

Should I Have Said “No”?

Critical Reflections on Tensions in Forum Theater

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Abstract

Tensions play a productive role in the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, a process in which certain voices are privileged and others are marginalized. In this article, I invite the reader to join me on a self-reflexive journey through my facilitation of a Forum Theater event with young refugees, which took place in a context of harsh xenophobic sentiment in the public debate in Denmark. I wish to share my challenging experiences with facilitation of Forum Theater in this group, as well as critically reflect on why I engaged in dialogue with the group the way I did and how the effects of my own privileges were invisible to me at the time of framing the facilitation, even if my aim was to contribute to awareness and activism. Through my writing, I have become aware of how my blindness to the differences regarding race and social status became crucial for the knowledge we could produce in the group. I conclude the article by discussing how a facilitator can use the perceived tensions as stepping stones in activist inquiry.

Keywords

Forum Theater, empowerment, dialogue, critical reflexive analysis, Whiteness, othering

Introduction

In Forum Theater, participants start out sharing experiences of conflict and then act out the critical situations they have talked about. After a situation has been staged, it is acted out once again and a facilitator now mediates an interactive process between the

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actors on stage and the participants in the audience. The facilitator asks the participants to suggest actions that would alter the situation to the better. When someone in the audience suggests an alternative way to (re)act, the facilitator invites them to replace the protagonist on the stage and enact their proposal (Boal, 1974). The intention is that, through Forum Theater, participants create practical, bodily experienced knowledge collaboratively, discover existing normative understandings and share critical reflections (Barak, 2016; Hersted, 2017). Studies describe Forum Theater as a method for empowerment in which participants gain agency and increased control over their lives by testing out new ways of acting that challenge oppressive social norms. They do this on the basis of a recognition of the value of their own life experiences and an understanding of marginalization as a product of structural inequality as opposed to individual deficiencies (Edmiston, 2012; Erel et al., 2017; Olesen & Nordentoft, 2018).

In this article, I build on my experience of facilitating Forum Theater with 14 young refugees at the school where they learn the Danish language and are introduced to Danish culture in order to prepare them for formal education in Denmark. All names have been changed to ensure the anonymity of the students. The participants came from four different countries. We communicated in Danish, my mother tongue, which the participants spoke at a very basic level.

What follows is a critical, reflexive analysis of some of the tensions I experienced when I worked with Forum Theater with this group of young people in this specific setting. I analyze an experience which taught me that “we cannot act as if our membership in or alliance with an oppressed group exempts us from the need to confront the ‘gray areas which we all have in us’” (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 322).

Before we turn to Ayse and Kaya in their characters as mother and preschool teacher in the Forum Theater, I will explain how the situation came about. Amir, a 22-year-old Syrian refugee, became my neighbor a year ago. He is the same age as my own children and we became fond of each other. I was often offered a cup of his good Arabic coffee with cardamom while we shared our everyday life experiences. Repeatedly, Amir expressed his frustration with the language school: “We are not taken seriously,” he complained, “they insist on making us sing and play like small children in order to learn to speak Danish.”

One day, having a coffee together, I told Amir about the Forum Theater exercises I had been facilitating in a group of psychiatric nurses. For many years, I have worked with participatory action research among professionals, such as nurses and social workers. Often these professionals want to reflect upon their daily practices in order to better understand, deconstruct, criticize, and theorize them. My focus has been on developing research, which makes a difference in practice—a kind of activist research approach that necessarily includes transformative, embodied, positioned, dialogical, and context-sensitive dimensions (Olesen & Nordentoft, 2018). Forum Theater is one of the methods I use in these processes.

That day, the group of nurses had acted out a situation where they had found it hard to meet the needs of their patients. The group had concluded that it shouldn’t be the

individual psychiatric nurse who should be solely responsible for good communication, as she is part of a system where medical discourses and hierarchies limit her possibilities of acting in line with her professional values. When I told Amir that I find Forum Theater to be a fruitful way to explore a challenging situation, he replied, "You should come to my school and do the same!" I believe that he imagined that I, as his friend and as a university professor, would be able to give him and his classmates a chance to share knowledge and find solutions to the problems they experienced, instead of doing what he considered a waste of time at the school.

At first, I just smiled and said, "No, I have only worked with Forum Theater in groups of professionals, where the topics are related to tensions in a professional setting."

