue. They also wanted the audience to understand “that their attendance at the play constituted participation in research and in a real policy exercise” (2009, 1476). Cox, Kazubowski-Houston, and Nisker found that there was a higher degree of interaction in the focus groups than in the large audience discussions. During the general audience discussions, many of those who spoke identified as “experts” of some kind and presented their arguments in such a way that those with less expertise were intimidated and silenced. The authors note that most of the audience members were highly educated and female. Therefore the audience was not as diverse as they would have liked. This was in spite of the fact that the performances were free and the researchers had advertised in community and popular magazines and newspapers as well as on the *Orchids* website and with various professional and advocacy groups. Participants in the focus groups were pleased with their experiences and said that they felt freer to express themselves in the smaller groups. One of the drawbacks of the focus groups was that “in some groups, a lack of self-consciousness and casual use of language led to more overt joking around and, occasionally, the emergence of ‘unpopular’, racist or other perspectives offensive to the facilitator or participants” (2009, 1478).

While most of the social scientists using performance research were optimistic about audience learning and reactions, Kazubowski-Houston (2010) felt that the compromises she was forced to make during the writing and rehearsals of *Hope*, her play with the Roma women of Poland, undermined her original goal of challenging the audiences on racist and gender-based stereotypes and inequalities. Many of the audience members focused more on the entertaining and theatrical techniques of the play than on the political issues Kazubowski-Houston hoped to illuminate. However, Kazubowski-Houston does note that she was unable to carry out formal post-performance discussions with the audiences because the Roma women objected, fearing that they would be at risk (189).

The NSL project will not use either the Forum Theatre or Legislative models. Our methods for audience engagement and evaluation will be

similar to those of the health performance studies and will include observation of audience responses as recorded with field notes during the performance, audiotaped large group audience discussions and smaller focus group discussions following the performance, and a survey that will be handed to the audience as they enter the theatre.

I asked NSL members for their views on audience composition and engagement. NSL members hope for a diverse audience. Ideally NSL would prefer that the audience be mixed in terms of its demographics and experiences. For example, one member commented:

My ideal audience would be ten percent other homeless people. Ten percent low-income people. Just all the way up to Milobar [the mayor of Kamloops]. So that there were people there who had the full range of experiences, people there who could actually do things financially to effect some change.

There were concerns about “not wanting to preach to the converted” as well as not wanting the entire audience to be the “typical audience for mainstream theatre in Kamloops . . . the fifty year old female teacher.” Another NSL member said that we need to talk about these issues very early on in a person’s education and so she felt that she would like to see high school kids attend the play.

The various goals for audience reaction and engagement with the play and planned discussions included: changing people’s perceptions of the homeless and challenging the status quo; building empathy and connecting with the audience on many different emotional levels; and mobilizing audience members to take action and become involved with the issue of homelessness in their community.

Most NSL members feel that they have a very good idea as to what the average Kamloopsian thinks about members of the homeless population. Some have already had conversations with members of the public:

I recently had a conversation with a woman who I would consider to be upper-middle class. She was a senior citizen, quite comfortable in her lifestyle . . . and she doesn’t

understand why homeless people or poor people need to eat every day. Like eat three meals a day.

Others think that we all have a hard time letting go of the stereotypes:

I would love it if there were people who came with solid pre-conceived ideas of how those people are all just lazy drug addicts and they should know better and who come away going “Oh.”

. . . people just picture the one type of person, you know, the one person—the street entrenched guy that has got his hat out on the sidewalk and that guy needs help for sure. But we are talking about a much bigger issue than that.

In addition, most NSL members believe that the average member of the public is in denial about the role of luck in a person’s life and how easy it often is to slide into poverty:

I hope that we’ll have liberal people that come to it and come away with “I had no idea how easy it was to fall into that situation”. . . Because I think most of us who aren’t homeless think that we are pretty safe from that. Nothing that serious is ever going to happen to me. But I also, I think we will discover that most of those people who were homeless felt the same way before they got there.

