The Power of Personal Stories: Building Resilience Through Story-Telling in a Safe Space

Amy Lee, Hong Kong Metropolitan University, Hong Kong SAR

The Kyoto Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2022
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract
The prolonged global pandemic forces much of daily operations to retreat into the domestic space (i.e. work from home) and students to learn in their home instead of going back to the school. Numerous reports have shown increased stress levels in family members, including the working mother who is burdened with work from home arrangements and the care of the children who are suddenly all staying at home. Even for young people who are "stuck" at home, the learning experience has been much changed and they are struggling to meet the academic requirements with much less support from the teachers and peers. Being in the same space with family members for a sustained period of time during such a stressful social situation have added challenges to emotional health. Outside-classroom or non-academic experience during this time may facilitate stress-free connection among young people to help them understand their emotions better and to find support through sharing other peoples' stories. This presentation is a report on the teaching and learning project conducted from 2020 at a Hong Kong university. Employing Playback Theatre techniques, the project provided a means for young people to reflect on their own lives and to connect with various groups of people beyond their usual circle. Two years on, students have established solid connection among themselves and have reached out to the community to facilitate understanding and interaction with different people.

Keywords: Playback Theatre, Personal Stories, Connectedness, Dramatic Language, Safe Space

Introduction

When the proposal for this article was written, many Hong Kong people were still waiting for the lifting of some anti-covid measures concerning travel. I am happy to say that now travelling from and returning to Hong Kong has become more convenient and this has been a much awaited piece of good news to most Hong Kong people. For almost three years, the pandemic had affected many aspects of life globally, changing our daily behaviour, and requiring careful adaptation to the "new normal". In Hong Kong, there were phases when work had to be conducted from home, school activities were all moved online when possible and students stayed at home to learn looking at their monitors. Although "home" is always considered our refuge, the forced return to the domestic space did not promote a sense of well-being for all, surveys conducted during this period reflected that people's stress level increased by more than 25%, and the percentage of felt anxiety was over 40% (Zhao 2020: 433). The need to address this situation is clear, although Hong Kong, like many other global cities in the world, is resuming a kind of normality.

Although I use the pandemic and the increased stress level among people as the beginning of this presentation, its content is meaningful not only in the context of the pandemic. In 2020 my research team obtained internal funding from a university in Hong Kong to conduct a research project to provide a learning experience for undergraduate students using Playback Theatre techniques, specifically to enhance self-understanding, self-esteem, and further to outreach into the community to engage members of the disabled community. Our plan started in 2019, the application for funding was submitted at the beginning of 2020, and we got the funding in late June 2020. By the time we started the training of university students recruited for this project, all teaching and learning activities were moved online, and it was very difficult to get permission for face-to-face activities that involved a gathering of people, even on campus.

The project team worked hard to find different ways to complete the 30-hour training using different methods. There were 16 girls in the group, and finally most of them received enough hours of training to be able to move on to the next stage – conducting showcase/performance to peers and members of the community. The second phase of the project involved bringing the group to disabled communities, and invited members of the disabled community including deaf people and those with visual impairment. This phase was a very challenging but immensely fulfilling experience as the university students not only performed for them, but invited them to be members of the performing group, and received the same Playback Theatre basic training, before the whole inclusive group presented showcase and performed for an inclusive audience. The main components of the project were completed in August, and the project team presented a 2-day sharing of the findings and a concluding performance to the public on 3-4 September 2022, at the Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre.

This paper refers to our experience in the project, to reflect on what personal stories can do for/to us, if told and shared in a safe space, not as an "immediate solution" to stressful situations such as the pandemic, but as a long-term practice or even a built-in component in our education system. In the following, I will reflect on the idea of a "safe space" in the context of Playback Theatre practice, and how personal stories being shared in such space may have a positive effect on self-understanding, self-esteem, and most importantly, in building connections among people. The presentation will end with some feedback from participants about what this experience has meant to them. It is hoped that the sharing of

these outcomes may arouse more interest in creatively using personal stories to enhance personal well-being, not only in times of social disruption, but also as part of our routine mental health assurance.

