

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: University of Sheffield
Unit of Assessment: 29 - English Language and Literature
Title of case study: Using theatre to educate, empower and inform communities
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Bill McDonnell's research into participatory theatre has impacted on culture, education, and policy, both nationally, through a report – <i>Social Impact in UK Theatre</i> – commissioned by Arts Council England and the Independent Theatre Council, which remains the only report exclusively devoted to the social impact of theatre; and locally, through 'Acting Together', a Theatre in Education company led by McDonnell, which works with museums and schools to promote diversity, inclusiveness, multiculturalism, and civic cohesiveness; and to increase the skills, knowledge, and cultural agility of children from areas of significant socio-economic deprivation, enriching the lives, imaginations, and sensibilities of individuals and groups.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Prior to his academic career, Bill McDonnell worked as a practitioner in community, educational, and activist theatres; this experience continued to shape his research after his appointment in Sheffield's School of English in 1999. His subsequent work with local communities, schools, and museums has been reflected in his research outputs, which evidence a longstanding commitment to the social uses and value, and to the ethics, of theatre. Running through both these research areas is a common interest in applied theatre, i.e. theatre which has educational, communal, or political purpose(s) beyond itself, beyond performance, and which privileges participation, process, and community.</p> <p>Typical of McDonnell's research into applied theatre and his fusion of practical experience and academic analysis is his monograph, <i>Theatres of the Troubles: Theatre, Resistance and Liberation in Ireland</i> [R4], shortlisted for Theatre Book of the Year 2008, which focuses on a neglected area of theatre history and radical community-based practice. As the book demonstrates, (i) involving the community in collaborative authorship provides a crucial way of avoiding stereotyping and misrepresentation, and (ii) the most meaningful impact is achieved by work that draws on existing social networks and reflects the concerns of the community in which it is situated.</p> <p>McDonnell's research into the social value of theatre is also evidenced by his 2006 study, <i>Social Impact in UK Theatre</i> [R3] (co-authored with Dominic Shellard, then a colleague in the School of English). Commissioned by Arts Council England and the Independent Theatre Council, this remains the only report devoted to the social impacts of theatre; it identified 49 descriptors for social impact, encompassing personal, group, civic, and economic effects, including:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The value of being exposed to powerful dramatic narratives that challenge, stimulate, provoke and cause us to question/reflect/act; 2. The value of being exposed to the visions/experiences of other cultures, and to minority, marginalised or hidden experiences; 3. The stimulation of the imagination and development of personal understanding of theatre as art: of the interplay of language, movement, music, light and sound to entertain, move and teach; 4. The individual opportunity through the 'safety of fiction' to witness or explore painful or difficult experiences safely; 5. The opportunity to transcend barriers of language and articulacy by using the language of images and play to express experience; 6. Factual knowledge gained through witness or participation in theatre; 7. Basic to advanced theatre skills gained in workshops or through training; 8. Enhanced personal expressiveness gained through active participation in drama. <p>The study also identified generic factors enabling these social impacts. These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Artistic excellence; • Cultural Partnerships, which were identified as one of the most important social and economic evaluative measures of theatre's social impact (for example, in meeting the challenges of social exclusion and racism, and overcoming educational disadvantage); • Proactive strategies to overcome social, political and economic barriers to participation; • Participatory creative processes, with a genuine creative dialogue between company and

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community, and between artists and participants;

- A commitment to ethical practices.

These principles underpin McDonnell's approach to the impact activities described in section 4.

3. References to the research

- R1. McDonnell, B. (2005), 'The Politics of Historiography – towards an ethics of representation', *Research in Drama Education*, 10.2:127-138. RIDE is the leading international journal for research into educational theatre. [Peer-reviewed; returned RAE2008]
- R2. McDonnell, B. (2006a), 'Theatre, Community and Liberation - reflections on interventionary theatre', in *Theatre as Social Intervention*, ed. by John Somers and Michael Balfour. Toronto: Captus Press, 2006. Based on keynote address at the 5th International Conference on 'Theatre as Social Intervention', University of Exeter, 2005. [Returned RAE2008]
- R3. McDonnell, B. (2006b), *Social Impact of UK Theatre*. London: Arts Council England. [Funded by £20,000 Arts Council grant]
- R4. McDonnell, B. (2008), *Theatres of the Troubles: Theatre, Resistance and Liberation in Ireland*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press. Shortlisted for Theatre Book of the Year 2008. [Returned REF2014]
- R5. McDonnell, B. (2011), 'Experiential Learning in Museum Theatre - towards a model of 'thick practice'', *Journal of Arts and Communities*, 3.1: 57-71. [Peer-reviewed journal]

