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**DANGEROUS TEACHING:
AN APPROACH TO DIFFICULT LEARNING IN THE THEATRE CLASSROOM**

by

Tei Ellgen

**A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Teaching**

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

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Capstone Project Facilitator: Julianne Scullen
Content Expert: Kevin Werner Hohlstein

DEDICATION

To my Mom and Dad for your continued support during this process, as well as my friends who cheered me on along the way. Thank you to my professors and my content expert for giving me the reassurance that I needed to push forward with confidence.

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CHAPTER ONE

Background

A Personal Introduction to Social Justice Theatre

In 2016, I made a decision that would alter the course of my life forever: I declared my major in Theatre Arts. There would be many days following this decision where I would question my choice, frequently fighting off the monologue in my head that insisted, *you made a mistake!* Most of my trepidation came from how I believed my parents would react, though Norwegians seldom outwardly show their distaste, it can be transmitted through wavelengths, *so* in hopes of saving myself, I opted to co-major in Education. I loved theatre, but I'd never thought of myself as a teacher. The teachers in my family knew that they wanted to teach, I wasn't so sure of myself.

That is until the day I was introduced to Making Waves, a small social justice theatre troupe operating on campus. This group of people would impact my view of education indefinitely. Together, our troupe facilitated dialogues ranging from ableism to Islamophobia to appropriation to sexuality and gender. We interacted with police, college, high school, and younger students, adults with disabilities, and the list goes on. The content of our presentations garnered a lot of heat, which was what we wanted. We wanted people to start talking. As one of my favorite educators once told me, "Theatre isn't supposed to make you comfortable, it's supposed to make you think" (Tory Peterson, personal communication, 2020). The culmination of our efforts led us to the Detroit Theatre and Pedagogy Conference, where we presented in 2018. The conversations and experiences I had in Detroit solidified my involvement in social justice theatre and education.

I want to be completely transparent regarding my positionality before I go any further, as I think it gives some context to my thought process. To start, I am a fourth-generation American, most of my family came from Norway and Denmark. I grew up in two households, as my parents divorced when I

was just over a year old. My childhood was rocky, and I was constantly transferring to different schools due to moving, so I never really got comfortable in one school setting until later into my high school years. I did, however, get the opportunity to experience a wide array of educational settings and experiences, which helps me now in devising my own way of teaching. I am also a queer woman with two supportive parents, without whom I would have been unable to attend college, and who are also college graduates. In *Making Waves*, we often had conversations about our positionality and privileges. I believe that in order to enter your classroom as authentically *you*, you need to be aware of what privileges and biases you're bringing into it. I hope that sharing a bit about my positionality will help in understanding my approach to my research.

Change in a Safe Space

I have always been of the personal belief that art brings change, and art spaces facilitate the creation of change in the larger world. Art can bring forth discussion, can foster creative solution development and, most importantly, stimulate *changers*. In the times we and our students live in today, there is no better time to be fostering healthy discussion in the classroom. We live in the age of political unrest, racism, police violence, a pandemic, and the list continues to grow. So much has happened just in the past year, issues that cannot, and should not, be ignored. I believe that educators play a vital role in igniting a passion and interest in real world dialogues, but where do we start? The question I will be addressing in this paper is this: *How can high school educators create a safe space for difficult learning in a social justice theatre program?* What I mean to address reflects the intent of my research in how we, as educators, can find ways to approach issues such as racism, homophobia, police violence, our health, etc. with the students through theatre. My focus demographic in terms of age group is high school students, as this is the age group that I am most interested in teaching. The term *safe space* is one which you have undoubtedly heard, though its exact meaning can be interpreted differently depending on what setting you're using it in. In the context of my research, I will be defining a *safe space* as an environment that respects all viewpoints and experiences.

Over the years as a young future educator, I have worked with students of all ages, coming from extremely diverse experiences. Because of the diversity of my students, I would oftentimes come into settings where the idea of a safe space was new and/or not discussed openly in the classroom or the school at large. Even during my time in undergrad, I had to learn what a safe space was and what it meant in the context of a classroom. Never had I been made more aware of this concept than when I began my student teaching experience in the arts high school from which I'd graduated. I was ecstatic to be back in my old stomping grounds, even more so because I would be able to teach theatre in an environment that I had always hoped. Students auditioned for the art areas they wanted to study at this school, so I was really excited to get to work with passionate young theatre folk in an area in which I was also extremely passionate. I admit, I went into this experience with my *college student glasses* on. These students were about to graduate, ready to carry their artform into the wider world, have stimulating dialogues, and be changers in the art community, so I approached the class with these beliefs at the forefront of my mind. My own biases were shaken, however, one day during play rehearsal. My students were adapting their own modernized version of *12 Angry Men* by playwright Rose (1955), a project that took up the entire final class period. Part of this adaptation process was altering the characters so that they more closely resembled high school-aged students; the jury would be altered to be the school disciplinary committee. If you're unfamiliar with the original story, a brief synopsis is that a jury of diverse characters, in terms of viewpoints, is tasked with deciding the fate of a young, "inner-city", youth accused of murder. When my students approached the topic of the vilified teen, who is never shown in the original play, they threw around the idea of his race. The beginning of the adaptation process went really well, so I never imagined the kind of damage this topic would bring about. Once race was brought up, and my students started running through the script, I started to sense a lot of tension. This was a student-led class for the most part at this stage, so the expectation was that students could take breaks to adjust at any point in the reading, whether to pose a dialogue or question about the script. Still, they continued to read until the end, then one student left. The student was a young, black man and was very emotionally conscious of himself. I followed him out after a nonverbal "okay" from my cooperating teacher and found him crying in the

gallery. Through heavy sobs, I deciphered that he was struggling with the identity of the "unseen character" in the play. In the play, *his* character had to identify with the young man, but he was having an extremely difficult time identifying with a race outside of his own. He didn't want to mimic the understanding of someone else's experiences, but also didn't want to mimic the understanding of a white person's experience in the same position. Though this was a concern of his during the discussion of race, he hadn't mentioned it to his classmates, so it had boiled over into a meltdown. Something that might have seemed very minimal was actually an issue to this student because of his lived experience as a young, black man. This student would have more revelations like this one but, once we organized a class discussion regarding the students removing themselves from their characters, not removing their lived experiences from themselves, the process became much more open. There were boundaries that had to be addressed and crossed, and it was possible, even if the start wasn't great.

This experience may make some advocate against broaching such topics with students, but I believe in the contrary. It took a couple difficult, sometimes uncomfortable, conversations in order for my students to create an environment that was open and honest about race and theatre. These kinds of conversations are important for students to have, as they directly or indirectly relate to issues they're facing in the real world. In a broader sense, we all carry our own biases and lived experiences into our work as students and teachers. We are never free from these influences. Though we may all come from different backgrounds, *art* is universal. It is a language that predates any written one, widely translatable, adaptable to fit any setting. Theatre, then, is a language that communicates ideas, feelings, and issues that we may not be comfortable speaking about in a traditional sense.

Difficult Learning

In this paper, I will be using the term *difficult learning* frequently. I use this term to describe the approach of topics pertaining to current real-world issues that could evoke feelings from students of different lived experiences and biases. These could also be described as *triggering* concepts, but it's my theory that creating a safe environment/safe space for these learning experiences should allow for real emotions to come to the surface, not for students to be hurt in the process. Human emotion triggered by

issues relevant to our experiences shouldn't be invalidated, this is not what *difficult learning* is about. Our students should be able to show emotion in class, but open and honest dialogue concerning such topics, when applicable and with student consent, is equally as important in approaching socially-relevant theatre with them. Being able to engage in dialogues where emotions are at play is another factor in approaching my research question: *How can high school educators create a safe space for difficult learning in a social justice theatre program?*

Issues such as racism, homophobia, Islamophobia, global warming, socio-economic disparities, etc, are not always unknown to our students. Imagine that! We don't give our students enough credit in terms of assuming what they know and don't know. Of course, not all students will arrive in our classrooms with the same lived experiences or having walked the same path. There will be students who are unfamiliar with certain issues, either due to their separate lived experiences or lack of exposure to certain issues. While not being aware of issues not facing you or your 'perception bubble', as I refer to it, isn't inherently bad, it can stunt your understanding of the world around you. Being able to have difficult learning experiences can open students' eyes to more diverse perspectives, which is enriching both educationally and socially.

A concern I had approaching this topic was thinking about the student I mentioned earlier. I believe that broaching more challenging social issues is important, even though some subjects may be triggering to students. As I thought a bit more, I realized that the main reason this episode occurred, outside of the triggering subject matter, was the absence of a discussion revolving around adapting such an open-ended text in the first place. Students learned about the original text before they started their adaptation process, but they were also a group of young, diverse students adapting a work written in the 1950s by a white man. These were students who were also developing their own sense of identity in a school that was very conscious of social issues. They were afraid of being associated with their characters if their characters had different viewpoints than their own, which added tension to the experience. With these factors at play, adapting the script and expecting a meltdown not to happen seems unrealistic. Still, the students were able to redirect themselves and their adaptation experience by utilizing class time to

have difficult conversations about who *they* were, who their *characters* were, and why what happened in the context of the play matters in the modern world. It's as one of my favorite professors once told me, "Theatre isn't supposed to make you comfortable, it's supposed to make you think." (T. Peterson, personal communication, 2020).

Going Forward

The goal of this paper is to utilize references that run the gamut in order to address the question: How can high school educators create a safe space for difficult learning in a social justice theatre program? I will be looking at *methodologies* from various sources, as well as addressing issues of *bias* and the *history* of social justice theatre. The influence of real-world dialogues has been the foundation of social justice theatre (O'Connor, 2013), it would be impossible and uncondusive to my topic to not include in my research. We will use this as the starting block. The second step is addressing bias. In the context of this paper, I will be addressing not only bias in the classroom, but also as it appears in a theatre-specific educational setting. Bias is evident in all environments, even if it's subconscious, as we carry it everywhere (Kaufman, 2018). Knowing that we're starting with a discussion on the history of social justice theatre, the biases that will be addressed will extend from that which the students and teachers bring into the classroom and out further into outward biases and stereotypes. Acknowledging and understanding bias, where it comes from, and how it's transmitted can help us in understanding what needs to change and, potentially, how to make those changes. Lastly, I will focus on methodologies that align with integrating real-world dialogues and narratives into the theatre classroom. Furthermore I am addressing how real-world dialogues can be integrated into a theatre classroom, all of the resources I will be referencing have a focus in the arts and theatre. It is important that these resources link explicitly to a theatre education environment, as I am explicitly focusing on how these dialogues can be approached in a theatre classroom. These segments will form the makeup of the second chapter of this Capstone project.