However, Amir insisted that he and his classmates would benefit from a day working with their own experiences and collaboratively finding ways to overcome the challenges they face in Danish society. From other volunteer activist work among refugees, I knew—or think I knew—the challenges of their social situation in a rather xenophobic political climate. I felt compelled to use my professional expertise when he was so insistent.

I could have said that I had no experience of working with groups of people outside a professional setting and invited Amir to be my partner so we could collaborate on doing Forum Theater with his classmates, but I did not, probably because at the time I did not realize how strongly the differences between us would come into play. Instead, I said that if he arranged everything with the school, I would come for 2 days; the first day, we would work with Forum Theater, the second day we would discuss and evaluate.

My proposal was accepted, the dates set and here I am, ready to facilitate a Forum Theater session with this group of young refugees.

Forum Theater

At the very beginning of the Forum Theater session, the students tell each other a story about difficulties they have faced in their encounters with Danish society. They search for the words in Danish when telling their stories. Everybody in the group has a limited vocabulary in Danish. For a while, their lack of fluency in Danish makes me doubt whether it will be possible to continue, but we carry on as planned. When we have heard all the stories, the group chooses to work on Amina's narrative about her son in preschool. Ayse and Kaya accept to play the characters as mother and preschool teacher and Amina tells them how to act and what to say.

Now the Forum Theater can begin. We sit in a semicircle watching Ayse, who plays the character of a mother with a child in preschool and Kaya, who plays the preschool teacher character on the stage. The mother is wearing a headscarf. She looks small and shy. The teacher has expansive movements and a big smile. Ayse, playing the mother, asks meekly, "May I say something, please?" Kaya, playing the preschool teacher, smiles with a big professional smile, "Of course." I sense that Ayse is searching for the

right Danish words, making an effort not to sound critical. She explains what has happened to her son in preschool: "I am worried, Roni has bite marks on his thigh and arm." The teacher keeps smiling while she listens. The worried mother continues, "I've also seen him being hit at the playground!" The teacher responds, still smiling, "I do understand that you are worried, but it's quite normal for young children to be hard on each other." The mother nods, the teacher gives the mother a friendly pat on the arm, then bends down to help a child put on his boots.

Now, as I describe the scene, I feel a pressure in my chest and sense the mother's pain when the teacher diminishes her concerns by offering justificatory pleasantries instead of empathetic, actionable solutions. Yet, I am not sure about what I felt at the time. Maybe I was more concerned about how to facilitate the process. I remember looking around and getting the impression that everyone was emotionally affected.

After having acted out Amina's narrative, the participants talk about how the mother could have acted differently. Ayse and Kaya return to the stage. They start acting it out again, but this time the audience can interrupt and step onto the stage. As facilitator, I encourage them to intervene when they see an injustice played out and to suggest what the mother, Ayse, could do differently. The preschool teacher, Kaya, then would be obliged to react differently as well.

Ayse and Kaya have barely entered the stage before one of the participants says, "Stop, she must take a friend with her who speaks better Danish." A classmate steps onto the stage and acts as the friend. However, this does not change the attitude of the teacher. In fact, the friend's Danish is not much better than that of the mother. The scene continues. The participants have many suggestions: "Slap her in the face so she can feel herself how it feels," "Find another school for your son," "Go and smack the child who bit your son."

I'm bewildered. I have been working with Forum Theater with many groups of professionals, but never experienced anyone suggesting vigilantism. I can feel my heartbeat; I don't know what to do!

In the situation, I did not try to negotiate the specific suggestions with the group. Instead, I remember saying something like "I think these suggestions are too harsh." After a moment of silence, a young woman says, "I have a friend who was worried about having her child in a preschool. Then she was allowed to visit and after that she said: OK, it's a nice place." I feel relieved; here is a suggestion I can approve of and use. I suggest that Mother Ayse asks if she can come to visit the preschool. The teacher smiles, "Yes."

My impression is that everybody is pleased that we found a happy ending to the first scenario, but I am not sure because I am more aware of my own discomfort as a facilitator in deep trouble than of the 14 young people around me. I must have felt the need to find a benevolent solution. I simultaneously sensed that it was not possible because of the racist structures and practices then operating in Danish society that affected refugees' individual lives. Still, I did at the time feel responsible for accepting an individualized solution which referred to a rational discourse that says that Danish welfare institutions work well, as refugees will find out if they approach them.