4. Details of the impact

Impact on National Policy and Practice

McDonnell's research has affected national policy and practice in two key ways: (i) *The Social Impact of Theatre* provided a benchmark for the Arts Council to use for evaluating funding applications and gave theatre companies a framework round which to structure applications [S4]; (ii) It has informed the teaching of participatory theatre in the UK. This impact has been achieved first, through a collaboration with Frances Rifkin, Artistic Director of Utopia Arts, a London-based community arts and training company [S5]. As a result of McDonnell's published research on participatory theatre, Rifkin asked McDonnell to act as academic mentor for her pioneering project, 'The Ethics of Participatory Theatre in Higher Education: A Framework for Learning and Teaching' [S6], funded by a Higher Education Academy grant (2008-10). Building on the principles of ethical practice laid out in *The Social Impact of Theatre* and in McDonnell's 2005 *RIDE* article, Rifkin's project develops a framework for an ethical approach to the teaching, learning, and professional practice of participatory or applied theatre; this research underpins teaching at Durham, Manchester, Newcastle, Northumberland, Queen's Belfast, Rose Bruford, and the University of East London. McDonnell's published research on ethical practice and participatory theatre is likewise used for teaching at other UK HEIs (e.g. Exeter [S8], Goldsmiths, Manchester [S7]).

Impact on Education

McDonnell's research into, and commitment to, the social value of theatre also led him to establish, in 2002, 'Acting Together', an educational theatre company comprising volunteers (both staff and students) from the University of Sheffield. This company delivers 3-4 projects annually, working with schools from ethnically diverse areas defined by 'significant economic and social disadvantage' (OFSTED) and with a high proportion of pupils on free school meals and with Special Educational Needs (for example, one partner school, Southey Green Learning Community, has over 50% of its pupils on free school meals). The projects support work on literacy and oracy, social relationships, and the delivery of curriculum topics. For instance, projects in the academic year 2012-13 comprised 'Not just a number', working with Y8-10 on articulating personal experiences (Hinde House School); an excerpted performance by Y6s of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, using the original language (Southey Green Learning Community); and two projects around learning topics: 'Egyptians' (Y4) and 'Circuses' (Y1), both at Southey Green [S1][S2].

In 2009-11, a significant strand of the work produced by Acting Together was delivered through collaboration with the Culture Lab, the outreach unit of Museums Sheffield [S3], which has the remit to 'inspire young people to explore, stretch and develop their language, creativity, understanding and confidence in arts, crafts, culture and heritage', principles which also underpin the practice of Acting Together. This collaboration focused on three projects, the first two of which were funded by HEIF Knowledge Transfer awards: (i) 'A Picture of Us' (Graves Art Gallery, 2009), working with staff and pupils from Hucklow Primary School and Beck Primary School; (ii) 'Food

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Glorious Food' (Weston Park Museum, 2010), working with staff and pupils from Southey Green Learning Community; (iii) 'The Trial of Spencer Broughton' (Weston Park Museum, 2011), also with Southey Green Learning Community.

All of Acting Together's projects are underpinned by, and implement, the principles developed in the research study *The Social Impact of Theatre* and explored in McDonnell's articles and 2008 monograph. The projects with Culture Lab also related to wider national schemes. 'Picture of Us' belonged to a Tate Britain sponsored initiative, 'The Great British Art Debate', which looked to 'pioneer new ways of working with school and community audiences' in exploring 'what Britishness is'; 'Food, Glorious Food' connected to national healthy-eating initiatives.

Educational Impact: Children

All Acting Together projects impact on the cultural life and education of the children at participating schools, giving them the opportunity to create and interpret cultural capital, enriching and expanding their imagination and sensibilities, as well as enhancing their learning. This applies to the pupils who witness the performances (which are staged for the entire school) as well as those who create them. For example, at Southey Green Learning Community, after the *Macbeth* project with Acting Together, the school proceeded to run two further workshops on the play, indicative of the momentum that had been built up and the impact that the project had had in connecting and engaging the children with Shakespearean literature. Pupils were reported as reciting lines and acting out Shakespeare in the school corridors (including parts given to other children to learn), and even children who were not involved in the performance contributed voluntarily by making stage properties at home in their own time [S2].

The children involved in performances develop basic theatre skills (devising, image work, narrative, voice and movement) as well as social skills (team work, respecting each others' abilities and differences) and generic skills (debating, analysing, researching). Those children involved in the projects with Culture Lab also had the opportunity to broaden their engagement with and understanding of Museums Sheffield's collections and its cultural and civic role. This interaction brought them specific subject knowledge about the exhibitions and creative ways of learning; it also allowed them to intervene in, and contribute to, public understanding and perception through their performances. For example, in 'A Picture of Us', the largely British Black and British Asian children were able to offer their own witty commentary on an art exhibition which manifestly did not picture them, whilst 'Spencer Broughton' – about the trial of a local eighteenth-century highwayman – drew on extensive research in the city archives and the Local History unit of Sheffield Libraries.