Changing people’s perceptions and their stereotypes about homelessness is not easy, but NSL members believe that the format of the play, which is so different from a media-driven “three minute elevator pitch,” will be capable of engaging the public much more deeply emotionally and intellectually. As one member explains:

This is a complex problem, right? There’s no one, single right answer and people need to understand that it is complicated. So this seems like the perfect way to deliver the messages really clearly. It’s difficult to deliver it clearly

because there are so many facets to it, right? . . . Hopefully we connect with them at a lot of different levels. I would like to see them laugh and cry and be in shock and be amazed and be comforted at different points. Because that's life and hopefully we can portray what life is like for these people. So when you journey through their life you would see, yes there's some levity, there's some fun. They have a social network. They are hilarious. They tell great jokes, but they have also gone through these things that I've never heard of anyone going through before, right? That kind of shock and then hopefully some relateability where they see that these people are just like their son, their cousin, and their aunt. It touches them in a deep way that makes them cry hopefully. Something like that.

If the play can manage to build empathy and educate the audience, will it also be able to mobilize audience members into advocating for social change? One member felt that the audience experience could result in certain individuals taking “incremental steps”:

Yes, that would be ideal, for there to be a motivation for them to advocate for what they see as being necessary for change. Even if we don't get to the stage where they feel motivated to really be involved. Provided they are moved from being indifferent to being open to learning more. I think that is huge. Once they've had the experience of seeing sort of first hand, what these participants have lived through, whatever they chose to express. From there, if they are open to learning more about what the issues are and what the challenges are, then from there I feel like we are in a good position to be able to—people can guide themselves into an area where they feel it's appropriate for them to make a change. If they do want to start volunteering more or if they want to advocate more or if they want to donate more. Whatever the case may be.

Other NSL members admitted that since our own group had no idea what the “call to action” would look like, it wasn’t realistic to expect mobilization on top of awareness:

I guess I’m a bit of a control freak in that I feel you have to have a plan. So I feel like if we expected mobilization then we should have a clear and concise idea of what that mobilization should look like. I don’t feel like we do, or maybe can, or should.

Lastly, one NSL member argued that the size of Kamloops may be helpful in both audience or public awareness and mobilization:

I see the same people on the street over and over again. On the North Shore and Downtown. The audience members will see some of the performers in their daily lives after the performance is over. This may have an impact. This wouldn’t happen in a big city. If you saw the play in Vancouver and lived in, say, Shaughnessy, would you ever see any of the performers again?

Social Justice and Social Change

Linked to the goal of mobilizing audience members is the ideal of social justice and/or social change. When I asked the question “How important is the issue of social justice or social/societal change to you,” I did not define the terms. I let each member in the group elaborate on what this meant to them and, then, how important this was as an expression of their efforts in the project. Every single member told me that this was “majorly important,” “absolutely pivotal,” or “very central to my life.” Homelessness is a huge issue, and quite rightly one member stated that “there’s no changing this issue without complete re-evaluation throughout society.” However, every NSL member acknowledged that there were limitations to what we could expect to accomplish with the project: “How much social justice can you put on the table at one sitting?” Most members felt that “individual

change” was more realistic and that it was possible on three levels: the project would change us (the NSL members),⁸ the homeless or recently housed participants, and some of the audience members. Beyond that, it was thought possible that the project could be an important first step to further grassroots community projects of a collaborative and activist nature. We’re on the “right track,” said one NSL member.

Conclusion

The No Straight Lines initiative on homelessness in the city of Kamloops is a collaborative work in process—one that has emerged through the discussions and planning efforts of academics, community workers, and artist/activists and will continue with the added participation of unknown members of the homeless or recently housed population. This is a project that takes group members well out of their comfort levels and into the “unknown” on a number of levels. Interviews with NSL members highlight personal and group goals as well as their excitement and concerns for their project. Three of Dubinsky’s frameworks for collaboration (self-interested, normative, and mimetic) help explain why certain individuals came together to work on this project and why the project has been designed in a particular manner. The NSL project is in very early stages and the group has much to learn from previous research involving similar methodologies. Both sectors of popular theatre, as identified by Filewod, are important for this fledgling project. Collective collaborations, in terms of creativity, knowledge creation, and analysis, are viewed as crucial to the group. Individual empowerment and public/community empathy and engagement are key objectives. The literature from theatrical studies and the social sciences reveals that projects similar to the one proposed by NSL have strengths and weaknesses. On the positive side, the performances (and the processes involved in collaboration) do seem to lead to a greater awareness for many participants and audience members. From an awareness and empowerment perspective, many researchers believe that their projects enabled both the participants and audiences to examine their issues as well as their beliefs and to re-evaluate aspects of their life experiences. Some researchers also believed that participants and/or audiences showed signs of mobilizing for concrete changes. On the negative side,

power struggles between participants in the collective process may lead to serious problems, the researchers may find themselves more “politically motivated” than their disadvantaged participants, audiences may not be as diverse as anticipated, they might not “catch” intended messages, and they may not express the empathy or the learning hoped for in large group discussions and smaller focus groups.