My goal with the remainder of this project is to address how difficult dialogues and learning can be integrated into a theatre classroom. By addressing the history of social justice theatre, bias in theatre and general classrooms, and methodologies pertaining to integrating new directions and challenging

dialogues in theatre classrooms, I hope to create a concise narrative that includes diverse perspectives on this subject. I will say that my own assertion leans toward the idea that students are ready to learn and work with challenging dialogues, through theatre or otherwise. My hope is that the research I garner and present will reflect this idea, as I like to believe that the students of today will be *changers* in our society. I will leave this chapter off with a quote by the late Boggs (2014), a social activist and key figure in the Asian American Movement: We are the revolutionaries we have been waiting for.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Overview

In chapter one, I delved into the reasoning behind my research, the personal and professional factors that led me to choose my topic. In this chapter, I will begin by discussing social justice theatre, influential authors of the past and present, as well as the work of Tectonic Theater Project. I will then hone in on the barriers that limit teachers' abilities to approach social issues in the classroom, citing specific instances of school and parent interference. Lastly, I will explore ways in which we as educators can create a safe environment for student learning and how to approach social issues in our classrooms. Through the process of my research, I have found resources that reflect various perspectives regarding implementation of social issues and social justice awareness in classrooms. In turn, I have gleaned new insights into the process and by sharing the culmination of my research, I hope to answer my research question: *How can educators create a safe space for integrating and implementing challenging discussions in the High School Theatre classroom?* Social justice theatre makes up a lot of the backbone of my research, and identifying social justice theatre plays help to understand how theatre is used to promote change. Understanding the impact of integrating social issues as tools for education comes with its own cons, being lack of support from schools and parents. Getting a better understanding of these challenges can show us how careful educators are being in order to approach these topics, but how lack of support can harm the process. Exploring approaches to this kind of education addresses a large part of my research question, in that it shows educators how we can engage with our students regarding social issues, but also elaborates on how we can create a safe environment for that learning to happen.

An Introduction to Social Justice Theatre

Social justice theatre has cemented itself into the face of theatre as we know it today, and its influences in the wider world are evident. Its roots are founded in the social movements of our past, issues that still resonate today and continue to be portrayed onstage. Issues of racial equity, gender and sex

equality, poverty, and violence are just some of the topics that social justice theatre has and continues to broach. The Oxford dictionary definition (n.d) for *social justice* is justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society (as cited in *Oxford Languages*, 1884). The term was coined in the early 1800s. According to Kent State University's program for public administrators (Kent State Board of Public Administration, 2020), there are five principles for social justice: *Access* to resources, *Equity*, *Diversity*: understanding differences between individuals and their experiences, *Participation* in creating policies that benefit individuals, and *Human Rights*: rights that are unalienable and inherent to all individuals (para 7-15). These principles drive the social justice movement and bleed into the fibers of social justice theatre as we know it today. One of the earliest plays we can see dialogue emerge surrounding social issues is in *Mother Courage and her Children* by playwright Brecht (1939). Brecht (1939), a German playwright and poet, began writing his, arguably, most influential play in 1939 when Germany was invading Poland, something that is cited as being of great influence in the play's themes of dread and hopelessness Brecht (Wood, 2015). Many theatre scholars have argued whether or not *Mother Courage* is an anti-war play, however its war-focused theme and Brecht's own experience as an ambulance driver do seem to steer the dialogue in this way (as cited in *Mother Courage is not just an anti-war play*, 2009.) The work sparked dialogues surrounding what war meant and its effects on human life and human will. I'd like to take a look at the impact social justice theatre, old and new, has had on the larger world and get a sense for how these texts benefit a pursuit into exploring social issues with the classes of today.

Classic Social Justice Theatre

Brecht's works were undoubtedly influential in sparking dialogues regarding war and human life and created a foundation for artists to translate social and political issues onto the stage. From war-torn Europe, we transition to a juror's meeting in Rose's *Twelve Angry Men* (1955). First aired in 1954 as a teleplay, *Twelve Angry Men* examined the American judicial system and corrupted politics before being adapted to fit the silver screen in 1957. Rose's original teleplay told the story of a teenager being tried for murder and the jurors tasked with deciding his fate. It focuses on the eighth juror who

instigates a dialogue that evolves into a larger conversation surrounding justice. The play is all about peeling back the layers of an individual and, in a larger sense, the American political system; uncovering the biases we and our country perpetuate (Rose, 1955).

In 1959, *A Raisin in the Sun* by playwright Hansberry was first produced, a work that would go down in history as one of the most widely celebrated great American plays. Hansberry was a pioneer black playwright during a time when playwrights and artists of color were very sparsely highlighted in society (Čerče, 2018). Her most influential play delved into black life in all of its complexities, as well as civil rights, women's rights movements, and justice. The title itself is in reference to Hughes' poem *Harlem* (as cited in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, 1994). This poem was written in 1951 alongside other works in Hughes' book *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (as cited in *Langston Hughes, a poet*, 1988). This poem ties directly into Hansberry's play in its themes of hope, but it has also been heavily elaborated and transcribed by theatre scholars across time; both texts are so interwoven that you can't address Hansberry's play without having a conversation regarding Hughes' poem (Čerče, 2018):

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore--

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat

Or crust and sugar over--

Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

Like a heavy load.

Or does it explode? (p. 23)

Hughes (as cited in *Langston Hughes*, 1997) was extremely influential at the time for highlighting the black experience in America, which is equally reflected in Hansberry's works (as cited in *Practices of Freedom: Lorraine Hansberry, Freedom Writer*, 2017). *A Raisin in the Sun* follows the life of a black family existing and attempting to function financially in south Chicago. Each character has their own perspective regarding their situation, ranging from content to desperate to obtain wealth and, subsequently, a way out. Not only does the play address the economic inequity that exists in America, but also assimilation into 'white culture', be it forced, subconscious, or intentional (as cited in *Practices of Freedom: Lorraine Hansberry, Freedom Writer*, 2017).

More black-directed theatre emerges in the mid-80s with Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* (*The Colored Museum*, 1987). Wolfe grew up in Kentucky and attended an all-black school, beginning his pursuits into theatre when he transitioned into high school. He has since worked in arts administrative positions, education, and playwriting, *The Colored Museum* being one of his most renowned works. The play is really a collection of "exhibits" that have a satirical angle directed toward black stereotypes, the product of which being an abstract revelation of what being black means (Knight, 2012). While the tone of the play leans toward humorous, Wolfe's "exhibits" address the very bones of America, white and black, in the 1980s (Elam, Jr., 1992). In one of his pieces titled *Symbiosis*, a Man is throwing out all of his black-affiliated music and is confronted by Kid, a representation of himself as a child in the 60s. Kid can't understand why his older self is doing this, with Man explaining:

"The climate is changing, Kid, and either you adjust or you end up extinct. A sociological dinosaur. Do you understand what I'm trying to tell you? King Kong would have made it to the top if only he had taken the elevator. Instead he brought attention to his struggle and ended up dead (Wolfe, p. 34)."

Wolfe's pieces are usually no longer than three pages (Knight, 2012), yet they encapsulate very real, relevant dialogues of the time in which he was writing them. Assimilation, slavery, and stereotypes are all interwoven into satirical shorts made to make the audience cringe and laugh and reflect; a sort of disturbed revelation (Elam, Jr., 1992).

As I've shown, there are many playwrights of the past who have addressed socially-relevant issues, including race, war, and economic disparity, through the artform of theatre. These texts offer an insight into issues faced by the people of the time period, as well as what issues prevail into our current climate. Part of understanding how to devise theatre for today is understanding the circumstances surrounding the works of the past. The aim of my project is to address how high school educators can create a safe space for difficult learning in a social justice theatre program, and part of identifying how to approach social justice theatre today is by looking at the history that lead us to modern translations and adaptations, as well as new approaches. Brecht, Hansberry, Wolfe, these were some of the trailblazers of what would become modern social justice theatre.

Modern Social Justice Theatre

The playwrights of today have elaborated upon the works of the past, and have created pieces that address the past and present. In a similar fashion to Wolfe's work (*The Colored Museum*, 1987) with being black in the 80s, new works have emerged addressing the issues of today. While some issues are perpetuated throughout time, modern theatre works such as *Facing Our Truth* (Flores, Q., Gardley, M., Manassah, T., Mansour, M., Miller, W., Morisseau, D., O'Brien, D., & Pamatmat, A., 2015) focus on how such issues translate into today's society. I found my copy of this book while looking for reference material at Half Price Books, and instantly knew I had to add it to my library. *Facing Our Truth* is a collection of 10-minute plays that address topics such as privilege, and even the murder of Trayvon Martin. In the last piece titled *No More Monsters Here*, author Gardley takes us on a short ride through the lens of a person of color. Rebecca, a white woman, is put into a virtual reality simulator by a doctor after being diagnosed with *negroidphobia*, a phobia of people of African descent. In this simulator, Rebecca takes on the form of Raheem, a black man, as he goes about his day. In the end, Rebecca is shot by a faceless figure and wakes up in the doctor's office, the impact of which sends her into a panic attack. Rebecca is left with the aftermath of the experience, constantly wondering if she's being stared at or avoided because she might still be black. The piece touches on privilege, perception, and racism all in the span of a few pages. What's salient about it is that Rebecca doesn't leave the doctor's office a better

person, nor cured of her *negroidphobia*, but she is more conscious of how the world, and she, perceives people of color. While all of the plays in the book are gritty, this one speaks to issues of racism in a way that calls out racist ideologies and doesn't sugar-coat anything. No one leaves a winner, Rebecca isn't cured, the simulation was an extension of a harsh reality, everything is surreal but very real all at once (Ordin, 2017).

