Urban youth try drama: a pedagogy of the real?

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REVIEW ESSAY

Urban youth try drama: a pedagogy of the real?

Why theatre matters: urban youth, engagement, and a pedagogy of the real, by
Kathleen Gallagher, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2014, 295 pp., $75.00 (hardback),
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Introduction

Gallagher argues that young people in different nations face different challenges, and, via a 'pedagogy of the real', she analyses the deeply-rooted issues in lives of urban young people in Canada (Toronto), India (Lucknow), Taiwan (Taipei) and North America (Boston). Their struggles and challenges, their hopes and fears and the different aspects of lives that the young people are facing are clearly depicted throughout this ground-breaking research. Gallagher's involvement to engage in this international research involving young people from four nations is impressive and notable. Her own life events provided the insight for her to conduct such a comprehensive and complicated research study. Becoming a mother and the death of a colleague who embraced the 'pedagogy of possibility' partly inspired Gallagher to pursue this research

Capturing the lives of marginalised urban youth in a global setting is a delicate and complex task which Gallagher argues is not a simple task. The drama classroom serves as the frame for understanding student engagement and student involvement within contexts of family, peers, school and community. It also reflects the wider spheres of realities around the globe in transforming social, political and economic domains.

Gallagher shares cultural geographer Michael Brown's mixed method of applying quantitative research within qualitative ethnography in a culturally complex research setting. Brown (2007) views postmodernism as an acknowledgement of plurality. Similarly, Gallagher argues that her international study demands pluralizing her epistemologies and methodologies.

Gallagher utilises storytelling as a start off point to capture the issues raised in the lives of those young people she worked with. She interweaves individual interviews with teachers and students and focus group interviews with students. Based on the real-life stories provided by the participants, she and her team of researchers later used Verbatim theatre as a mechanism to elicit information from individuals who attended the theatre performances through individual and group interviews.

Such international research was complex, and tasks were carefully arranged and executed according the ethics of research to ensure privacy and confidentiality of both researcher and research participants were safe guarded. It is essential to note that conducting real-life research is not easy, especially when different countries have their own structured rules of ethics. For example, Gallaher's co-researchers had issues in North America where there was no collaboration between the local research team and the initial school which was identified. There was a need to change the research venue. Based on Gallagher's reporting, not much data is revealed from Taiwan as the system of not disclosing local issues can be sensed when research was conducted.

In this review, I conclude with some insights from my own doctoral research which uses real-life dilemmas as an alternative method to encourage young people in a multi-ethnic setting to talk about their daily moral conflicts and how they went about resolving such conflicts using a dialogical approach.

The unique aspect of my own study is that, every day, young people are grappling with a scenario of multi-ethnicity, different cultures and stringent top-down systems of governance. Despite this, the young people shared similar challenges and found pleasure in partnership, peer support, engagement and student connectedness within and outside the school community as analysed in Gallagher's research.

A view I happen to share

Young people are faced with a challenging period in life when they undergo different aspects of development; physical, emotional and spiritual. Gallagher tried to capture and analyse how the young people in Toronto, Boston, Taipei and Lucknow confront their own daily challenges in order to face the realities of life. In my own research, students in different multi-ethnic groups are continuously grappling with the complex beliefs of self-identity vs. communal identity. They want their autonomy, yet are bound to respect the elders and are not given a voice to state their preference, let it be about clothing, choice of vocation or even their physical appearance (Vishalache 2011).The research was conducted in different parts of Malaysia where the participants were 16–17 year old young people from different ethnic and religious groups. It is similar to Gallagher's case studies where students are struggling to survive or to be heard; such as pleading with bus drivers to get a free ride to attend school; and in other cases students fleeing from home to avoid being married off early because they want to continue school.

Gallagher faced difficulties with the complexity of working with different cultures and demographic structures. She worked closely with her local collaborators to ensure that their research questions and underlying assumptions were culturally appropriate. Their analyses took into account the necessary social and contextual dynamics when communicating with young people. One simple example is identifying the parenting styles and how the different discourses were understood based on the diverse cultural aspects. In Toronto, the young people were quite open in discussing their relationship with their parents in focus group discussions. In India, interviews were conducted with the participants to understand how the parenting style affected the young people. In Taiwan, the heavy influence of Confucian philosophy was observed by the Taiwanese students. The reapplication of an older moral system within a new hierarchy of social functions where an institution is responsible for moral and social condition (Flanagan 2011) made it difficult for Taiwanese students to express themselves or share their voices.

I faced similar challenges with participants during my research using real-life moral dilemma discussions (Re-LiMDD), as they were from different cultural and religious backgrounds. Coming from a family of mixed parentage and being able to converse in several languages helped me during the data collection process. However the understanding of different cultures and body language was continuously challenging from the ice-breaking session right up to the reflective stages. In fact, several times during data analysis I had to show the video recording to students and confirm what they meant when they winked at each other, kept quiet, rolled their eyes or showed their fist.