After a short break, another play is staged. This time Issa has directed three classmates to act out a scene he has experienced where he was denied entry to the local disco. The process is roughly as before. The participants suggest what the Issa character can do and the proposals are again rather violent. I am overwhelmed and feel uneasy. I cannot figure out if the young men around me are suggesting these violent actions because they believe it is their only option or if they are not taking Forum Theater (or me) seriously. Maybe they think I am acting precisely as their teachers at the school do. I do not ask them. The thought has left again before I take full heed of it. Then a participant says that the rejection is illegal and suggests that the rejected Issa character go to the police. A classmate plays a police officer and the scene ends with access to the disco.

While we work with the last scene, many students from other classes gather outside the classroom windows. Young men and women push each other to get to see what is going on. Amir asks me if it is okay to invite them into the classroom. My first thought is “no, we need to reflect on the two plays while they are still fresh in our memory,” but before I have answered, the classroom is full of people talking in languages I do not understand. I am totally disconnected, but I can feel the energy and enthusiasm in the room. I feel exhausted and unhappy. I do not know if Amir notices it or he just wants to be polite when he walks me to my bike and thanks me for “a very exciting day.”

The agreement was that I would come back a week later to have a talk with the group about our shared experiences. However, it was canceled due to illness, in the days to follow, the students had to prepare for exams, and I was not given a new appointment. Consequently, I do not know what the students’ thoughts were about our work with Forum Theater. Moreover, I am uncertain I would find out even if I had met them again. When, over a friendly cup of tea, I asked Amir what he thought, he simply repeated, “It was so exciting, everyone was happy.” Perhaps that was his impression, or perhaps he just said it out of politeness.

Analytically Based Critical Reflections

In what follows, I will present a critical, reflexive analysis of the tensions in the Forum Theater session with the group of young refugees in order to challenge my status as facilitator and my juxtaposition with structures of power in relation to the young refugees, which I was not aware of at the time. My point of departure is my own feelings of discomfort and my questions about whether what we did made sense in terms of ideals of empowerment. This involves taking a close look at the role of the facilitator and the impact of power dynamics in such situations.

My feelings of extreme discomfort while facilitating the Forum Theater exercise were impossible to ignore at the time, yet I was not able to respond appropriately to this discomfort.

Several researchers point to how feelings can be used as the basis for investigating assumptions about what is occurring in emotional moments (Cunliffe, 2002; Heen,

2005; Pedersen & Olesen, 2008). In writing this article, I attempt to use my feelings as information.

I base my analytical reflections on a combination of Bakhtinian dialog theory, seeing knowledge as an unfinalizable product of the dialogical interplay of multiple voices, and a Foucauldian understanding of power/knowledge relations (Bakhtin, 1981; Foucault, 2003; Olesen, 2019; Phillips, 2011). In order to understand how blindness to my privileged status became crucial to my facilitation, I have learned from studies of Whiteness (Ellsworth, 1989; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Matias et al., 2016).

I will focus on when and how tensions arose, and how my own position of power and my own preconceptions were embedded in discourses. My hope is that a focus on how tensions arise in collaborative interactions, irrespective of the personal competence (or not) of the facilitator, may lead to new perspectives on future work with Forum Theater as a complex inquiry practice.

I will discuss the following questions:

1. How do we produce and reproduce knowledge in Forum Theater?
2. How do we work with tensions in Forum Theater?

How Do We Produce and Reproduce Knowledge in Forum Theater?

My performance as a facilitator at the language school makes me wonder whether I should have stuck to my initial refusal when Amir suggested that I came to his school to facilitate a Forum Theater exercise.

I have shown in the narrative above how, despite emotional discomfort about refusing participants' suggestions and uncertainty regarding what was going on, I persisted with the replacement of the protagonist and decided which suggestions for alternative actions were relevant to put on the stage. In this way, I engineered a division of labor and created a discourse in which I remained the person in power setting the framework.

The fact that social processes are emergent implies that we can never know, either before or during the process, what will happen. We may have a plan, but we cannot control either our own or others' way of being socially, emotionally, and cognitively present. Even though I do think that I should have taken my hesitation more seriously when Amir asked me to come, my spontaneous "no" seems to show how to some degree I anticipated my limitations as a facilitator because of the institutionalized power imbalances between me and them. However, in changing my "no" to a "yes," I overrode these concerns.