Rankine, a Jamaica native, addressed racial division in her play *The White Card* (as cited in *Stacked Deck*, 2019). The narrative of the play, published in Minnesota, is segmented into two parts and follows the conversations between two white art collectors, a couple, Virginia and Charles, and a black artist named Charlotte. The first segment of the play focuses on a dinner party hosted by Virginia and Charles, wherein they discuss Charlotte's work with her, as well as other works that address racial inequity in America. Over the course of the conversation, Charlotte begins to become unnerved by the hosts' perception of these works; the impact they put on the art. At one point later on in their discussion, Charles shows Charlotte a piece of artwork he purchased titled *An Anatomy of a Death*, a recreation of the autopsy report of Michael Brown, an 18-year old black man who was killed by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson. This sparks a heated debate on why this art was made, what purpose it serves, and the damaging effects of "American sentimentality" (*The White Card*, 2019). Charlotte addresses the work by saying, "Feeling bad by looking at black lines enclosing a white space doesn't come close to experiencing the dread of knowing you could be killed for simply being black (*The White Card*, 2019).", a message that echoes the separation of narratives between black and white people (as cited in *Stacked Deck*, 2019). Virginia and Charles can't understand what it means to be black in America, so they project their narrative onto artwork in a way that reflects their inability to understand. Charlotte desperately tries to elaborate on the issues surrounding art "mimicking" real events, but to no avail. In the second segment, it is a year after the catastrophe of the dinner party, and Charlotte is approached in her studio by Charles. They have a discussion as they both reminisce on the night, one of the final pieces of dialogue being a reflection of Rankine's message (as cited in *Stacked Deck*, 2019):

CHARLOTTE Racism exists outside of reason. Black people have never been

human.

CHARLES That is so hopeless.

CHARLOTTE Go further into that hopelessness, and then we can begin to really see each other.

(Rankine, C., 2019, p. 87)

The White Card exposes the reader (the audience) to a dialogue of racial division in a very nuanced way; in a way that many might not have considered. Our perceptions are buried within us, but never invisible. The sentimentality we project after real events is portrayed as cringeworthy in this play, and it's this kind of mindset that is removing us from the true nature of the world around us. Art is not the same as life, and though it can be mimicked, projected onto canvas, the true *impact* of it cannot be recreated.

The Laramie Project & Tectonic Theater

Before the threat of coronavirus made its way into our schools, I was student teaching at Perpich Center for the Arts Education. During my time there, I was invited to attend a workshop with a member of the Tectonic Theater Project, a company devised by Moisés Kaufman. This workshop focused on what Kaufman defined as 'Moment Work', "[...]a flexible framework for Discovery and theatrical experimentation. (*Moment Work*, 2018)". Over one weekend, a group of educators would devise small pieces using elements such as light, sound, and movement, using these to begin the storytelling process. The point of Moment Work is to develop a narrative in segments, integrating dialogue far later in the process so as to allow for authentic exploration of theatrical elements. In one of our segments, we separated into pairs and were asked to locate costume pieces. My partner and I found two old kimonos and were instructed to find ways of interacting with our garments. After our pair work, we were then asked to join another pair and marry our moments. One of our members stood on one side of our acting space, slapping a belt against a stool, while two of us crossed to another member on the other side who would strip us of our original kimono and replace it with another garment. The result of our work was an

evocative piece that reflected forced cultural assimilation; the stripping of one culture in favor of another. We had no idea how our piece would resonate when we were constructing it, we were simply collaborating to create an image that allowed for movement without words.

In 2000, Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Project devised a work that would spark a dialogue in schools and learning environments across the country. *The Laramie Project* was a play created in response to the 1998 murder of University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard (as cited in *Moment Work*, 2018). The salience of this issue was that Matthew Shepard was a gay man, and that his murder was not acknowledged as a hate crime, something that sparked more reform to Wyoming hate crime laws (as cited in *Documentary Trial Plays in Contemporary American Theater*, 2013). The play itself is derived of interviews from the inhabitants of Laramie, the town in which Shepard was murdered, and their reactions to his murder, as well as journal entries from the theater company and news reports addressing the crime. The culmination of these accounts is a three-act play that includes over sixty characters. The book *Moment Work*, Tectonic Theater Project's guide to devising theatre, author and member Barbara Pitts McAdams described the process of the troupe's process in devising *The Laramie Project* (as cited in *Moment Work*, 2018). Kaufman and his troupe started their research with a hypothesis, or *hunch*, as he described it (as cited in *Moment Work*, 2018):

“The hunch was that we would be able to compile a document that would serve as an X-ray of contemporary American culture, the way the transcripts of Wilde's trials served as a record of the zeitgeist of the Victorian era. This document would reveal not only how the town felt about homosexuality but how it felt about religion, violence, class, education, the death penalty--about “all the fault lines that are dividing our culture,” as one of our interviewees later said.”

(Kaufman, M. & Pitts-McAdams, B., 2018, p. 178)

This hunch would be the basis of the troupe's work within Laramie, and serve as the driving force behind their data collection (as cited in *Moment Work*, 2018). It would be revised over time, when they would eventually return to the town while devising *Ten Years Later* (Kaufman, M., 2014), a follow-up to the

original *Laramie Project*, wherein interviewees were revisited and re-interviewed regarding how things had changed in the town during the span of time. Their goal was to see how much difference, if any, 10 years had made.

Tectonic Theater Project's work with *The Laramie Project* extended beyond the stage and into classrooms shortly after its initial production. Not only were schools incorporating it into their theatre seasons, but the troupe itself developed workshops on performing the play. In the workshop I participated in, our speaker and guide (a member of Tectonic Theater) described how members would use moment work to direct groups of students through the piece, not only creating a more evocative end product, but also developing a discussion around the topics present in the play itself. Through devising moments, students were able to create a deeper dialogue and develop new concepts and ways of adapting the play. Much like Tectonic Theater Project's research led them to adjust their approaches and hunches throughout their discoveries and gained insights, students participating in these workshops were working through the piece through moments, allowing the process to be *fluid* and *broken* (as cited in *Moment Work*, 2018). Kaufman and his troupe valued the idea of *togetherness* in their efforts to devise theatre, which is a concept carried through into their workshops. Theatre is a collaborative artform, it demands participation (as cited in *Moment Work*, 2018).

Barriers and Contests

Education has deep roots in the specific narrative that puts students in the listening seat and teachers in the role of speaker. I remember being in elementary and middle school and feeling almost afraid to talk to most of my teachers. I felt as though my self-agency, my ability to speak up in support of myself, was reframed as conflict. I've seen this in students I've worked with in the past, students who are afraid to engage with their teachers because of some preconceived social hierarchy. While it is our responsibility as educators to keep our students safe, to give them the information they need, and to ensure that they behave according to the environment they're in, we must acknowledge that they are also people. These are not blank figures in front of us whose only purpose in the classroom is to receive information. We should be ensuring that they are able to actively engage, ask questions, and support

themselves through self-agency. In the same way, we should be encouraging discovery in our classrooms and in our schools at large. This also means that teachers should advocate for themselves and for the education of their students. Everyone enters an educational environment with their own biases, perspectives, and beliefs. The goal of expanding students' understanding of social issues is not to deter them from what they bring into our classrooms, but to encourage new avenues of thinking. As we will learn, there are various barriers and contests to teachers being able to explore broader forms of education with their students.

“Miseducation”

During my research on this subtopic, I ran into a familiar term frequently: *miseducation*. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary definition, it means “poor, wrong, or harmful education” (as cited in Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 1828). One particular article I found confronting miseducation came from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an institution promoting educational excellence. In his article *Social justice miseducation in our schools* (Rochester, J., 2017), Professor Rochester poses an older approach to the purpose of education, stating that, “Schools should mainly stick to what they are uniquely entrusted to do—teaching math, physics, English, and other subject matter and, beyond that, a love of learning. Schools should not aspire to be churches or social work agencies.” (as cited in *Social justice miseducation in our schools*, 2017) This issue has been long-standing in the context of education; keep politics and religion out of the classroom (as cited in *Radical Teaching: Politics in the Classroom*, 2010). Rochester’s concern lies in that educators risk pushing their own beliefs on their students, which is a valid criticism of this kind of education (Zembylas, M., 2015). As I said before, we cannot remove our biases, beliefs, and perspectives from who we are at our core even when we enter the classroom. The goal of encouraging discussion and exploring social issues with our students in the classroom is to teach them, regardless of what they’re bringing into the classroom. He also poses that:

“Educators for Social Justice talk a lot about diversity, but do they promote the most important type of diversity—diversity of ideas? Contrary to their claim that they celebrate “disagreement,” they seem to promote only a politically correct, left-leaning perspective.”

It is not unknown to me that most of the social justice movement is leftist-leaning. As someone who has been active in social justice theatre, I am all-too familiar with *cancel culture* (as cited in *How to deal with Cancel Culture*, 2020), radical left ideology, and the hypocrisy that exists within the community. These factors can be damaging in a classroom of developing minds, so I understand Rochester's position. However, I will say that this statement categorizes educators for social justice as a whole body that collectively hold the same views and act in the same way. An effective educator will understand that students have their own beliefs and biases when they enter their classrooms and invite all discussion, this includes a diversity of ideas (Zembylas, M., 2015). It's also the job of an effective educator to address this diversity with their students early on in a way that acknowledges they might not agree with their classmates, but how imperative it is for the process of learning that their differences aren't demonized (Zembylas, M., 2020). Again, the goal of this type of education is not to reprogram our students, but to engage them in a new avenue of learning.

The Cost of Engaging in Themes of Social Justice

In rural Oklahoma in 2009, educator Taylor of Grandfield High School began approaching *The Laramie Project* with her students (as cited in *USA Today*, 2009). The now former educator gained a lot of attention because this process cost her her job. Taylor began her unit by showing her students the 2002 film adaptation of the play, before starting the production process with her class. The educator had been in contact with the school's principal and, while they both acknowledged the controversial subject matter of the play, Taylor was granted permission to go ahead with the production. Shortly after the process began, the principal redacted his permission and told Taylor to disband the production altogether. The class protested this, but Taylor's class was cancelled and, after arguing this to the superintendent, she was put on leave and, subsequently, fired. There was backlash from her students, as well as the Oklahoma chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), urging the district to reinstate the educator. In an interview by *USA Today's* Toppo, Taylor stated, "I didn't ask them to change their belief systems[...]but what I asked them was, 'Can you be tolerant of those that are different from you?' Many

times the students came back and said, 'I don't like gays.' I said: 'I'm not asking you to like gays. But can you be tolerant (2009)?'"