Gallagher's study included 118 secondary school students from the four cities, with each city having fewer than 40 participants; Canada ($n = 20$), India ($n = 14$), Taiwan ($n = 36$) and United States of America ($n = 29$). The gender balanced: Female = 55, Male = 54. The age range was largely 13 to 19 with one participant older than 21. Participants self-identified as being of Aboriginal descent, minority ethnic groups, having a disability etc. The dynamics of working through mixed methods to ensure in-depth data was collected in a unique way, yet was closely related to the ethnographic aspects of research. Suppositions were made explicit and disciplinary efforts were embedded in the world of youth engagement research.

The focus in the discussion below is on the analysis of how young people are struggling in their own ways to face the different conflicts in their daily lives. This could be due to cultural and political influences.

Bridging with real-life

Gallagher's argument is that theatre and drama do not commute similarly to the young people in the different cities. In Taiwan for example, the lecture-style teaching and authoritarian structure, including surveillance, within the school presented particular challenges that were not helpful in allowing the

young Taiwanese to be heard. Not many narratives were provided from Taiwan, except for an incident where the Taiwanese teacher was fired from her position as public disciplinarian.

However, in India the experience was more positive as drama and theatre is part of the Indian culture to educate society about social problems. It has been the culture in India to raise awareness regarding social injustice and to activate public support for change and transformation through drama and theatre. The great sage Bharata narrates that *Natya*/drama teaches duty to those bent on doing their duty, love to those who are eager for its accomplishment; reprimands those who are ill-bred or unruly; promotes self-restraint in those who are disciplined; gives courage to cowards, energy to heroic persons; enlightens men of poor intellect and gives wisdom to the learned. Drama is seen as a mode of relief for unlucky persons who are afflicted with sorrow and grief; will be conducive to observance of duty (dharma), as well as to fame, long life, intellect and general good; and will educate people too (Ghosh 1950). Thus when the Verbatim interviews were converted to a play focussing on domestic violence, the participants educated the society in the village by inviting the local police, women and girls. It was a powerful cultural process which empowered not only the research participants but also the local community. Gallagher's research enabled the participating girls to work within their constraints and develop a constructive partnership with the local villagers. However, there were constraints from parents of participants who were authoritarian in nature. One particular participant had to fight all the way against her father just to be in the research programme and be involved in the drama. But finally she had to give in and opt out of the programme as her father was in the verge of violence and disowning her.

In Toronto, the marginalised youth were more confident and felt life was worth living when they experienced the powerful moments of performance which portrayed their lives, their struggles and their ability to resolve conflicts. *The Doors* project which started as an individual prompt where students were given a journal to develop their personal narratives progressed to discussions. After several months it was developed into a piece of theatre where scenes were created based on students' writings. Gallagher presents the young people's reality; where the voices of the young people are given priority as she constructs a 'youth knowledge base' (237). However, she later admits that these findings cannot be generalised as each group of participants in the various cities or within a nation is different. What was important is that she built mutual trust and a respectful environment with the young people, appreciated their openness and cherished the moments with them.

Drawing on Freire (1993) about paradoxical hope-in-action, Gallagher observed that hope is the central theme of practices that she and her team witnessed. The participants are hopeful of transforming their lives for the better even if it means continuously struggling with issues of discrimination and poverty, fighting for their own rights and going against communal practices. Gallagher and her team believe that it is not an imaginary hope but the hope that by working together actions would transform their material lives. This hope is highlighted where young people in Canada and India are in a continual struggle of helping oneself or working with peers. Emotions of joys and tears of personal and communal affection were emerging in the research. Other feelings of fright, anxiety, anger, frustration, compassion, pleasure and hope was felt from the voices of the young people.

Young marginalised people are affected by their emotions and the place they dwell in. In Toronto, Gallagher found that the conditions of a run-down space affected the emotions of the students and the teachers, whereas in Lucknow the school was seen as a safe haven compared to some of the students' homes. However, teachers in Toronto who thought they might get burnt out of teaching in such a space and dealing with difficult students realised that preserving dignity when facing economic hardship for the students should be supported by them. Narratives showed that some students repeatedly uttered that they were answerable for their own fate and this was echoed by participants in Lucknow where one student fled to stay with her grandmother just to be able to attend school.

Gallagher made endeavours to understand race and racism and what it meant to the young people, and how colour and migrant issues affected their lives. In Lucknow, the issues were more related to gender normative behaviours and the great influence of patriarchal authority in the Indian culture. The fathers' attempts to suppress the dreams and desires of girls among the Lucknow participants are clear throughout the research. Even towards the end of her research when Gallagher planned to bring five Indian girls from her research to England, one girl did not make it as her father threatened to beat her,

throw her out and also kill her if she went back to school and Gallagher and teachers had to intervene to help the girl out. These struggles are continuously faced by young people with authoritarian parents.