Epilogue

Reflections from the Field: Inside the Rehearsal Room

Rehearsals commenced in the spring of 2014. A small theatre in a poor area of Kamloops was chosen as the venue. Our “getting to know you” stage of the project took place in a rather tiny front room of the building, which shared its space with a Sushi restaurant. Prior to the first rehearsal, an important issue needed to be negotiated between me and one of the theatre professors as well as one of the front-line workers. There was a serious hiccup in our self-interested collaboration. Concerns were raised about the possibility of the “non-homeless” (i.e., academics and support workers) outnumbering the homeless participants during the rehearsal process. From the point of view of the theatre professor and front-line worker, the number of people within the rehearsal room should be as small and intimate as possible. However, I had already specified on grant applications and in the ethics paperwork that I would be at most, if not all, of the rehearsals and that two “service learning” students would accompany me. We would be participant observers—participating in all disclosures and activities and documenting the process through a sociological lens. One of the English Literature professors also had a service learning student who would act as a scribe to the group. I wondered about the lack of communication between this colleague and me. However, I was also reminded of Lunde, Heggen, and Strand’s (2012) research on conflicts between disciplinary and epistemic styles and cultures. In addition, although this particular theatre professor was part of the NSL from the beginning and had been to all the meetings, she was not involved in the lengthy ethics board process and probably had no idea as to what had been signed off on or the design of the complete project. In the end, I agreed to rotate the

