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Applying the Pedagogy of the Oppressed: A Review of Creating Together: Participatory, Community-Based, and Collaborative Arts Practices and Scholarship across Canada

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Abstract

Creating Together: Participatory, Community-Based, and Collaborative Arts Practices and Scholarship across Canada offers a series of real-life practical examples where the concepts of the book title are effectively applied and an impact is made in a range of places across Canada and with a range of marginalized groups. By using a comparative approach, this review links the material presented in Creating Together: Participatory, Community-based, and Collaborative Arts Practices and Scholarship across Canada to the concepts presented in Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed. The examples in Creating Together offer pragmatic applications of Freire's concepts and provide a series of pragmatic illustration for those that want to make a difference in community engagement particularly with those who occupy the edges of society.

Keywords

Arts Based, Participatory, Community, Collaboration, Oppressed

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Applying the Pedagogy of the Oppressed: A Review of *Creating Together: Participatory, Community-Based, and Collaborative Arts Practices and Scholarship across Canada*

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Creating Together: Participatory, Community-Based, and Collaborative Arts Practices and Scholarship across Canada offers a series of real-life practical examples where the concepts of the book title are effectively applied and an impact is made in a range of places across Canada and with a range of marginalized groups. By using a comparative approach, this review links the material presented in *Creating Together: Participatory, Community-based, and Collaborative Arts Practices and Scholarship across Canada* to the concepts presented in Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The examples in *Creating Together* offer pragmatic applications of Freire's concepts and provide a series of pragmatic illustration for those that want to make a difference in community engagement particularly with those who occupy the edges of society. **Keywords:** Arts Based, Participatory, Community, Collaboration, Oppressed

Creating. Together. Participatory. Community-based. Collaborative. Arts practices. Scholarship. Canada. Each of these words is powerful by themselves and when strung together in a phrase – a book title no less – I needed to know more. When I received the book, *Creating Together: Participatory, Community-Based, and Collaborative Arts Practices and Scholarship across Canada* (Conrad & Sinner, 2015), the picture on cover drew me in as I attempted to discover what I was looking at and then I noticed the subtle details like the collaged image wrapping around the spine with the edge of the image showing on the back cover.

My background in studying communities and structural conflict as well as my experience in corporate training and teaching Economics shaped my perspective as I made sense and as I share that sense of the book. Overtly this collection of material is about participatory arts and scholarship, however less obvious, and arguably more importantly, the book effectively demonstrates Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

In working with Brazilian adult learners, Freire approached learning from a non-traditional approach that focused on collaborative or mutual learning that recognized the impact of a power differential within education. He presented his thoughts in the book: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* which was originally written in 1968, translated into English in 1970, and republished as the 30th anniversary edition in 2000. Although the ideas of Freire have been challenged (Stern, 2009), many of the concepts have provided significant insights and impactful direction for working with marginalized individuals and groups of society.

In the forward to the book the editors are described as "contemporary artist-educators concerned with activation, authorship, and community in their independent and collective practices" (p. vii). These elements clearly come through in the way the book was assembled and in the material that is shared throughout the book. Again and again, throughout the presented chapter the range of authors use art for drawing marginalized people into community and into the community. The following sections provide an overview of *Creating Together* followed by specific examples of connections between ideas from Freire and the material in this book.

Overview of *Creating Together*

Creating Together (Conrad & Sinner, 2015) is segmented into three sections: (1) participatory arts practices, (2) community-based arts scholarship, and (3) collaborative arts approaches. Throughout the material shared in these sections, art is used in a variety of ways for engagement of oppressed peoples, for sense making, and for community building. In the 14 chapters spanning 240 pages I found that it was beneficial to read slowly and process the material thoroughly because I started to get bogged down in the middle of the book and was missing key details during my first reading.

The chapters included in the first section highlighted a range of participatory arts practices that were used to engage indigenous youth, high-risk youth, youth experiencing mental health challenges, new immigrant/refugee communities, and homeless women. Additionally, this section repeatedly illustrates that participatory art practices are especially effective for connecting to youth (p. 40).

The concepts of meaning making and meaning giving were mentioned and illustrated in several places throughout the book (including p. 27). Several specific techniques are offered in this section including Forum Theatre (p. 28, p. 39) and Digital Story Telling (p. 58). Similarly, staged photography is described as being “well suited to making stories from experiences because the images that are photographed are always out of context, so the viewer is invited to make connections between the sections of the story” (p. 79). The reader is directed to additional participatory art initiatives at the following links: www.artsandhomeless.com and www.homelesshub.ca (p. 86).