Hope provides the vision to go on for the young people. Gallagher found that in all the study contexts in Toronto, students skip school because of boredom and teachers who are too strict for these young people who are already struggling with jobs after school and financial burdens. The power of theatre/drama is encapsulated in the examples of some students who were homeless. Seeing a drama about this issue gave them hope; they felt their lives were acknowledged by the portrayal; they could stand proud of who they are and no longer be embarrassed because of the negative perception of society towards individuals living in shelters

Relating *Why theatre matters* to *Re-LiMDD*

The storytelling through theatre method and Verbatim theatre that Gallagher undertook helped participants connect their own struggle in life and what they were undergoing. The storytelling used by Gallagher positions the story not as a space to arrive but a place from which to begin questioning one's reality. She uses ideas and provocations raised in classroom discussions or interviews as starting points for the thinking-in-community approach. It is sharing of a common language, realities that the young people face and shared concerns of spaces within the school and outside in the community that made the difference to the young people. Gallagher adopted similar processes towards building a research relationship with the participating students.

In my research, I used real-life moral dilemma discussion as a tool to elicit the challenges in life that the young people were undergoing. The real-life moral dilemmas were provided by the participants themselves. Through a process of ice-breaking, building trust among participants, construction of real-life dilemmas, ensuring the confidentiality of the source of each dilemma etcetera, I explored and critically analysed the types of real-life moral dilemmas that a selected group of twenty-two 16–17 year old secondary students face. The research sought to discover what young people describe as moral dilemmas, how they approach them and what they find useful in resolving these moral problems. Qualitative research methodology – consisting of a modified framework of participatory action research and gathering data for textual analysis through a modified form of participant observation, focus group transcripts, interviews, and student journals – was used to analyse and determine the space, activities, individuals involved and the relationships that the young people value.

Many of Gallagher's findings relate to my own and the real world that young people are challenged with. In one focus group interview in Toronto, Gallagher's participants share that they attend school because their parents went there (45). My own student participants agreed that they would do drugs if their parents did so as the parents are their role models (Vishalache 2011). Similarly, Gallagher's participants and my own spoke about maintaining a balance between the mind, heart and action and that how they react or behave at the end is their own responsibility. The belief of taking responsibility for one's own self echoes Bibby's (2011) concept of psychosocial beings who acknowledge the internal and external aspects of any beings. The young people in Gallagher's research are in a process of understanding a lifelong trajectory and being blown by public and personal spheres plus the complexities of their classed and structured lives; it is very complicated. I share the same challenges as Gallagher and struggled with the inadequacies of earlier analyses.

Gallagher explicitly observes the many times her participants commented on the support and joy and strength that their peers provided them: my research concluded that the young people viewed their friends as a source of 'peer pleasure' rather than 'peer pressure'.

However, in my research which was within a multicultural sphere I had to struggle with ad hoc cultural discourses not obvious in Gallagher's; for example, a Chinese youth brought issues of an older generational attitude; 'Young people should not argue with the elders as the elders ate salt first', or the Indian youth who said; 'I want my own autonomy but parents say what the first child does, that's followed by younger siblings' (Vishalache 2011).

Gallagher's work progressed through many ups and downs. Her reflexive moments, her doubts, her capability to restructure her whole research as she endeavoured more and more insights and challenges

in conducting such a comprehensive research of pushing the boundaries of Simon's 'pedagogy of the possible' to 'pedagogy of the real' should be analysed critically. It also gave me the assurance that my Re-LiMDD within a multi-cultural setting was not a simple task to undertake.

I had moments of unpleasantness within my own research which was resolved through the construction of working agreements amongst participants and between participants and researcher. Dealing with real-life matters is no small issue and when matters get heated, there must be a mechanism to bring the situation back to an appropriate climate. In Gallagher's experience, putting each other down and degrading name-calling was seen as acceptable by students but not by teachers. In Re-LiMDD, however, such issues need to be handled with great care because what are discussed are the dilemmas of the participants and they take ownership for the direction of the discussion. The collaboration and co-operation between participants is worth analysing and this was seen in the theatre or drama performances of Gallagher's groups. As Luce Irigaray states, art is more critical than morality if individuals want to explore humanity through relationships (Burke and Gill 1993).

Conclusion

Originally Gallagher proposed an international research project that would examine how the relationships among culture, identity, multicultural and equity policies, and student engagement have an impact on the lives of young people in schools and communities traditionally labelled 'disadvantaged' in the four different cities in Canada, Taiwan, India and the USA.

However, as the research took shape, Gallagher realised that 'youth knowledge base' is an unrealistic goal in a general sense because young people's experiences are so contextually situated, their 'voice' so inadequately accessed. However, her work here can be the starting point for many international social science and humanities researchers who want to explore and dive deeper into multi ethnic young people-involved issues.

Gallagher's research which uses mixed methods to venture into many aspects of student engagement and student connectedness within and outside the school sphere is an innovative start and can be further explored and applied to other spheres and age groups. By including different young people in different cultural settings through a common mechanism, theatre, this book makes a great contribution to a globalised world of understanding the real-lives of young people within their own cultural and political boundaries.

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