Reflections from the Field – Inside the Rehearsal Room

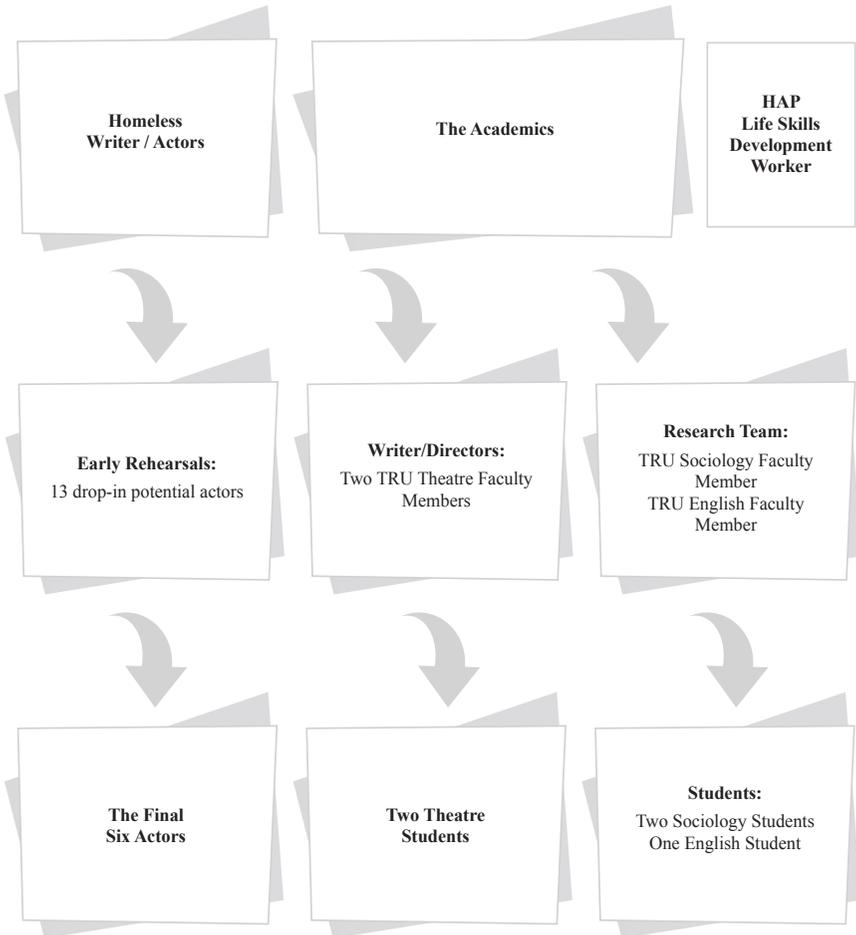


FIGURE 3.3. Theatre Project Network 2 by Dawn Farough. Design by Moneca Jantzen, Daily Designz.

students so that one less person would be in the room at all times. The English Literature professor said that she would not come to rehearsals. I knew from my previous interviews that the artist/activists had planned on attending rehearsals as well, but this was no longer to be the case. They

were forced to volunteer in other areas of the project. In the end, we began with approximately ten homeless or recently housed participants and six academics/students/service workers in the rehearsal room. From my perspective, the homeless participants were enjoying the attention from the rest of us and expressed considerable curiosity about our lives and the project. When I explained that I would be taking notes (as would the students), none of the participants complained or showed any discomfort.

The academics and support people arrived early for each rehearsal and then the participants started to roll in. Some were always on time while others were chronically late. NSL had rules about attendance and arriving on time for the participants, who are being paid for their efforts, and the theatre faculty patiently reviewed the rules in every session. We always began with the telling of our “stories,” and this took several of our four-hour sessions to complete. I was amazed at the length of some of the stories. I expected the participants to be somewhat shy or reticent. This is the case for only a small minority; most of our participants loved to talk and had no trouble taking centre stage for as long as possible. The stories varied, but there were the expected similarities: dysfunctional childhoods involving foster care, abuse, and neglect; addictions to drugs and alcohol; and few support systems outside of the homeless community and sub-culture. Some participants were temporarily housed but feeling nervous that they would be back on the street eventually. Others were “camping.” The men outnumbered the women. One of the women worried that the men would judge her and consider her story “not good enough.” The men countered her fears, declaring that they could not imagine being pregnant or having to look after children while living on the street. However, at least two of the men declared that the social service system favoured women and children over men. Everyone in the room was required to disclose their personal history, and the participants asked questions if they felt that something might be missing. Some of the academics and students apologized about their privileged lives, and the participants called them on that—they wanted details, not apologies.

I reflected on the arguments in political theatre and the social sciences about using theatre as a method to allow for a critical self-reflection and consciousness raising that challenges mainstream thinking and common-sense knowledge. Through theatre, disadvantaged people become

less submissive; they start to advocate and envision a different kind of democracy. I quickly discovered the paternalism behind Boal-inspired theatre methodology. The homeless were neither submissive nor lacking in a critical social consciousness. I noted in my reflective journal:

Three of the homeless men are already very critical of mainstream society; they discuss the divisions between the poor, the middle-class and the wealthy, analyze racism and the lack of spirituality in mainstream society, and comment on the average Canadian's total disregard for the environment. They seem more politically aware than the majority of my sociology students. They are also very critical of their own families. Ironically, their family backgrounds, to my way of thinking, seem to be less abusive than that of the average participant in the group. Rather than tales of foster care, physical abuse and rape; they talk about family members judging them or not being able to understand their lifestyles. All three have battled addictions. Their identities are very strongly tied to a certain way of life which they see as superior to that of the mainstream. They are devoted champions of the homeless and "would never want to become like the rich people they know."

I wonder if this process will simply confirm their already firm ideas about mainstream society and their place within it, or will further self-reflection ensue? Certainly there is leadership in the homeless community and subculture. The homeless population in Kamloops have their own leaders and champions—those like "Mike," who made his rounds daily, talking to all his homeless friends, giving them advice, and telling the social service workers about the individuals he thinks may be in jeopardy. Another individual I will call "Ian" proudly informed us that he was the mayor of the tent city in Edmonton, that his personal hero was Jack Layton, and that his goal in Kamloops was to develop another tent city. The NSL collaboration is supposed to support social change, and I am reminded that all the NSL members told me that the issue of social justice or societal change was majorly important to them. However, it is becoming apparent to me that

social change may look very different to Mike and Ian than it does to the majority of NSL members.