Taylor's story is, unfortunately, not in isolation. A few years after Grandfield High School made the decision to fire Taylor, another educator's story caught some attention. Pontiac Academy for Excellence Middle School teacher Brooke Harris came to media attention after she was fired from her position over a fundraiser (as cited in *Teaching Tolerance*, 2012). Harris had been inspired by her students' interest in the murder of Trayvon Martin and had them write essays about him for class, essays that were meant to be included in the school newspaper. The majority of Harris' students were black, and they identified with the young man, so they encouraged their teacher to allow them to hold a fundraiser for Trayvon's family. The principal of the school permitted the fundraiser however, Superintendent Jacqueline Cassell did not. After this blow, Harris' students encouraged her to ask if the class could come and explain their project, proposing this ended with Harris being suspended. After extensions were made on her suspension, Harris was eventually fired. Brooke Harris was using real-world events as a means to educate her students and was, ultimately, punished for it. Alice Pettway, a reporter for the organization Teaching Tolerance, said this about Harris' situation:

"Real life is not clean. It is not clear cut. It is not safe. But it is the world our students live in and they will be required to navigate it as adults. Teachers must bring this outside world into the classroom. The only way this will ever happen is if we create an environment in which teachers feel safe discussing controversial issues with their students (as cited in *Teaching Tolerance*, 2012)."

This wasn't an issue of a teacher bringing her own agenda into a classroom, this was a teacher actively listening to what her students were interested in and engaging with them in a meaningful way.

Issues of censorship and school disapproval aren't the only barriers that stand in our educators' way. Bangor's James F. Doughty School was in the media recently for an incident that took place outside of the classroom (as cited in *Bangor Daily News*, 2020). The school began incorporating diversity and equity education into their curriculum, a choice that was shared with students and their

parents at the beginning of the school year. Due to the school's hybrid system, many of the teacher's lectures were online for parents to see as well as students. Bill Kimball, one parent, recorded a section of this particular teacher's discussion regarding race and gender. The lecture itself was tame, with Bangor Daily News quoting the teacher in the video:

“The fact that my race is white is part of my privileged identity[...]Race is not something that gets in the way of me getting a job or puts me in danger, whereas my gender being female is something I have to think about and might be one of my more targeted identities.” (as cited in *Bangor Daily News*, 2020)

This kind of discussion struck a nerve in Kimball and he decided to upload it to a pro-Trump Facebook page. There, the post garnered quite a bit of heat before Kimball removed it. Fortunately, the backlash from this altercation resulted in The Bangor School Department hiring Racial Equity and Justice in order to train staff in racial equity and diversity. Though this incident ended with positive reform, it could have stemmed terrible alternative outcomes.

Approaches to Difficult Learning in the Theatre Classroom

“As actors, our trade is empathy,” these are the words of Frostburg State University lecturer Michele Labar (as cited in *Social Justice Theatre Aims to Teach Empathy and Intervention*, n.d), and they really encompass the relationship that theatre thrives upon; the *actors* and the *audience*. The connection between these elements is made possible through shared empathy, if the actors can convey empathy the audience will become participants in the experience of theatre. It is a dialogue that make two seemingly separate entities one (Waxberg, 1998). In a theatre classroom, it is important to establish with students the relationship between actors and audience as a shared awareness (Spolin, 1999). I have often heard teachers describe the audience as the “faces” that actors play to, similar to watching television. While the audience members of Early Modern England may have agreed with this portrayal, theatre has evolved over the centuries to be both entertaining and *engaging*. When I was in my junior year of college at Hamline University, I was cast in the theatre department's rendition of *Rabbit Hole* by Lindsay-Abaire as the grandmother. In one particular scene, the grandmother and her daughter are packing up the room of her recently deceased grandson's room and engage in a conversation about loss and living beyond grief.

During a pause in my monologue, I could hear soft sniffing coming from the dark seats of the audience. In that moment, the audience and I shared the experience together. It's difficult to artificially create that connection.

The *changers* in our classrooms will create moments such as these. I've seen first hand the impact people can have on others using the medium of theatre, and how this art form can bring about emotions and dialogues naturally. When I was completing my hours of observation at Anoka Middle School for the Arts (AMSA), my students were devising individual monologues that were socially relevant to their world or their identity. The assignment was made open-ended so as to allow students to explore a range of topics and make connections to issues they were passionate about. I was really excited to work on this with them, as I was still very passionate about social justice theatre and incorporating themes of social justice into a theatre class was exciting. During the drafting process, I was roaming the space and helping students with questions about the writing process. I had been aware of two students, a pair of friends, who had begun to grow louder and louder in conversation as the period went on. Eventually, I had to step in, as their discussion turned into more of a heated argument. One student, who was black, was drafting his monologue to broach the topic of racism in the justice system and his friend, who was white, wasn't happy with his portrayal of police as racist. The two students were feeling very raw emotions due to their connections to the topic and wanted to have a meaningful discussion about it, they just got a little loud. Even in a controlled environment and having a week of introduction to devising this kind of theatre, these students had to learn about discussion through a difficult argument. Nothing can mimic real emotion, and this kind of reaction is important, no matter what stage it occurred in (Waxberg, C., 1998). In *Emergent Strategy*, brown talks about emotional growth as nonlinear, stating that we need to

“[...] take turns actually feeling what is happening to and around us, and letting our feeling help us understand what we must do. Because that is what we are creating, a world where we can feel ourselves and each other and do less harm and generate more freedom.” (*Emergent Strategy*, 2017, pp. 105-106)

Feeling is necessary in order for us to connect with ourselves and each other. I'll continue by engaging in how we can develop a safe space for feeling these emotions while applying socially-relevant materials and dialogues into our classrooms.

Safe Space for Difficult Learning

Confronting social issues will never not be scary for many of our students. While I want to dive headfirst into social change and address inequity through theatre, I need to remember that an environment of trust and security must first be established. In Chapter One, I addressed the topic of safe spaces, environments that promote growth while also ensuring all individuals have access to a judgement-free setting. It is a healthy, tolerant environment that is the foundation for transformation in a theatre classroom. In my pursuit to find a resource for developing a safe space, I came across a chapter *Staging Social Justice*--a collection of writings by educators with a focus in activist theatre--by Bernardo Solano and Paula Weston Solano. The chapter, titled *It's Safe to Say*, explores what it means to hold a safe space for students, how to create one that promotes active learning and acceptance, and how to maintain such an environment. The authors used the Fringe Benefits workshop guidelines as a framework:

1. *Raise hand to speak. No side conversations.*
2. *No putting each other down.*
3. *No real names in stories or improvisations!*
4. *Improvisations*
 - a. Put-downs need to be based on the imaginary characters, not the actors!
 - b. Physical boundaries: No hitting; no "stage combat."
 - c. No touching another person except from the shoulder to the fingertips.
5. *Confidentiality.* No repeating outside of this space what other people said or did.
But what you say may be used in the play!
6. *No judging* what others say, either verbally or in the form of laughing, groaning, rolling your eyes, and the like.

7. *Speak up!* Say “Ouch!” if you’re uncomfortable with something that’s happening or being said. Say “Oops!” to acknowledge or apologize for something you wish you had not said or done.
8. *You have a right to “pass”* on any/all invitations to share your ideas, opinions, and stories and/or invitations to participate in theatre exercises. You may also call “UNCLE!” mid-sentence or mid-exercise. Take care of yourself.
9. Give each other the *benefit of the doubt*.
10. Please be *brief and to the point*.
11. *Mandatory Reporting Law*.
12. *Step up/step back*. If you haven’t been participating a lot, “step up.” If others need “air time”, “step back.”

(Solano, B. & Solano, 2013, p. 133-134)

What is particularly salient about this model is the amount of agency it gives to the students. In a safe space, it’s important to allow students to advocate for themselves. They need to be able to assess their needs and make them known to their peers and the teacher. I appreciate the use of “code words” to identify when a student isn’t feeling comfortable in particular. When I was working as an intern at the Children’s Theatre Company in Minneapolis, one of my high school students suffered from anxiety, so we developed a code word so that he could let myself and his peers know when he needed to take a break. It was incredibly beneficial for me so that I could assess where he was emotionally and also for the student so he could avoid hurting the feelings of his classmates, which was a big concern for him. I’ve seen various renditions of the above guidelines, but the core principles are widely shared throughout. As educators engaging in any kind of potentially triggering or new subject matter, in theatre or otherwise, these rules for creating a safe space for our students are important to bear in mind and integrate into our classrooms (as cited in *Not Light, but Fire: How to Lead Meaningful Race Conversations in the Classroom*, 2018).

Emergent Strategy

In 2018, I picked up a book titled *Emergent Strategy* (2017) while at the annual Detroit Theatre & Pedagogy Conference. Little did I know that it would be this book that would change my approach to my path in theatre education forever. Author brown, who prints their name intentionally uncapitalized, is an activist based in Michigan and has foundations in the women's rights movement and strategies for social justice (Gumbs, 2018). This book in particular draws heavily from black-focused science fiction author Butler (Canavan, 2016) and social justice activist Boggs (Boggs et. al., 2012), both powerhouses of social commentary. The goal of brown's book is to use observations in order to form a better understanding of how we can apply the world to our efforts of coexisting and transforming as humans. *Emergent strategy*, in brown's words, is "[...] how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for (p. 3)." brown utilizes plant imagery in order to describe how emergent strategy works in an ecosystem and transposing that idea onto humanity:

"I love to see the way mushrooms can take substances we think of as toxic, and process them as food, or that dandelions spread not only themselves but their community structure, manifesting their essential qualities (which include healing and detoxifying the human body) to proliferate and thrive in a new environment. The resilience of these life forms is that they evolve while maintaining core practices that ensure their survival. A mushroom *is* a toxin-transformer, a dandelion *is* a community of healers waiting to spread...What are we as humans, what is our function in the universe?"

(brown, a., 2017, p. 9)

In terms of teaching, looking at the world as an ecosystem is really interesting, as everyone in your classroom and yourself influence that ecosystem. An educator impacts students, students impact their peers, influence is felt throughout the ecosystem (*Emergent Strategy*, 2017).

brown ties emergent strategy into what is called *transformative justice*. Transformative justice, as brown defines it, is "justice that transforms the root causes of injustice". In the context of emergent strategy, transformative justice "[...]asks us to consider how to transform toxic energy, hurt,

legitimate pain, and conflict into solutions. To get under the wrong, find a way to coexist, be energy moving towards life, together (brown, a., 2017, p. 133).” In terms of educational strategy, transformative justice is a tool for approaching and constructing work in a way that addresses feelings, frustrations, concerns about social issues and finding ways to combat those issues (as cited in *Emergent Strategy*, 2017). The Young Women’s Empowerment Project (YWEP) uses the following definition of transformative justice:

Transformative Justice:

1. Acknowledges the reality of state harm.
2. Looks for alternative ways to address/interrupt harm, which do not rely on the state.
3. Relies on organic, creative strategies that are community created and sustained.
4. Transforms the root causes of violence, not only the individual experience.