Playback Theatre and Safe Space

Playback Theatre was created in 1975 by Jonathan Fox, who was a therapist and a theatre performer in New York. This is an improvised form of theatre which has no script, but has a range of dramatic forms for representation of personal stories shared by the audience. Fox (2008) feels that this dramatic form can encourage healing at both personal and communal levels. He gives three reasons:

> First playback theatre is gentle in its approach as the individual does not have to tell any more than what is comfortable to them. Second, playback theatre's "aesthetic sensibility" to what the audience member has shared then lets the actors capture the many layers of the story, and lastly, one person's story can make a connection to many other people within the community. (Saud 2020: 183)

The playback theatre group contains a conductor who acts as the bridge of communication between the actors and the audience, and who is also in charge of how the stories are shared and to a large extent, interpreted. There are some actors in the group, as well as members who play the music and prepare the simple props. The conductor will host the performance by leading the audience to share their personal stories around a certain theme. After each sharing, whether long or short, the conductor will address the playback theatre actors on the stage and repeat the stories in an organised manner, as well as naming the theatre form that the actors will use to present that story.

After a few short form "playbacks", the already warmed up audience will be invited to come to the stage and be interviewed by the conductor to share more detailed personal stories. The audience member who shares his/her stories can choose one of the actors to play himself/herself, and after the brief interview, the conductor will repeat the detailed story to the actors and again name the theatre form to be used. During the performance, the teller of the story will sit at the stage and watch, until the end of the performance when the conductor will ask for his/her feedback on the performance. In one performance, there will be a few of these detailed personal sharing before the show is concluded with the actors' "summary" of the events, feelings, observations and thoughts that had taken place in the performance. As this brief description of the process of playback theatre reflects, the success of the performance relies on the willingness of the audience to share their stories, as well as the quality of engagement that the troupe is capable of. Trust between the audience and the troupe is an essential component.

Safety in the playback theatre space is established by this trust. This is how playback theatre is being described by a professor at the Baylor College of Medicine, (Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences) where playback theatre experience is offered as part of a first-year elective course entitled "the Compassion and the Art of Medicine": "The troupe works to create an environment based on trust where everyone feels safe and comfortable enough to tell a story from their lives – honoring and respecting tellers' experiences no matter how silly, sad, joyful, or embarrassing they may be" (Salas et al. 2013). Indeed, without the establishment of trust, it is impossible for members of the audience to relate their own experiences, especially when those experiences may remind them of emotions such as

embarrassment, disappointment, pain, anger, and sadness. I have witnessed in the numerous showcases presented by our team that personal stories from members of the audience shared through the playback theatre forms, often elicited tears of identification, sympathy and other personal and mixed emotions from members of the audience.

Given the unique nature of playback theatre, and the perceived therapeutic effects that it may have, issues of safety have been a topic of concern and discussion. Dramatherapists note that they "aim to create a safe space for the emergence of personal story and the creation of an effective therapeutic relationship" (Nash and Rowe 2001: 18), and in many ways playback theatre can be seen as challenging the creation of such a safe space. The personal is shared in the open, and moreover repeated in different forms – the story-tellers' words, the conductor giving it a shape as instructions to the actors, and the actors presenting that in a playback theatre form, and finally the episode is also summarised in the concluding session before the end of the performance. If audiences have come out of this playback theatre experience feeling that some kind of therapeutic effects have been achieved, what has happened in the process of the playback theatre, so that such seemingly dangerous exposures of the personal can be transformed into a safe (and even therapeutic for some) experience? Nash and Rowe called it "playing safely with danger", when they commented that there were actually three "containing devices" of playback theatre practice to maintain psychological safety.

The Three Containing Devices – "Playing Safely with Danger"

The first containing device mentioned by Nash and Rowe is "the ensemble", the group of playback theatre actors who not only work together, but have "close, deeply co-operative and sustained relationships". This comes from the way rehearsals are conducted:

> [T]he playback form is used to tell and re-tell the company members' own stories and a great deal of time is spent on addressing the group's internal dynamics and relationships. This essential, though sometimes painful, process enables the conditions for effective performance, sensitising the actors to each other and crucially, to the audience. (Nash and Rowe 2001: 19)

Nash and Rowe's depiction of the rehearsal and how it strengthens the bond among members of the troupe as well as enhance their sensitivity towards their own and other people's emotions confirms what I witness among the undergraduate students and their connection with the disabled players joining the team. Despite the COVID situation, or perhaps because of the COVID situation, the challenging conditions during the training period and the rehearsals have consolidated the group spirit, so much so that two years after their initial training, when they rehearsed for the project sharing in September 2022, they warmed up very quickly and were able to deliver a smooth and well-formed inclusive performance in a relatively short time.

The second containing device is "the discipline of the form". Nash and Rowe mentioned that the International Playback Theatre Conference in 1999 showed that different groups from different cultures may have their styles of presentation, but the basic structure of a playback theatre performance was clearly stable. They called the playback theatre performance a "ritualised event" because "the beginnings and endings of enactments are clearly marked and the reception of the tellers' story is well defined" (Nash and Rowe 2001: 20). Despite the fact that there is no script and the performance depends very much on the stories shared by

members of the audience, the stable forms as well as the basic structure of a playback theatre performance reduces the sense of chaos, and contains the experience in the clear structure.