Conceptualizing power and analyzing inequalities is a core issue for sociologists. The macro-level or grand theories of Marx, Weber, and feminist theorists present a “power-over” viewpoint wherein power comes from a capitalist class, elites, or patriarchy. The homeless are typically understood as individuals at the bottom of the class hierarchy in any capitalist economy. On the other hand, sociological research derived from the symbolic interactionist tradition, or from the work of Foucault, views power as interactive, relational, and situational. My fieldwork presented different types of power struggles between my research subjects, and in all of these, the homeless actors utilized power. In examining the power struggles between the actors as well as between the theatre faculty and the actors, it was obvious that I needed to think about how the homeless actors wielded and performed power on an interactional and micro-level. One of the earliest sociologists stressing the interdependence and relational aspects of power is Norman Elias. Elias argues:

In so far as we are more dependent on others than they are on us, they have power over us, whether we have become dependent on them by their use of naked force or by our need to be loved, our need for money, healing, status, a career, or simply excitement. (cited in Dunning and Hughes 2013, 66)

NSL was extremely dependent on the homeless actors. There would be no play or research project without them. We had spent a lot of time and effort in planning the project, but we were asking a lot from people who were either currently homeless or recently (and marginally) housed. Individuals dropped out of the process for various reasons and we never really knew whether the play would become a reality. The collaborative efforts to generate a script took months, and during that time there were numerous power struggles—most of them between the actors themselves. Initially, the power struggles were based on who might have the most deserving story and who really shouldn’t be there. For example, one actor had a problem with another actor because this individual was recently housed. Later, a major

issue emerged around race. An Aboriginal actor told another that as far as he/she was concerned, she/he wasn't a real Indian. The animosity between the two of them threatened the collective creation process to the extent that a social service agency was called in to perform a healing and conflict resolution circle. Their efforts were appreciated but the conflict was not resolved. Discussion followed as to whether one of the actors should be voted out of the group. In the end, this did not happen.

Other conflicts were caused by differences in social and cultural capital. One of the actors had increased her/his social capital. By hanging around with social service providers, increasing her/his level of education, and applying for work positions within the social service sector, she/he had greatly increased networking capacities. Unfortunately, all of this individual's positions to date were temporary and lacking in long-term job security. She/he was often homeless between jobs and forced to "couch surf." She/he also had to deal with the fact that fellow actors often made fun of those in the group they thought were trying too hard to get ahead. I witnessed a conversation between this individual and another actor where her/his social work ambitions were gently mocked: Actor 1: "I'm trying to be in social work, why should I work at 7 Eleven?" Actor 2: "I can get you a job at A&W. I got compliments on my fries."

If we understand cultural capital more from the perspective of Bourdieu (1979), the emphasis is on how body language, linguistic styles, social skills, and tastes in food, fashion, entertainment, hobbies, etc., are associated with social class and embodied by all of us. We display our class positions with our bodies and in our interactions with others. We perform "class." In interactions where class positions are similar, people feel comfortable because the cultural capital is familiar and understandable. In interactions where class positions are different, people with lower cultural capital will feel uncomfortable and will likely not participate or will gain little from the interaction. All of the homeless actors were aware of how their "subculture" of homeless individuals differed from the mainstream and of how often people judged them for lacking the correct cultural capital. For example, an actor stated: "I always wear my best clothes and make-up when I'm in the welfare office so people will think I'm an advocate or something." Another actor referred to the Value Village as the "V&V Boutique" and

humorously informed me that “it’s where we dress for success.” Finally, a conversation among three of the actors is very revealing of how aware the homeless are of cultural capital differences but also of how changes in cultural capital can cause conflict within the homeless community: Actor 1: “The manners in the culture we’re in is definitely different from when you are higher upper.” Actor 2: “Yeah. But I’m still going to judge some guy who eats like a dog.” Actor 3: “If someone tells me to get educated, I’d be mad and tell them to F Off!” Actor 1: “I’ve been taking flak from outside this door. The people I’m with think—if you’re in theatre, you’re queer.”