(brown, a., 2017, p.135)

Just looking at this definition from a teacher’s perspective, there’s a clear framework for addressing and constructing dialogues concerning social issues, one that could aid in lesson-planning. While transformative justice is originally a political framework closely related to social justice (as cited in *Emergent Strategy*, 2017), its educational relevance should not be ignored. It’s an approach to discussing and addressing violence without creating or responding with violence. Stemming off of the concept of transformative justice is a framework created by brown (2017), a framework that is segmented into three parts:

1. Why? Listen with “Why?” as a framework.

brown uses “Why?” as a means to uncover reasons behind reasonings; what are the factors at play in why decisions are made, why ideas are perpetuated? brown states that “Why?”, “[...] is often the game-changing, possibility-opening question. That’s because the answers re-humanize those we feel are

perpetuating against us.” and “[...] makes it impossible to ignore that we might be capable of a similar transgression in similar circumstances .” (brown, a., 2017, p. 148)

2. *Ask yourself/selves: What can I/we learn from this?*

This question addresses not just *why* something is, but how what we experience can become a learning opportunity. “If the only thing I can learn from a situation is that some humans do bad things, it’s a waste of my precious time--I already know that. What I want to know is: What can this teach me/us about how to improve our humanity?” (brown, a., 2017, p. 148) brown acknowledges that introspection and understanding of what can be learned isn’t black and white, there is a need for deeper exploration into what a situation can reveal to us.

3. *How can my real-time actions contribute to transforming this situation (versus making it worse)?*

This question addresses more interpersonal reflection on the part of the individual (brown, 2017). brown acknowledges the influence of social media on the way that we process situations; it makes it easy to air our pains before we have the opportunity to process them, often making situations worse. brown reflects on this question, stating, “I think this is some of the hardest work. It’s not about pack hunting an external enemy, it’s about deep shifts in our own ways of being.” (brown, a., 2017, p. 149)

In the age of social media and cancel culture, our minds and the minds of our students can be easily swayed, and it happens quickly. I remember when I was in high school, I was quick to point fingers when I thought something was unjust. I recall a couple summers of hurling verbal abuse at religious protestors picketing Twin Cities Pride, content with the immediate gratification of calling out those who were attacking my way of life. Though brown’s approach is one of social and transformative justice, she acknowledges that the culture we’ve created around transmitting our grievances hinders the conversations we should be having. It’s important that our students know that every situation is an opportunity for learning, be it introspection, a conversation between oneself or another party, or uncovering a new perspective.

Using Artist's Tools for Application

Sadler is a student affairs professional who analyzed art as a means of activism through the lens of Augusto Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed*. The basis for Boal's form of theatre, in her words, is "[...]to empower communities of people to act out their angst, their feelings of disenfranchisement, and to reclaim a sense of their lost power (as cited in *Art As Activism and Education*, 2010, p. 87)." Boal's work in the realm of social justice theatre has resulted in more schools and educators engaging with social justice education in classrooms across the country. Theatre of the Oppressed framework seeks to identify where the roots of inequity stem from and how to promote empowerment in the classroom (Sadler, K., 2010). Part of giving students the space to do this kind of work also involves educator workshops, wherein teachers undergo training in social justice topics to better understand its influence on their students, their classrooms, and their society. It goes without saying that we cannot promote students' exploration into this kind of introspection without addressing our own understandings or confronting what we don't understand (as cited in *Making Invisible Intersectionality Visible Through Theater of the Oppressed in Teacher Education*, 2015). This isn't to say that I as a white educator can step into a workshop and come out of it understanding what it feels like to be a person of color. That's simply not how it works. Long ago, I had a conversation with other members of Making Waves about the difference between *sympathy* and *empathy* in terms of our understanding and approach to race in theatre. At the time, we were content to call outsiders (those outside of a minority group) sympathizers, but I've come to understand that a third element makes more sense in the context of the work we're trying to do as educators. *Compassion*. The difference here is that sympathy acknowledges the disconnect--I can't feel what you feel, but I acknowledge that you feel it--empathy acknowledges a connection--I can feel what you feel--but compassion acknowledges a disconnect and directs action--I can't feel what you feel, but I see you feel it and want to do something about it (Singer, T. & Klimecki, O., 2014). When students are seen in the space that they are learning, they become more engaged (as cited in *Dialogic teaching in the initial teacher education classroom: "Everyone's Voice will be Heard"*, 2016). Opening an environment

to self-exploration and discussion about socially relevant issues invites students not just to be seen, but *heard*.

“Theatre and performance are fundamental human activities. By providing a space for students to synthesize their multiple identities and roles, students gain the agency to comment on and create change at their universities, in their communities, and on a personal level.”

(Sadler, K., 2010, p. 85)

There is a domino effect of sorts that comes with inviting students to engage with this kind of dialogue, this kind of theatre experience. Much like Adrienne Maree Brown’s analysis of our social ecosystem (as cited in *Emergent Strategy*, 2017), Sadler notes the various stems that connect our students and their experiences in our classrooms to the wider community (as cited in *Art as Activism and Education: Creating Venues for Student Involvement and Social Justice Education Utilizing Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed*, 2010). Nothing exists in isolation; we impact and are impacted upon.

Another educator to use Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed pedagogy is Hickling-Hudson, whose focus in theatre application led her to the Area Youth Foundation (AYF) in Jamaica (Hickling-Hudson, 2013). In her dissertation, Hickling-Hudson cites her own use of his structures, identifying his approach to audience participation in helping find solutions to problems played out onstage. She elaborates on strategies used by Boal and Brazilian educator/philosopher Paulo Freire, constructing a model for student activities geared toward understanding and development (as cited in *Theatre-Arts Pedagogy for Social Justice*, 2013):

1. *Introductory and closing activities*: The young people, in small groups, talk about the best and worst things that have happened in their lives, and share their vision for the future. This enhances a sense of sharing and trust. The life skills that need to be acquired if they are to achieve their vision become the basis for workshops. Each session ends with a relaxed winding down of activity and further dialogical reflection on what was learned.

2. *Developmental activities*: The tutors select topics that relate to the particular problem that has come out of the initial group discussion. In workshops, topics such as the following are explored in some depth: a) interpersonal communication; b) coping with conflict; c) uses and abuses of power; d) gender relations, parenting, and family life; e) healthy lifestyles; f) taking a stand on social issues; and g) the world of work.
3. *Artistic activities*: Song writing, theatre productions, creating music videos and photo-novellas, and working on film sets are some of the artistic activities that emerge from the process.

(Hickling-Hudson, A., 2013, p. 25)

These activities can act as a guided framework for approaching social issues. It allows for deeper introspection, dialogue between students, and different means of conveying a message. Art is non-linear. It rarely takes on the same shape or process perfectly over time. You may end up with a completely different product even using the same tools that you begin with time and time again. What is powerful about Hickling-Hudson's approach to these activities is that she gives guidelines that promote discovery and enhance student experience. By starting with an activity that has students focused inwardly and expanding that focus outward in the following activities, she is engaging students in the transition between self and application in the ecosystem of society.

In a dissertation by Michaud, a framework for approaching social justice theatre with rural, homogenous communities is addressed (as cited in *Theatre of the Oppressed in Rural Education*, 2019). Much like the work of Sadler and Hickling-Hudson, the influence of Augusto Boal is prevalent. In this paper, Michaud addresses their approach through a devised theatre piece, which is set in rural America. They begin with an introduction to Forum Theatre, a type of interactive theatre that Boal was known for, setting up the instruction to be a kind of solution-creating process wherein two students begin onstage and classmates may pause at any time to interject a potential solution to the problem they're facing. Boal called this kind of interactive audience-participant a *spectator* (as cited in *Theatre of the Oppressed*,

1974), a combination of *spectator* and *actor*. The teacher in this model is assigned as the Joker, another Boal term that means the *icebreaker* (as cited in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 1974); the one who encourages participation. “Your job is not to tell your students *how* to handle these conflicts, but rather, it is to help guide them in the process of brainstorming and improvising their solutions. The impact will be much greater if they are the ones in charge of finding ways to diffuse these situations (Michaud, J., 2019, p. 90).” Michaud gives guidelines for the Forum Theatre framework, explaining it’s similar to a game wherein everyone participates and there are rules to adhere to. Similarly, the teacher, or Joker, is given their own set of rules, so as to allow students the most agency in their process with little influence. What is salient here are the guidelines Michaud presents:

- The protagonist has options.
- The oppressor can change.
- An ally can change the course of an action.
- Magic, although fun, does not actually work. Or help.

(Michaud, J., 2019, p. 92)

Apart from the last being humorous, the other guidelines are incredibly simply interwoven with the real implications of ourselves and our society. We can make choices that have lasting effects, people in power or causing harm have the ability to change, and allies (supporters in a movement) can instill change and transformation (as cited in *Emergent Strategy*, 2017). This kind of structured learning experience exposes students to new understandings about how actions impact others and how people can create action (Michaud, J., 2019). This isn’t a black and white framework, it acknowledges a gray area in which exploring different possibilities is necessary.

Another use of *Theatre of the Oppressed* comes from Desai, an educator who focused on Boal’s tactics in order to give teachers a resource for approaching social issues. In their book section *Utilizing Theatre of the Oppressed Within Teacher Education to Create Emancipatory Teachers* (Desai, S., 2017), Desai explains how they utilized TO in their workshops, citing a particular class wherein they asked a group of teachers to answer a question regarding anti-immigration law states: “What is your responsibility

as a critical multicultural educator if you were a teacher in one of these states (Desai, S., 2017, p. 232)?”

The group of teachers were having difficulties with the question, so Desai implemented TO in the form of a scenario. The scenario involved a student asking a teacher about their thoughts on recent

anti-immigration laws, to which the main questions asked by the teachers was “are they here legally?”.

Desai reflected on this, but told his class that it didn’t matter in the context of the scenario, moving on to assign roles to different teachers. Once they were placed in these roles, they began addressing the

question, occasionally switching out with other educators in order to have a more effective nonlinear discussion. After awhile, one of the teachers posed a question in regard to reporting “illegal” students:

“Don’t teachers have to uphold the law or else they could get fired?” Desai didn’t respond, instead letting

the other teachers interact with the question. One teacher chimed in asking if it was legal for teachers to

ask those questions of their students, and the discussion evolved from there. Desai reflected on the

process in the chapter, stating that, “Without TO, this scenario may not have been tangible but rather just

another discussion where I focused on racial oppression. By being placed in the role of a student who may have been undocumented, participants could better empathize how this student might be feeling.