As seen in the September presentation, members of the audience were new to the theatre form and they freely shared what they experienced. Every time a story was heard, the conductor would repeat the episode in a structured manner and suggested the form to be used to the actors. Because of the stability of these forms, the actors (in this case university students, visually impaired members and deaf members all together) got the cue immediately and translated the story into the dramatic form, without any discussion or inquiry before they enacted the story. The ability to do so depends on their knowledge, skill and experience with the playback theatre forms, but also on the strength of mutual understanding and trust that had been established in their previous collaboration with each other.

The third containing device is "the role of the conductor". Nash and Rowe depicted the conductor's role as "managing the relationship between the stage and the auditorium" (Nash and Rowe 2001: 20). Despite the seemingly blurred boundaries between different spaces, between different groups of people in the setting, the conductor maintains the boundaries through her verbal cues during the transitional moments. As seen in our inclusive playback theatre performance in September 2022, the conductor was managing the flow of the progressive stages of the performance – first of all by introducing the sign language interpreters and their positioning during the performance. This conductor had also worked with the inclusive group for more than 2 years, and she was well aware of the personalities, the style of performance and the relationships of the group and therefore managed the group very well. On top of that, she knew when to approach the audience and the safe distance that she could keep with different members of the audience.

Safety through the Authenticity of the Actors

I agree with Nash and Rowe that the three containing devices they described have the power to frame the playback theatre experience and offer the audience a stable and therefore safe space for them to share personal stories. From my experience, I would also want to suggest that the beginning and the ending of each performance, when the actors introduce themselves and retell important takeaways from the performance respectively, are also important components in constructing a safe space for all who attend the performance. I refer to this factor as *the authenticity of the actors* – as there is no script, these actors present themselves as themselves, in a way exposing their vulnerabilities to the audience. I see this as an invitation to the audience to similarly allow their vulnerabilities be shared and seen by all who are present. The final session when the actors one by one steps out and tells the audience what has happened in the performance by saying "I remember …" from all the sharings in the performance, is a wonderful consolidation of the meaning of the experience, as well as a strong confirmation of the equal authenticity that actors share with the audience.

Conclusion: Sounds that Link Two Worlds

I would like to conclude this paper with a poem that was created by a blind participant in our group. For two years, 70-year old Peter worked with the students and other members of the disabled community in the training, in the rehearsals and the performances. He actively participated in the learning experience, asked a lot of questions, and also made many suggestions. He told the team that he thoroughly enjoyed the experience, and the opportunity to work closely with such different people in the group. At the end of the last performance

before the showcase, he prepared a gift for every member of the group, a poem that he created, in braille, etched on a small wooden tablet. The conductor received the same poem, but in a hand-made tapestry with the braille attached.

The poem is created in Chinese, and I have taken the liberty to translate it into English. I may not be able to capture the full emotions of the poem, but here it is, entitled "Sounds that Link Two Worlds":

Sounds that link two worlds
Stories that link two worlds
Friendship that links two worlds
Hearts that link two worlds

Figure 1: A handcraft gift from participants to the conductor.

For Peter, who is blind, his experience with the inclusive playback theatre training and performance was mainly an experience with sounds. But the sounds bring him into the world of the other members, and bring other members into his world too. Looking back, these two years' inclusive Playback Theatre project truly "provide[s] a safe space for telling and listening to each other's stories and developing more complex narratives and more nuanced understanding of identity" (Cohen 2004:6).

References

Cohen, C. (2004). *Creative Approaches to Reconciliation.* Boston: Brandeis University.

Nash, S., & Rowe, N. (2001). Safety, Danger and Playback Theatre. *Dramatherapy*, 22 (3) 18-20.

Salas, R., Steele, K., Lin, A. et al. (2013). Playback Theatre as a Tool to Enhance Communication in Medical Education. *Medical Education Online, 18*(1). doi:10.3402/meo.v18i0.22622

Saud, N. B. (2016). Playback Theatre: An Approach to Community Reconciliation in Nepal. *Proceedings 2016: Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya*, 181-196.

Zhao, S. Z., Wong, J.Y.H., Luk T.T. et al. (2020). Mental Health Crisis Under Covid-19 Pandemic in Hong Kong, China. *International Journal of Infectious Diseases*, *100*, 431-433. doi: 10.1016/j.ijid.2020.09.03

Contact email: awslee@hkmu.edu.hk