While being with the refugees, I wish I had been more aware of my status not only as a university professor but also as a White person with all the accompanying privileges (Matias et al., 2016). I think it would have made it possible to show more respect for their experiences and suggestions. As already mentioned, I assume that what seemed to be my lack of respect was a feeling of powerlessness regarding the fact that

the conflicts which we played out were so embedded in racial and economic hierarchies that we could not use negotiation to find answers to them.

By not acknowledging the forms of discrimination and exclusion that Amina and her classmates experienced as a form of institutionalized violence and instead approving the individualized suggestion that the mother could spend a day at the preschool, I showed a sort of ““cool violence” compared to the “hot violence” of economic exploitation” (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p. 140).

Actually, I acted exactly like the preschool teacher, which I find immensely embarrassing. Still, I do understand the actions of the teacher. I can imagine how she has been shut in with too many children in need of help when Amina comes along and, in halting Danish, says something that barely makes sense. The teacher chooses to reassure the mother, “It’s normal that young children are hard on each other,” because she too is powerless in the face of political decisions and priorities that frame her work at the preschool. She has no influence on the poor standards resulting in a preschool teacher often having to be alone with eight toddlers. Neither can she influence the law that refugees, in order to receive public benefits, must be full-time students and therefore have to send their children to preschool 8–10 hours a day.

Today, looking back, I wish I had discussed these structural conditions with the young refugees, in order to share my understanding of knowledge and structures as products of powerful discourses and political decisions that can—and will—change over time. Furthermore, I wish we had discussed how precisely they could take part in that change.

But I did not. Why not?

Victim Blaming

I can only conceptualize this if I see both the participants and me as locked into specific positions and corresponding expectations, of which we were not aware—or at least I wasn’t. While working with Forum Theater, I expected that I could act as a competent facilitator even when I felt I was in an emotionally and professionally stressful situation. In hindsight, I think that I responded from a position of fear of losing legitimacy as a facilitator—a fear of disappointing Amir by having to admit that I had doubts about whether I could create a space in which we could participate on an equal footing. Moreover, even worse, a fear of admitting that it would be an illusion to try.

On my way home, I remember feeling ashamed that I could be so ignorant as to engage with the group of young refugees without reflecting on my privileged status as a White middle-class woman. Reading Ellsworth’s reflections on her own position helped me understand my feelings:

As an Anglo, middle-class professor (...) I brought a social subjectivity that has been constructed in such a way that I have not and can never participate unproblematically in the collective process of self-definition, naming of oppression, and struggles for visibility in the face of marginalization engaged in by students whose class, race, gender, and other

positions I do not share. Critical pedagogues are always implicated in the very structures they are trying to change. (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 309)

When in the classroom, I just felt a failure as a facilitator and an activist who wanted to support the participants' ability to manage in oppressive situations where they met injustice and felt silenced.

My clinging to the use of Forum Theater as a method I knew from working with professionals led me not to engage in dialogue with the participants in order to investigate their suggestions. Where did the ideas of using violence against the preschool teacher and the doorman come from? What did the different members of the group think might happen if we tried it out? Did they all agree? In addition, what did I myself think about the effects such suggestions would have?

I am sure that I felt challenged on my own positionality and socialization around what could be "appropriate actions." Today I regret that I did not even dare to discuss the participants' vigilante-type suggestions. I imagine that my intention to establish "a safe space" made me "side step the issues, as well as the educative aspects of anger and frustration, necessary for a beneficial and truly liberatory dialog on race to take place" (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p. 148). Maybe it would have been possible to discuss how the specific conflicts they experienced as young refugees were embedded in social and economic hierarchies reflecting the current political situation in Denmark in which refugees in the media were referred to as the main threat to Danish welfare systems and politicians were vying to tighten legislation on refugees.

It is probably no surprise that, cycling home that day from the language school, I felt that I had "contributed to neoliberal 'victim blaming' rhetoric on social inequalities" (Erel et al., 2017, p. 308). Due to the context, including my facilitation, we had reproduced the claim that Danish society is working optimally both in terms of preschools and in terms of legal rights. With this understanding, it becomes all too easy for young refugees to conclude that the fault somehow lies with themselves when they experience being overlooked and excluded in encounters with Danish society.