Furthermore, it pushed students to ask critically reflective questions by beginning to question their

previous notions (p. 232).” This exercise was done with teachers, but it can be applied to student groups

as well, such as in Burton and O’Toole’s article on implementing Boal’s practices in elementary through

high school classrooms where it was used to address bullying (*Enhanced Forum Theatre: Where Boal’s*

Theatre of the Oppressed Meets Process Drama in the Classroom, 2005). I’ve been in classrooms and

seen first-hand how powerful *Theatre of the Oppressed* can be when you’re working with a classroom of

young minds. If teachers can engage in scenarios like this amongst *themselves* as training, however, it is

so much more likely that it will be effectively carried out in the *classroom* (Powers, B. & Duffy, P., 2015).

Conclusion and Moving Forward

In the process of writing this chapter, I have addressed social justice theatre, social justice plays, barriers for educators approaching social issues in schools, and approaches to difficult learning, with my research question being: *How can high school educators create a safe space for integrating and*

implementing challenging discussions in a social justice theatre program? We have seen how social justice theatre began, whose works ignited attention over time, whose works press social justice issues today, and how educators are moving forward given tools from these texts, plays, *changers*. I was able to address difficulties educators potentially face when integrating education of social issues into their classrooms, but also how educators can begin to work on this kind of education in their classrooms. My goal with this chapter was to give an informed insight into pre-existing texts and explore other educators' approaches, but also to identify the pros and cons of engaging students in social issues in the classroom. I'm not writing this paper through the lens of rose-tinted glasses, I'm aware that change takes time, that factors outside of my control are at play, that it's not easy work. The reason that I chose this topic was my compassion for our students as they navigate the strange world they're growing into. I want them to devise their own ideas, identities, and discover their power. My hope is to engage students so that they have a meaningful connection between their educational and social lives; that they aren't simply standing in the world as a passive audience. These are our future voters, future workers, future parents, future changers. Exposing students to social issues in education is not for the purpose of changing them *within* our classrooms, it's to give them the ability to interact with new ideas; the change comes from them. I think that change also comes from our school as a whole. Addressing what is allowed and what is not, how we can advocate for our students, acknowledging if you are being supported by your school or not, and finding resources if you don't feel as though you are being supported; these are all important factors to consider in your own school ecosystem.

Going into my third chapter, I will be applying what I've gleaned here and using it to work toward my Capstone project. My focus will be on devising a curriculum specifically for approaching social issues in a high school classroom as a troupe. Theatre is all about community, there are too many facets to bring it all together to ignore the group aspect. The goal of having students work as a troupe is that they will have the opportunity to have healthy dialogues regarding social issues, one will be addressed for the context of this project, and how they apply to their world, work on being tolerant and listening even if they disagree with each other's views, and applying their work as a whole to the stage.

This will be a guided process, though it will have very little educator-intervention. This kind of lesson is meant for students to experience and work through obstacles, elations, realizations, and bring it all together. As I move forward into this process, I find the words of adrienne maree brown both personally salient and applicable to my process, “Nothing that has existed so far was the right way for everyone, but there are pieces out there we can begin to imagine together (*Emergent Strategy*, 2017, p. 57).”

CHAPTER THREE

Introduction

Methodology

In my experience working with students of varied backgrounds, and having a background in social justice theatre, I have often wondered how students can engage with relevant social issues through theatre education. It is my belief that a safe environment, proper introduction to difficult/potentially triggering issues, and ability for students to have open, honest dialogues surrounding social issues can be the foundation for this kind of learning. As someone who is very passionate about theatre as an avenue for open dialogue and collaborative learning, I want to be able to dive head-first into this kind of education. However, I also understand that the ability to engage students in this form of learning begins with the teacher.

This understanding led me to the realization that, in order for me to address this kind of educational experience, I had to devise a guide for teachers to understand where to start. In a sense, I wanted to create a handbook for educators who are looking to approach socially relevant issues with their classrooms. During the course of my research, I began to understand that education begins with our educators. As a young, future educator myself, I have experienced a lack of resources for this kind of learning experience; my goal was to develop a resource for future educators who came after me who also wanted to engage their students with this kind of learning. At the beginning of my research, my research question was meant to address our students, however, as the process developed I realized how teacher-focused it was. The rest of the research process and subsequent project then aimed to address the question: *How can high school educators create a safe space for integrating and implementing challenging discussions in a social justice theatre program?*

This chapter will focus on my research, process, and methods used to develop my guide. The chapter will also look at my intended audience, as well as the participants used to reflect the example classroom developed for the guide. I will be addressing the strategies by which influenced my process for

Chapter Four as well. The culmination of these factors will guide the narrative that leads into Chapter Four of my capstone project.

Process & Theories

At the start of my process, I raided my personal library for resources that aligned with my project. I knew that, as a young educator who has limited experience in developing curriculum, it would benefit my process to adapt resources to further develop the basis for my project. These resources had to be adaptable for varied age ranges and lived experiences, while not being so complex as to over-complicate the end product. With this in mind, I proceeded to engage with the materials I'd found.

Influences

For this project, I heavily referenced the processes of two powerful figures in socially-relevant dialogue in theatre. One of these figures was Kaufman, co-developer of Tectonic Theater Project (as cited in *Moment Work*, 2018). Moisés (2018) and his work with Tectonic focus heavily on *moment work* in order to devise theatre, a concept that is fully fleshed-out in their book of the same name (Kaufman & Pitts-McAdams, 2018). As I'd mentioned in Chapter Two, I participated in a Tectonic workshop with other art educators for a weekend while in the throws of my student teaching experience. This workshop inspired me to locate a copy of the book in order to incorporate into my own classrooms one day.

According to Kaufman and Pitts McAdams (2018), a moment “can be defined as a unit of theatrical time, a building block of theatrical narrative, or a structural unit of performance” (p. 43). Moments can focus solely on light, sound, textures, short movements, etc. They are devised on their own, and only come together after they are layered; this takes place later in the devising process (as cited in *Moment Work*, 2018). Part of what made me want to adapt this process to fit into my own project was actually seeing how this work creates narratives without the actors speaking. One such experience was watching a group of three actors sitting behind a white sheet covering a couple chairs. They would periodically turn a red and blue light on and off throughout their piece, their only sound effect being a news broadcast that followed the abduction and murder of a young boy. The actors didn't even need to say anything for the scene to evoke a kind of stunned silence from the audience. In this way, the actors

were able to develop a narrative using only three elements of theatre; I'm sure the same effect could be created with fewer or more. Discussions surrounding socially-relevant issues can be had, even in the absence of vocal dialogue or surrounded with noise. The real discussions arise during the construction of works.

The other resource that I referenced in my project was Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal, A., 1993). This text is essentially a guide for creating theatre that addresses social issues. Boal's work within the realm of theatre addressed issues that some people may overlook because they are not directly affected by them. He and his actors were able to engage their audience with this kind of dialogue by acting in public spaces accessible to a wide range of people with varied socio-economic backgrounds (as cited in *Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media*, 2010). This meant that their type of theatre could be performed anywhere and reach audiences that might not actively interact with theatre.

Implementing Theatre of the Oppressed

The actual act of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) as a practice approaches socially-relevant topics by opening a public forum for discussion (as cited in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 1974). Small pieces are devised by the troupe and a setting is selected depending on the context of the topic at hand. The troupe, then, creates a stage that heavily integrates the audience in play, which creates not only a more salient actor-audience relationship, but a very real in-time dialogue (as cited in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 1974). The importance of this relationship is addressed in several texts across time. Waxberg addresses it in his book *The Actor's Script* (Waxberg, C., 1998), and it's salience with TO's actor-audience connection is undeniable: "In order for audiences to connect with what is happening onstage, they must identify with the characters or recognize that something real--truthful--is happening in front of them (Waxberg, C., 1998, p. 31)."

In order to engage with these methods of theatre education, I wanted to utilize a framework for my project that seemed most applicable. While I'm not necessarily creating a curriculum, I found the framework of Understanding by Design (UbD) to be helpful in devising the material I wanted to create (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011, p. 2). This framework begins at the end, starting with the end goal in mind

and working backward through activities and assessments that flesh out the remainder of the lesson. Using this framework as a way to more thoroughly understand my process proved to be helpful in devising a guide I thought would be effective for educator use.

Setting

I have attended several schools in my lifetime, public and private, suburban and rural. Due to the diversity in my education, I have a broader understanding of how classrooms differ depending on the setting outside of the classroom. I really believe that exposure to so many settings pushed me to further my interest in implementing new avenues of learning in the classroom, wherever that classroom may be. Equally, I have worked with students from extremely diverse backgrounds, who exist in all sorts of settings. These experiences also gave me rich insight into how to adapt lessons and envision how to approach concepts depending on the setting.

For the project I had in mind, I quickly realized that the setting for my work would have to be easily adaptable to fit a variety of settings. Bearing this in mind, I decided to create a setting that is more closely aligned with settings I've interacted with, with alterations to expand it. My setting was created as a high school theatre classroom. I elected not to define a particular grade so as to leave it open for educators to adapt to a wider range. The school outside of this classroom is a public school on the outskirts of a fictitious city, not suburban but not within the city lines, that is home to a diverse student body. This school has programming for ELL students, as well as students on the autism spectrum. 40% of the student body consist of students of color, while the remaining 60% are white/caucasian.

It was important for me to have this setting closely mirror what I've experienced in the past. I have worked with students on the autism spectrum and ELL students, in settings where white students are the minority and the opposite. From my experience in the suburbs and city working with students, Minnesota (particularly the metro/Twin Cities and outskirts) is a melting pot of diverse backgrounds and experiences. This was what I wanted to highlight in my project; a setting that mirrors the diversity educators will likely experience in their own classrooms.

Methods

The methods I utilized in order to devise my handbook for educators closely follow how you would devise curriculum for students. I was heavily influenced by the concept of curriculum creation, as well as the framework of Understanding by Design (UbD). While this project is not meant to be a curriculum once fleshed out, there is no denying the influence of curriculum creation within my process. Once I had fully devised my idea for this project, I began looking at how the curriculum devising process might help me in developing my own project. After this had been addressed, I went on to explore the use of UbD, using it as a framework for devising my guide. I'll first go over my explanation for the influence of curriculum creation in my process.

Curriculum

I came into this project with no curriculum plan, as the end product desired was more so a handbook for educators to reference. However, as I fleshed out my project, I realized that the process for devising my guide closely mirrored the process for devising curriculum, which is why I decided to incorporate it into my process. Essentially, I was developing a *sort-of curriculum* for educators.