The process of engaging the community, especially those who are marginalized, using art creates a powerful learning space. “Involving community members through art not only encourages their participation, but also promotes their sense of ownership and investment in the results” (p. 79). The idea of mutual learning is about circulating co-constructed knowledge (p. 65).

The second section of the book describes and demonstrates how community-based arts scholarship is used to better understand the results of collective violence, clarify perspectives of Jewish diaspora, build community in schools, and promote cross-cultural collaboration that surround ecological issues. One of the specific techniques implemented to add richness, deepen understanding, and further delve into the material is Developmental Transformations (DvT) methodology (p. 97). A particularly notable concept shared in this section was the explanation of the origin of the word “community” and the concomitant meaning: “together with our gifts” (p. 148). Within a presentation of art, community building, and oppressed groups, the concept of sharing gifts in community strongly resonated with me.

The third section of the book offers several collaborative arts approaches as examples of “arts practices occurring in multi-leveled, multi-layered, and interdisciplinary collaboration” (p. 159). These examples include the use of ritualistic practices to establish a deeper sense of connection with self and to others, exploration of creative and research practices, the transformational process of collective art, the implementation of art in collective sense-making, and a meta-level reflection on the collaborative arts-based dynamic. Community building can be promoted by combining the tools of artist and academics. The approach to this collective sense making was described as follows: “Our work is an inquiry into our collaboration as artist and researcher” (p. 179). These efforts open the space to help the artist/researcher impact the oppressed and build community as they engage with specific individuals and groups. “As a form of public pedagogy, meaningful art experiences occur when notions of self are linked to the ways that social values are cultivated, communicated, and/or critiqued” (p. 193).

Additionally, as an outcome of working in the public space and using art to promote mutual learning, the qualitative research concept of “voice” is transformed from an academic ideal to a pragmatic lived experience. “The personal voice that is part of arts-based research has the power to move us towards recognizing tacit knowledge, something that objective-based research methods often miss” (p. 195). The lessons of art, including concepts such as space and representations of a place, are key elements of connecting people with people and people to themselves. Specifically, “a primary reason why space and place are central to human empowerment is their evocation and construction of our emotions” (p. 235).

Connecting Creating Together to Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Creating Together (Conrad & Sinner, 2015) is filled with real life examples of application of the “pedagogy of the oppressed.” For example, the book suggests that some artists and academics choose not to interact with the community (p. 145), in contrast to Freire’s (2000) statement that true change requires, “a courageous dialogue with the people” (p. 128). Freire continues to express this idea by saying: “In the dialogic theory of action, Subjects meet in cooperation in order to transform the world” (p. 167). The authors of *Creating Together* bolster this idea with the statement describing, “Collaboration research as research lived out in borderland spaces, spaces that live at the edges of disciplines, institutions, people and places” (p. 186).

The summary chapter concluding *Creating Together* (Conrad & Sinner, 2015) begins: “This chapter emerges as a surprise, as we have come through this writing to understand that critical to arts-based collaboration is mindful attendance to the in-between-relational-spaces of tensions, absences, learning, and curiosities that are revealed through reflection over time” (p. 227). In his writings Freire (2000) also identified the importance of intentionality of those interactions that occur within the interstitial places of society. He pointed to this concept of “co-intentional education” with the oppressed (p. 69) and rejected the idea of students turning “into *receptacles* to be *filled* by be teacher” (p. 72). Instead, Freire posed that “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (p. 72).

The many contributors in *Creating Together* (Conrad & Sinner, 2015) provide a set of extensive examples on how to take these ideas and transform them into reality as they described how Freire’s ideas are being effectively implemented across Canada. Furthermore, this myriad of participatory arts-based initiatives provides a series of open templates showing how communities can be engaged and changed around the world. The scenarios illustrated in this book clearly live out and demonstrate the ideas of Freire (2000) including the following “essential elements of witness” (p. 176):

- Consistency between words and actions
- Boldness when confronting risk
- Radicalization not sectarianism
- Courage to love
- Faith in the people

Conclusion

Nearly 50 years ago Paulo Freire offered a conceptual outline to engage marginalized adult learners. *Creating Together* (Conrad & Sinner, 2015) takes these ideas and theories and provides example after example of how to turn Freire’s ideas into reality. Through the use of

participatory arts based practices, the authors provide a clear roadmap for others to follow in the attempt to change the world through building community with and among oppressed people and marginalized groups. If you seek to make a difference in building communities or impacting the people who occupy the cracks in society then *Creating Together* provides a wealth of practical material. Additionally, if this review resonated with you then I would encourage you to read the full book and gain from the series of examples that effectively demonstrate the lived experiences of collaborative art based scholarship.

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Author Note

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