What occurred on the interactional level always needs to be seen within the context of macro-level societal realities of homelessness. Lacking adequate shelter is exhausting. Individuals were not always able to choose their roommates and sometimes they really disliked them. One actor was kicked out of his/her facility due to a “hot piss test” (personal communication, June 25, 2014). Our actors often had health issues: problems with their teeth and problems with their medications. One of the actors was hospitalized just before the performances were to begin and we didn’t know whether she/he would be able to participate. There were mental health issues. Friends died and there was always talk of funerals. At the societal level, these were vulnerable and relatively powerless people compared to the majority of people in the community. On the micro-stage however, our actors were incredibly strong people who understood the interdependency of the play and research project. Furthermore, since the play was about homelessness, the actors felt that they were the experts and as a result were very invested in their stories and what the play should be communicating to the public.

How was the local university (TRU) viewed by the homeless actors and the community partners? For many Kamloopsians, the university has an elitist image, and I’ve heard community members throughout the years refer to their university as a somewhat inaccessible place up the hill with inadequate and expensive parking. Upon returning home from one day in the “field,” I received an e-mail from the research office at TRU inviting me to a champagne and cheese party. The academics in NSL are part of a successful cohort of TRU academics who have been awarded a large grant. The e-mail asks me to extend the invitation to the community partners

involved in our research project. I wonder how the NSL front-line workers will perceive this invitation—homelessness in Kamloops and champagne and cheese at the university—and I am slightly embarrassed about the university’s elitist image. One of the service workers, in telling her story at rehearsal, made a point of saying that she enjoyed her Sociology classes at TRU but decided to become a social worker since she couldn’t stand the idea of being out of touch with people and “ivory tower” in her thinking and behaviour. On the other hand, one of the homeless actors had a very positive experience with a TRU program called Cope-Meca.⁹ Cope-Meca’s mission was to help alternative students with personal development, networking, and academic work. This homeless actor passionately believed that Cope-Meca was one of three institutional programs and services that had dramatically changed his life for the better. Unfortunately, TRU has now cut the Cope-Meca program.

The Performance

The play, *Home/Less/Mess*, opened to sold out audiences for five successful performances. The process leading up to the play was as messy as anticipated. After approximately one month, a core group of committed actors formed; however, some of the actors later left the group for various reasons. It seemed to take forever to complete the script, and there were power struggles—obvious “in your face” struggles between the actors and sometimes between the actors and social service workers, as well as more sophisticated and subtle ones between research partners. All of the actors dealt with anxiety due to the time commitments demanded from them, the emotional toll of telling and retelling their stories, conflicts with families and roommates, mourning lost friends and attending funerals, ongoing health issues, losing and gaining “homes” over the summer, and performing onstage. Many of us thought the play would never see the light of day. In the end, however, six actors managed their anxieties and completed the project and play. The script came together and audiences streamed into the less-than-posh Stage House Theatre located in a run-down area of the city. The vast majority of audience members remained for the question and answer period after the play and over 300 completed the surveys.

Support for the Actors and the Play

BC Interior Community Foundation, United Way,
Kamloops Art Council, Thompson Rivers University,
TRU Actors Workshop Theatre, Project X, Western Canada Theatre

Food Donors

24 restaurants, Two churches, Kamloops Food Bank,
Daybreak Rotary Club, New Life Mission, Ask Wellness Society,
Royal Inland Hospital Foundation, Individual Volunteers

Art Auction and Fundraiser

26 individuals from the community, 1 grocery store, 1 meat store,
3 restaurants, 2 pharmacies, 1 art gallery, 1 dance company,
1 sports team, 1 design company, 1 catering company, 2 theatre
companies, TRU Culinary Arts, Kamloops Symphony Orchestra,
Walmart, The Royal Inland Hospital

FIGURE 3.4. Outside the Rehearsal Hall: Sponsors, Donors, and Supporters.