In order to follow this process, I collected relevant materials, including *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal, A. 1974) and *Moment Work* (Kaufman, M., 2018), and used those as the backbone of my project. I incorporated potential alterations to the lesson/process, including students who are on the autism spectrum and ELL students; what tools might these students need in order to thrive in your classroom? It was especially revealing as I worked on addressing students of different abilities that my lesson-planning brain was switched on. Preparing for disruptions, making the work adaptable, creating a foundation for your students to engage with the material at hand, this was all prior knowledge sitting in the back of my brain from undergrad; things I've known but never realized were so relevant to a *teacher's* education.

Instead of developing a curriculum for students, I was devising a curriculum for educators, an outline from one educator to another, a resource for creating their own curriculum, activities, lesson plans, learning experiences. While I went into the process of developing my project with one idea for what I wanted the end result to be, I ended up discovering that it could be a layering of concepts.

Understanding by Design

Understanding by Design (UbD) is a framework developed by Wiggins and McTighe. The framework marries two concepts, “1) research on learning and cognition that highlights the centrality of teaching and assessing for understanding, and 2) a helpful and time-honored process for curriculum writing.” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011, p. 3) UbD is a method for devising curriculum wherein the end goal is the starting point, you work backward through lessons and activities throughout the process. It also asserts that it’s most likely for students to achieve long-term goals when they are given the opportunity to apply their knowledge in more engaging, meaningful ways. This method also cites patterning, experiential learning, and varied exposure to concepts as factors that enrich the learning experiences of students, and is also commonplace in this kind of framework (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011, pp. 3-4).

Particularly for the project that I devised, having an understanding for framing activities and lessons that incorporate experiential learning caught my attention during my research process. As a future theatre educator, in my mind, if learning can be acted out, it should be. UbD provides a framework that is well-suited to a variety of learning environments, and it was the method that most closely aligned with the work I was doing in the context of my capstone.

Stages of Understanding by Design

One thing that was salient about Wiggins and McTighe’s framework for me were the *stages* they developed for devising lessons. These stages provide the framework that aligns with their idea of backward learning or “backward-design” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011).

The first stage of this process is titled Identify Desired Results. In this stage, the educator is tasked with identifying end goals for the lesson. This is not the only aim of Stage 1, however. At this stage, educators should also be conscious of what they want students to take away from the learning experience, what essential questions should be addressed, what skills will students walk away with, and what *transfer* goals are being addressed. Transfer goals are aligned with long-term goals, desired outcomes that will bleed over into the next stage of learning (as cited in *The Understanding by Design Guide to Creating High-Quality Units*, 2011).

The second stage of design should tie directly into the first. In the UbD, Stage 2 is outlined to Determine Acceptable Evidence. This step outlines what performances and products will show that meaning-making and transferring are happening, how performance will be assessed, what additional evidence is needed to assess alignment with Stage 1 goals, and how or if assessments at this stage align with Stage 1 (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011, p. 8). This stage is important in that it outlines what needs to be done to obtain the end goal(s) of Stage 1, while also making sure that Stage 2 and Stage 1 are connected so that Stage 3 is also aligned (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011, p. 8).

The third stage of the process should fluidly transition from where we wove the first and second stages. Stage 3 of the process is entitled Plan Learning Experiences and Instruction Accordingly. Much like it sounds, this stage addresses the activities, experiences, and lessons that will achieve the desired outcomes set out in Stage 1. It also focuses on how and if independent discovery is being made, how progress will be monitored, how the unit will be differentiated to meet the needs of all students, and if the learning assessments are consistent between all three stages (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011, pp. 8-9).

Along with the stages Wiggins and McTighe (2011) present, they also frame some of the key elements that make up an effective learning experience. These elements include expectations, instruction, learning activities, assessment, and sequence and coherence. The expectations should be clear in a lesson, the outcome of the lesson, unit, or curriculum is well-defined and addresses a genuine issue. For instruction, the teacher is more of a facilitator who provides relevant sources and reference material, and exploration is encouraged through questioning. Learning activities are varied and students are able to make decisions regarding their mode of learning, learning itself is active and not passive, and learning is differentiated to meet the needs of all students. Assessments should address prior knowledge, skill level, and mistakes, students should be engaging with real-world application, students engage in self-assessment regularly, and feedback should be given over time that is both helpful and detailed. Lastly, the section on sequence and coherence state that the educator should start with a *hook*, an attention-getting opening, engage students with relevant problem-solving, increase complexity over time, the educator is not *overtaching* the basics of the lesson, and they are respectful and responsive to students' needs.

This way of creating a curriculum, lesson or unit backwards was very helpful during my process and execution of my project. Much like moment work, it allows the educator to frame their lessons into segments that aren't necessarily in order or, in this case, are inverted. In my experience, most educational goals are better suited looking at non-linearly, as a straightforward approach can often lead to a mis-representation of the target outcomes. It makes sense to approach curriculum with the final goal in mind and work from there to determine what needs to be done in order to achieve it.

Implementation

From how I've seen this framework used before, I believe that it can be made applicable to any subsection of education. The method is guided, with stages and key principles, making it easy to follow regardless of what you're teaching. I've personally only used it in the context of this project, but utilizing it as a tool to create a resource for educators has been severely helpful. As I said before, this process closely resembles Tectonic Theater Project's moment work (*Moment Work*, 2018), so I found it easier to integrate concepts from the resources I was using within the UbD framework (Wiggins & McTighe, 2001). Along with the work of Tectonic, Boal's influences were easy to weave into the UbD framework, as it is also more so a tool for devising theatre.

Participants

For this project, I wanted to devise a group of students that most closely resemble what you would see in a classroom in the metro/Twin Cities area, where I'm usually based. I wanted to approach this project with the understanding that the educators using the guide will be working with diverse groups of students. Students in these classrooms may be coming from extremely varied lived experiences and backgrounds, so it was important for my guide to be specific enough to provide the best instruction for any educator while also being open-ended enough to fit any classroom. The end product is meant to be adaptable to fit a variety of educational settings and student groups, as well as educators.

The grade level I've applied this project to is beginning high school, but the guide can be adapted to fit an older middle school classroom. My reasoning for this is that I wanted to reach a wider range of educators, and because the material being addressed can be adapted to fit whichever grade level lies

within the four high school years or later middle school. For the purpose of my project, I wanted to maintain an open, yet specifically guided approach to introducing socially-relevant issues in a theatre classroom. This process could already be very open-ended, so I wanted to make sure these students were reflective of those who we could see in our classrooms, even if we don't see the same demographic of students every year.

Intended Audience

I have worked with a wide array of educators from my undergraduate years through to now, and I have both positive and negative experiences with the experiences I've had working with them. I believe that all educators are still learning in their practice, from students, resources, colleagues. We cannot be effective educators without first understanding that we are going to be learning for the rest of our lives; the old saying *You can't teach an old dog new tricks* is severely outdated in my opinion. We were once in our students' shoes, in the desks within the walls of whatever classrooms we learned in. When we start dissociating from our students, we are reverting to the idea that we only have the knowledge we came into the classroom with; we become vending machines for information.

My handbook for educators is a tool that engages them in a new avenue for learning. In turn, they are also learning. What do I need to come prepared with to engage my students with social issues in my classroom? What do I already know? What can I learn through the process? My intended audience is whomever wishes to enrich their and their students' learning experience, to broaden their understanding of what can be addressed and how to address it in the classroom. I'm not looking to push an agenda. What I am looking to do is have more educators willing to learn alongside their students, to engage in potentially difficult conversations, to ask questions of themselves and others. The educators who reference my guide are open to dialogues, and wish to engage their students with socially-relevant concepts in a different way. I believe that theatre is a great asset to us. It opens a space for play, exploration, and discovery, a space for collaboration and conversation. Theatre tools are unique in that they demand your attention, an active mind and body, and an audience. On your "stage" (whatever that may look like), learning can be expanded to meet the needs of all learners through active play. The

audience I'm aiming for are those educators (in any capacity) who are adventurous at heart, those who wish to challenge themselves and their students.

Summary

Chapter Three of my capstone dissertation focused on my methodology, process, participants, and intended audience for the context of my project. The goal of my project aims to address how we, as educators, can create a safe space for students to engage with social issues through theatre education, using influences from Theatre of the Oppressed and moment work. The work I've devised is aimed toward educating educators on how to engage their students with socially-relevant topics in a theatre classroom that is both structured and guided, but also instills the importance of questioning and open dialogue. The handbook presented as my Capstone project is a fleshed-out interpretation of what I've addressed throughout my paper, a guide for educators to open the door to a potentially unfamiliar avenue of education. The hope is that more educators are able to incorporate these practices into their classrooms, encourage discussion, and enrich their practice in theatre education.

CHAPTER FOUR

Introduction

I began this process with the hopes of addressing the question: *How can high school educators create a safe space for difficult learning in a social justice theatre program?* The goal of the process of devising my project was to provide a guide for educators who wanted to engage their students in socially responsive theatre. This guide was meant for all educators of varied backgrounds, experiences, and understandings of social justice theatre and approaches to socially relevant issues in their classrooms.

At the beginning of this process, I addressed the importance of art as a form of discussion about socially relevant issues. Art and spaces facilitating art creation are integral to opening dialogues housing difficult topics. In the wake of George Floyd's murder, I began to see a surgeance of creation; posters, graffiti, spoken word, etc. These works opened the floor for more and more changers to continue the dialogue of racial injustice in our city, and in our country. As Chauvin's trial commenced, the conversation continued. It seemed as though people were ready for justice to be served, as we all waited on baited breath for the outcome. Then, a young man in Brooklyn Center was killed. April 11th, 2021. Daunte Wright was 20 years old, not much older than the students in our high school classrooms. The protests began that night, a conversation of chants in the streets. After this last killing, there is no doubt in my mind of the importance of social justice and, in the context of my research, a deep need for the conversation to continue.

This chapter will provide an insight into my learning experiences as I devised my Capstone project, including those that were unexpected. It will also include a revisitation to my literature review, the implications of my work (potential policy implications), and limitations I perceived during the creation of my project. The closing of this chapter will address future research or projects that may come out of this experience, the results of my research, and my project's benefit to the profession.