At the same time, I could see and feel how the classroom bubbled with joy after having worked with the Forum Theater. Four times as many people came into the classroom and I sensed energy and happiness around me. Why? Perhaps much more happened beyond what I contributed, am able to see and understand, or have the right to know about. Maybe my feeling of being uncomfortable cannot be separated from the group feeling comfortable?

What had passed that left the participants so involved and eager to share their experiences? I can only be curious and hazard a guess. For instance, I can imagine that it was important that the day with Forum Theater began with me stating that I see their experience as important and worth learning from. On this basis, they formed groups and told each other what had been difficult in their encounters with Denmark. They have, in the midst of a school context, been given time and space to witness each other's most painful experiences of being rejected, misunderstood, and excluded, and my impression was that we all listened carefully and empathetically to each other.

Afterwards, they chose the narratives we would work with in the Forum Theater scenes. Conceivably, they may also have learned that “a White teacher”—me—might be interested in their narratives rather than conveying “narratives about how to behave in Denmark” and be interested in what they were trying to say rather than correcting their Danish language.

Knowledge was produced and reproduced in tangled ways. Drawing on Enria, instead of trying to sum up I will suggest that, as activists and researchers, we reflect on how we can make “research more inclusive in practice while simultaneously acknowledging the indeterminacy and imperfection of such effort” (Enria, 2016, p. 321). This quote leads to my second question.

How Do We Work With Tensions in Forum Theater?

Forum Theater, as a method, does not seem to me to have intrinsic empowering potential—it all depends on how it is used. Too often, dialogical and participatory methods such as Forum Theater are attributed positive values without questioning (Nordentoft & Olesen, 2018; Phillips et al., 2013). It sounded honorable when Freire wrote “being dialogic is not invading, not manipulating, not imposing orders. Being dialogic is pledging oneself to the constant transformation of reality” (Freire, 1970, p. 46).

Seen from my current position, this is a hopelessly romantic idealization of emancipatory research from another time and space (Boal, 1974; Freire, 1970). The ideal is admirable, but it is imperative that we remain aware of the normative ideal of engaging in dialog and maintain a critical reflexive perspective on the contradictions, dilemmas and ambiguous power dynamics that are at play, regardless of our good intentions.

Contemporary researchers using Forum Theater methods with subordinate groups point to Boal’s claims about making the sessions rehearsals for socio-political transformations (Edmiston, 2012; Enria, 2016; Erel et al., 2017; Kaptani & Yuval-Davis, 2008).

Kaptani and Yuval-Davis have used Forum Theater as a social action method with refugees. They did not focus on finding realistic scenarios or outcomes. Instead, they established a space where the participants could perform many different scenarios and thereby gained experience with “the constructed nature of social locations where ascribed identities of disadvantage and power relationships are constantly constructed and reconstructed” (Kaptani & Yuval-Davis, 2008, p. 8).

I certainly respect and appreciate such descriptions and analysis of work with Forum Theater. Still, they do not appear to attend to the tensions resulting from the power dynamics in all knowledge production, particularly in contexts where differences in position of power are prominent. Instead, they focus almost exclusively on how the Forum Theater event in question must be used in order to realize its emancipatory potential (Erel et al., 2017; Kaptani & Yuval-Davis, 2008). Furthermore, while they do not reveal their own emotions or choices while working with Forum Theater, they appear to know that, for instance, “[p]eople felt transformed as they had the

chance and ‘permission’ to ‘act by themselves’ (Kaptani & Yuval-Davis, 2008, p. 7). Some authors do state that “[A]s researchers, we actively participated in constructing this knowledge by posing our research questions and participating in the theater workshops and reflections” (Erel et al., 2017, p. 304), but they do not reflect on the tensions embedded in creating inclusive spaces given the differences between researchers and participants or between participants themselves.

Inviting people to a Forum Theater session is one way to open up a space for experience in order to realize an emancipatory potential. But, following a post-structuralist epistemology, it becomes a contradiction per se, to want to establish a “discourse-free space” where all voices are welcome while, at the same time, assuming that there is always power present in the form of dominant discourses and consequently also processes of subjectification.