What kind of learning experience was this for the actors and the audience? Were the actors “empowered” and did audience members experience empathy, education, and the necessary motivation for engagement? Early interviews with the actors reveal that all gained something from the experience, whether it was in the creative process and the joy of performing; a therapeutic and cathartic release in telling their stories; an educational and leadership capacity from sharing ideas and insights about homelessness; interactional skills gained from socializing with others and learning tolerance; or the development of better communication skills, more self-awareness, or self-confidence. As for the audience, in some ways, it was not as diverse as we had hoped—there were more women than men and university-educated folks were over-represented in comparison to the general population—but on the other hand, there was more diversity in age and income levels than that commonly found in theatre audiences. Typically, gender, income, level of education, and age are important variables in predicting audience attendance in theatre and other performing

arts. In Canada, women, and those with higher incomes and educational credentials, are more likely to attend than other groups (Hill Strategies Research Inc. 2003). The audience for *Home/Less/Mess* differed in that the largest category of attendees reported an annual household income before taxes of less than \$25,000. However, the second largest category of attendees reported an annual household income of \$100,000+. While some members of the audience were well aware of the issues of homelessness before seeing the play, it turned out that we were not just preaching to the converted. Many audience members reported that the play made them more aware of the issues, provided insight into the lives of the homeless, and helped them respect and feel connected to homeless individuals.¹⁰ They admired the actors and used adjectives such as “amazing,” “open,” “honest,” “brave,” and “passionate” to describe them. They felt that the play was important for the community, and for the first time, many understood the difficulties homeless people have in negotiating impersonal, rigid, and complex government bureaucracies. As well, although most respondents cited affordable housing, increased funding, and a restructuring of the “system” as the primary solutions to the problem of homelessness, a significant number argued that the community needed to “get involved.” Some promised to be personally involved in the fight to end homelessness. We need, argued one audience member, to work on “developing a sense of responsibility for each other.” Many audience members ended the survey with a “thank-you” to the participants and organizers of the project and play, along with a plea “to do it again” (see Chapter 7: Conclusion on the broader significance of production and performances).

NOTES

- 1 A transdisciplinary approach is the only form that clearly breaks down and transcends disciplinary boundaries. Academic collaboration becomes a process that generates research questions, theoretical, and methodological frameworks unique to the research project. In a multidisciplinary collaboration, researchers work together periodically, but they maintain their own disciplinary boundaries and often publish in their own journals. Finally, interdisciplinary research projects are those where knowledge is shared and links are made between the various disciplines in order to understand the topic under investigation (Brock University 2015; Harvard University 2015; Stember in Jensenius 2012, Washington University School of Medicine 2015).

- 2 For an analysis of the multidisciplinary collaboration during the rehearsal process, see Farough (2016).
- 3 Definitions of popular theatre vary. Filewod defines popular theatre as theatre which uses methods that are participatory in nature and directed toward community activism (2011). Errington (in Conrad 2009) sees popular theatre as “issues-based, socially critical, or critically reflective drama” (174).
- 4 The project will be documented with the use of ethnography. Ethnography, in the classical sense, involves extensive fieldwork using participant observation. The researcher participates with the group she/he is researching and “observes,” supplementing written field notes with methods such as formal and informal interviewing, document collecting, surveying, filming, etc. (Madden 2010). The project will involve an ethnography of the process of collective creation with the homeless in the workshops and rehearsals, the actual performances, audience reaction to the performances, and possibly a follow-up with the homeless participants.
- 5 Diamond (2007) explains that as the oppressors come from the same living community as the oppressed and their behaviour (like that of the oppressed) needs to be challenged and changed, his work also “makes space to investigate the fears, desires and motivations of the oppressor” (38).
- 6 Public sociology is defined as “sociology done as a partnership where sociologists and public organizations and interest groups each bring their own agenda and then negotiate the actual direction that research will take. . . . Sociology which reaches beyond its own disciplinary boundaries to involve the larger community in public discussions about the nature of society, its values, and any gap between what society promises its members and what it delivers” (Burawoy 2004, 7).
- 7 The women changed their minds several times, but in the end their concern about what the other Roma in their community would think of them was the deciding factor. They “did not want to make a laughingstock out of themselves in front of other Roma” (Kazubowski-Houston 2010, 72–73).
- 8 Many of us realize that we are “pretty ignorant about the homeless population and their experiences and why they are where they are and that they are not all the same” (NSL member).
- 9 The Cope (Career Orientation and Personal Empowerment) Program, developed for women, merged with the Meca (Men’s Education and Career Alternatives) Program at TRU in 1998 (Schmiedl 2015).
- 10 For a full analysis of the audience survey results, see Farough (2016).

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