Major Learnings

I have had many substantial learning experiences coming out of my work on my Capstone project. As a researcher, this came in the form of adapting works I referenced to fit the relevance of my project. Most of what I referenced came from two texts: *Moment Work* (2018) and *Emergent Strategy* (2017). These texts deviate from the guide I created, as they are not directly linked to classroom education. However, I knew from the beginning of my process that these texts were going to be integral to the guide I wanted to create. As I referenced the materials, I watched my project evolve, I pulled potentially relevant information from each text to format into my lesson plans and guide as a whole. As a writer, I noticed some evolution as well. I am a proficient academic writer, I know that my strength is in this area. As I began formatting my project, however, I knew that I needed to alter my writing approach to be more personable. The point of creating such a guide was to make something that was easily accessible for teachers of all backgrounds and understandings, which means creating a narrative voice that is more pleasantly readable. As someone who has difficulty reading most textbooks, I know how daunting it can be to read through reference material you can't relate to. By adjusting my language and writing in a way that is more similar to how I speak, I noticed that my guide wasn't only easier to read, but to write as well.

Literature Reflection

I focused on two main texts from my literature review to incorporate into my project: *Emergent Strategy* (2017) and *Moment Work* (2018). In the initial stages of my project, I was going to base my lesson plans on the methods of Augusto Boal and his *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1974). Upon further research, I found that, while Boal's methods were undoubtedly effective, my guide would be better suited by approaching lessons in a more introductory fashion. This made Tectonic Theater Project's *Moment Work* (2018) the perfect reference. *Moment work* is a guide for devising pieces of theatre using individual elements of theatre, developing a narrative, and layering moments in order to enhance or alter the narrative. I heavily referenced Tectonic Theater Project's work with devising plays such as *The Laramie Project* (2000) in my literature review, as this piece focused on a socially relevant issue at the time it was

being created. The narrative of this piece is still salient today, and is often used in theatre classrooms across the United States. I utilized the process for devising moments in order to create my lessons for a 3-week unit focusing on moment work.

Emergent Strategy (2017) also influenced my project significantly. This text is one that I have referenced in the past for different works, as I find it to be applicable for a myriad of different educational dialogues. In terms of this project, I knew that I could draw specific segments from the text in order to incorporate them into my reference list. Emergent strategy focuses on the transformation of individual experiences and interactions into the shared experiences and interactions we have with others; author brown describes this as *transformative justice*. It describes a ripple effect; our small actions and interactions reverberate into larger reactions. Most of the text focuses on social justice, social change, and social transformation. This made it an open-ended resource, which I applied to a social justice theatre classroom setting.

As I devised my project, I noticed some connections to other research from my literature review. One in particular was Sadler's (2010) dissertation on art as a form of activism. This dissertation heavily referenced Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed framework, as well as Sadler's own insight into how students' relationship to themselves and their experiences connect to the larger community. Sadler's commentary on the various stems connecting students' lived experiences and the larger community resonated with the ideas addressed in *Emergent Strategy*. Noticing this made me realize that adapting the concepts from *Emergent Strategy* was the right idea and that it was more relevant than I may have originally thought.

Implications

In my literature review, I referenced stories of educators losing their positions or facing harsh backlash as a result of integrating socially relevant materials in their classrooms. In one of the stories, a Bangor educator was attacked by parents for following the school's new curriculum change that incorporated diversity and equity into their classrooms (as cited in *Bangor Daily News*, 2020). In the wake of the backlash, the educator's school partnered with Racial Equity and Justice, an organization that trains educators and other school faculty on diversity and equity. Unfortunate as it is that the integration

of diversity and equity education brought upon such hate in the first place, this kind of dialogue made it possible for the school to enhance their approach not only for the sake of their students, but for their educators. It shows teacher advocacy, as well as the importance of issues such as this.

My project approaches a topic that has a history of backlash in the context of education: social justice. As I outlined in Chapter Two, educators who have broached topics such as this in the past have faced repercussive action, in and out of a theatre context. For this reason, educators should, fairly or not, take caution when approaching issues of social justice in a theatre classroom. My goal with my project was to create an open-ended format for educators to reference for their own units with enough background to effectively and safely carry out such lessons. My hope with my work is that it will begin a conversation into how to educate educators in how to approach themes of social justice in theatre and, potentially, alleviate some bias into social justice in education. I also hope that my work encourages schools to promote and enact diversity and equity training for their educators. It is my belief that, especially now, we owe it to our educators, our students, and our schools to encourage this kind of education.

Limitations

For the most part, I really enjoyed devising my project. As social justice theatre is something that I'm very passionate about, it wasn't difficult to pull information from my own background knowledge and favorite literature to incorporate into my guide. It was very fulfilling to compile a reference list of topics I was knowledgeable about in a way that didn't make it sound like I was writing a textbook. One major drawback of creating this guide I experienced, however, was formatting. I used Google Docs in order to format my project, after finding little success with other programs. In the beginning, I just started to pool all of my information into the program in order to get all of my thoughts down in one place. However, I soon discovered that other programs were less user-friendly and, being that I am not particularly technologically-literate, I opted to simply format my project fully in Google Docs. The limitation here is that my guide wasn't able to be formatted in the way that I truly wanted it to be.

Future Research/Projects

Culminating my research and devising this project reinvigorated my passion for socially responsive theatre education and, in a broader sense, social justice education. One of the main points of intrigue I gleaned from my research was on the backlash some educators have received due to approaching socially relevant themes/issues in their classrooms. I'm very interested in continuing my research into policies barring educators from approaching such topics (if there are any) and addressing both sides of the issue; those who are for implementing socially relevant learning into the classroom and those opposed. I'd like to go more in depth into the two sides and elaborate more in a separate research paper on the issue, more so than I did in my original paper. I believe it's important to understand the pros and cons of engaging students in social justice education, as well as how schools dictate what is and is not appropriate content for the classroom and why. Another topic I'd like to explore more in depth is diversity and equity training for educators. The goal for my project was to provide a guide for educators who are interested in engaging their students in social justice theatre, along with background material to support educator learning. While I can provide a chunk of background information I know, I'd be very interested in creating a more extensive guide for educators who want to learn about equity and diversity. One of the topics I outline in my project is the concept of privilege. This topic in itself can translate into an entire lesson if I were to create a guide for educator training, which I believe would be greatly beneficial for all educators, not just those who want to engage in social justice in the classroom. I'd like to develop a guide that is not targeted specifically to theatre educators as my project is, rather one that caters to educators of all backgrounds and subject areas.

Communicating Results

As I continued to develop my project, I wondered to myself how I could make my guide available to my target audience. My first idea was to create physical literature, I had gleaned the concept from an educator friend of mine who had his own unit guide (formatted like a Playbill) neatly printed in bulk. While I really liked this idea in concept, the issue was distributing the material. In order to make my guide

readily accessible, I knew that utilizing digital media was necessary. My project would be best accessed through a website. It is my hope to fully finalize my guide and create a website that includes both an online version and PDF downloadable copy that can be printed if necessary. By making my guide accessible online, it will be able to be referenced and used by almost anyone. The goal is for all educators to have access to this guide and use it in their own classrooms. For educators who have an interest in engaging their students in social justice theatre, this guide will provide a template for conducting a similar unit.

Benefits to the Profession

As I stated before, I have hopes that work such as mine will create a space for policy change in our schools in terms of how we train educators in diversity and equity. In a similar sense, I hope that my work can benefit the profession by making a guide to approaching themes of social justice in the classroom accessible to educators. While my guide was geared towards theatre education, being as it's a full theatre unit, components of these lessons and reference material can be adapted to fit other areas of education. The concepts from my guide may even be used to devise one-day lessons or activities that can be integrated into regular class periods. My hope is that one benefit of my project results in a continued discussion revolving around how we can integrate socially responsive theatre into our theatre classrooms. While my project is not the only one of its kind, providing an easily accessible resource for educators to apply to their own lesson planning in a unit similar to this one, and with background information into effective frameworks for approaching such material, may be helpful in normalizing this kind of education.

Summary

The process of devising this project has come with some challenges as well as some great revelations. I came into my process with a main question in mind: *How can high school educators create a safe space for difficult learning in a social justice theatre program?* This question led me to create one of the most substantial works I've made in my time in the Master's program. As someone who is deeply passionate about social justice and social justice theatre, I knew that this project was something I needed

to create. In devising my project, I was able to create a guide that was accessible to all educators, something that I could be proud sharing with like-minded educators and those of diverse backgrounds. This chapter not only outlined the process and outcome of my devising process, but also what I have learned along the way. This process challenged me to apply my background knowledge and adapt texts to fit into my guide in a way that would be easily accessible for educators of varied backgrounds. It encouraged me to look at myself as an educator who is actively learning and, in turn, assume that all educators are continually learning.

Thematic Bibliography

History of Social Justice/Conflict Theatre

Social Justice Theatre had cemented itself into the face of theatre as we know it today, and its influences in the wider world are evident. Social Justice Theatre is a subsection of theatre that focuses on social issues varying from global warming to racial equity and everything in between (as cited in *Staging Social Justice: Collaborating to Create Activist Theatre*, 2013). Much like any social justice form, this subsection of theatre seeks to promote change in the world through action and dialogue (as cited in *Emergent Strategy*, 2017). In this section, I will explore the history of Social Justice Theatre in terms of its beginnings, as well as current applications and approaches to issues new and old. I will be investigating how this type of theatre has created change, beginning onstage and bleeding into society and the wider world. This section will distinguish how influential theatre has been in the social justice movement and the creators and activists who made change in the world through this medium.

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Barriers and Contests

Bias exists in every person, and in every environment (as cited in *Radical Teaching: Politics in the Classroom*, 2010). It goes without saying that it also must exist within the classroom. We as educators must recognize that our students bring their own biases into our classrooms, as do we. In respect of my research topic, I will be addressing existing bias as it pertains to the classroom, as well as research that has explored teaching in ways that are adaptable to student groups of all experiences. This section will explore biases in teaching and students' experiences while also looking at how we as educators can create a space that explores anti-bias learning.

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Approaches /Methodologies to Difficult Learning in the Theatre Classroom

The ways in which we as educators engage with our students academically can mean the difference between *ineffectual* and *impactive* learning. The classroom, therefore, should exist as an environment for exploration into real-world subject application and socially-relevant learning experiences (as cited in *Not Light, but Fire: How to Lead Meaningful Race Conversations in the Classroom*, 2018). This section aims to identify approaches and methodologies pertaining to integrating relevant social dialogues into the classroom in order to inspire *changers*. The ideation addressed here is that students want to engage in dialogues and influence the wider world as a

result of this kind of exposure and, as brown says in her book *Emergent Strategy* (brown, a., 2017), “The more people that collaborate on that ideation, the more that people will be served by the resulting world(s)” (brown, 2017, p. 19).

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