Whilst all of Acting Together's projects break down barriers (e.g. between city and University), those with Culture Lab in particular initiated new relationships, bringing the children into contact with the museum and its staff, as well as the University. These projects consequently opened up access to cultural spaces, which, for the most part, both they and their parents do not visit, or feel ownership of [S3]. The public performances at the museums implicitly constituted a civic celebration and endorsement of the children's creativity, and were a public expression of the value of partnerships founded on the role of the arts in education, formal and informal. The work was also a contribution to the schools' educational and social development goals, by offering the children new ways of exploring history and art, and by bringing them into the centre of major cultural spaces not as visitors but as commentators.

Educational Impact: Practitioners

Since its foundation in 2002, Acting Together has established strong and mutually beneficial relationships with partner schools, based on trust and understanding. As the company is invited back to the same schools time and again, this longevity is a measure of the impact of its activity and recognition by the teachers of the ways in which the process and practice of participatory theatre enrich the learning experience of their pupils. Besides the specific projects on which Acting Together collaborate, the company – led by McDonnell – has also contributed to the teaching environment and experience by training teachers in partner schools in basic role-play and theatre workshop methods, giving them the confidence to use these techniques in day-to-day teaching. The relationship with Acting Together has consequently had a positive impact on teaching practice and curriculum delivery at the partner schools.

The post-project evaluation of the *Macbeth* project is indicative of the impact in this area [S1]. The teacher interviewed noted that it had made a real difference to their own teaching practice to witness how the theatre workshop methods (such as freeze-framing) had helped the children to understand complex texts. The programme had also opened their eyes to what children with low

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levels of literacy are capable of, and also to the value of increasing the repertoire of the children's cultural experiences, which they now plan to integrate within the curriculum to a much greater extent. Further to that, the partnership with Acting Together had allowed the school to provide this experience without significant – and therefore prohibitive – financial outlay, by giving them access to the University's theatre spaces and resources.

Cultural Impact: Museums and Community Engagement

The theatre projects in collaboration with Culture Lab made a practical contribution to Museums Sheffield's participation targets for the delivery of Sheffield City Council's 'Kids Can Do' programme, which supports the development of positive outcomes for all young people aged 8-13 years in Sheffield. As the then Director of Community Education confirms [S3], the projects also '*contributed to capacity building in neighbourhoods [to which] the Museums had been dedicating long-term audience development*'. All three projects were notable for the high and regular attendance: the pupils' participation was voluntary and extra-curricular; despite that, all the children stuck with the projects, demonstrating a level and consistency of commitment that was considered unusual by their teachers [S2]. Culture Lab staff also noted an impact in respect of the take-up of places on subsequent projects, as children who had been involved in the theatre programmes signed up for other initiatives at the Museums, an indication of the way in which working with Acting Together had helped break down very real cultural barriers. Further to that, the theatre projects also enriched the visitor experience. For example, 100% of responders to the museum survey distributed at the promenade performance of the 'Spencer Broughton' project said they would like to see more museum theatre. Representative comments include '*very informative*', '*very enlightening*'; '*it brought history to life*'; and '*it should be here every week*'.

The collaboration with Acting Together also demonstrated the value, for Museums staff, of theatre as an educational method and it allowed them to develop new ways of interpreting and showcasing their collections. As the then Director of Community Education states [S3], '*The projects diversified the profile of our public programme and diversified the creative experiences of these young people in their own communities. For us as staff we definitely benefited from the fresh perspectives the students leading the projects brought to their interpretations relating to exhibitions and displays of collections material in the museums, experiencing the stories and meanings of objects and narratives in different ways and in particularly through the eyes and imaginations of young people. The projects helped us think through quite rigorously what the success factors for quality cultural and community engagement are, thinking that means there is a continuing commitment at the museums to sustain the continuation of such work in partnership to deliver creative activity rooted in interpretation of culture and heritage with community, cultural and public outcome*'. The work with Acting Together was consequently presented by Museums Sheffield staff as a model of innovative practice at a national seminar in Norwich in 2010.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1. The Assistant Deputy Head, Southey Green Learning Community, Sheffield, can corroborate the impact of Acting Together on both teaching practice and pupils' educational experience.
- S2. A Year 1 teacher at Southey Green Learning Community, Sheffield, involved in the Museums of Sheffield projects (2010, 2011) can testify to the impact of those on the pupils' learning experience and their level of engagement.
- S3. The then Communities Manager at Museums Sheffield can corroborate the impact on the museums and their policies for community engagement.
- S4. The CEO of the Independent Theatre Council can corroborate the impact of [R2] as a framework for funding applications to the Arts Council.
- S5. The Artistic Director of Utopia Arts can corroborate the impact of McDonnell's research when developing an ethical framework for participatory theatre in higher education and the subsequent impact of this framework.
- S6. The impact of McDonnell's research on the development of this framework can also be corroborated by Rifkin, *The Ethics of Participatory Theatre in Higher Education: A Framework for Learning and Teaching* (<http://tinyurl.com/pwrnb68>). PP3, 10

For examples of McDonnell's publications being listed in set reading at other HEIs, see:

- S7. http://courses.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/pg/search_details.asp?ID=1184
- S8. <http://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/drama/modules/DRA2082/description/>