Regardless of structural and individual differences among collaborative researchers, we are all caught up in discourses; what we say and do is constrained by, works against, or reinforces discourses that (re)produce social structures (Foucault, 2003; Olesen & Pedersen, 2013). Unlike Edmiston, who quotes to Davies in saying that “people who appear to be unequal [can be] declared to be equal” (Edmiston, 2012, p. 110), I think that the endeavored mutual positioning of researchers and participants cannot be clarified by simply stating that we want to create knowledge collaboratively and democratically.

A post-structuralist reading of Bakhtin recognizes that many contradictory and partial voices are at play while working with Forum Theater. An expression of a voice will always be partial and predicated on the absence or marginalization of alternative voices, and traces of former and future conversations will always be present (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 312).

Looking back at my day at the language school, I imagine I rejected the voices suggesting vigilante-type actions in the Forum Theater exercise because I damned these as “irrational.” They did not fit into the dominating, rational discourses to which I unconsciously related. Ellsworth points to how literature on critical pedagogy mostly refers to rationalistic ideals and suggests that as long as this literature

fails to come to grips with issues of trust, risk, and the operations of fear and desire around such issues of identity and politics in the classroom, their rationalistic tools will continue to fail to loosen deep-seated, self-interested investments in unjust relations of, for example, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 313)

In my view, this applies to the use of collaborative, empowering methods as well.

Power Imbalances

When I arrived at the language school, I came as Amir’s Danish friend, but I also came as a White, privileged associate professor, because Amir had told his classmates about me. Both facts may have influenced how they and I participated. They may have

chosen narratives and suggestions for actions onstage, which they found either appropriate, unimportant, or provocative. I have already described my actions. I think that, to use a Bakhtinian concept, we unintentionally “finalized” our understandings of each other to such an extent that it affected the knowledge we produced. I can only speak for myself, and I believe that my wish to create a “we” and to avoid reproducing their experiences of being “the excluded Other” made it impossible for me to talk about our differences, especially in terms of race and status in Danish society. It may also be worth noting how, in this article, I shift between using labels such as “the young refugees,” “the students,” and “the participants” because I cannot find a nonothering or nonhomogenizing term.

Fortunately, some researchers do reflect on “the importance of acknowledging the necessarily indeterminate and imperfect nature of our efforts to mitigate power imbalances” (Enria, 2016, p. 319). Dutta et al. give an exemplary illustration of how tensions can be highlighted in coproductive work in an article written by her, as the teacher, and five students who took part in her course. She points to an awareness of her privileged position as the person leading the construction of the article. She facilitated discussions, reviewed individual narratives, and posed questions to help “tidy up” the narratives. In doing so, she “had unwittingly engaged in normative practices that would grant us legitimacy from gatekeeping institutions—the very institutional practices I was trying to contest through the Everyday Peace project.” She relates how, in failing to share how vulnerable she felt as “an untenured, female, non-American faculty of color striving to engage in critical pedagogy” with her student collaborators, she “inadvertently decontextualized and disembodied my teacher self in our interactions” (Dutta et al., 2016, p. 351).

With the normative wish to support change through dialogue, there may implicitly lie some ideals or notions of what empowerment means in a particular group—ideals that we do not explicitly share with the participants. I find a tension between wanting to create a space for empowerment and being the one who creates the framework, which in itself is a position of power. It is as if the powerful, knowledgeable activists and/or researchers will “bestow” on the subjugated groups a right to speak, reflect, and act. Is it at all possible to create a space for empowerment while being the one who creates the “empowering framework”?

I suggest that Leonardo and Porter have a provisional answer to the question when they criticize the idea of so-called “safe spaces” and instead point to how “anger, hostility, frustration, and pain are characteristics that are not to be avoided under the banner of safety” (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p. 149) or, I’ll add “empowerment.” It was when I met Amir’s classmates at school that I started to think of empowerment, and it was while working on this article that I came to an understanding of my discomfort with my position as facilitator of the Forum Theater exercise. At the school, I experienced how the context—including restricted time limits, the school setting where we met, the unclear purpose, the expectations we had of each other, the division of labor, my lack of preparation and fear of giving up control, and so on—coproduced a situation full of tensions. These tensions probably could have been a source of creativity, of

problem solving, of talking across difference, but due to the context, we could not work out how to clarify them together.

Summing Up

It is my impression that we, as collaborative researchers, intend to carry out qualitative inquiry as activism in order to make our research meaningful and transformative. However, we do often work with Forum Theater, poetic writing, memory work, photo-voice eliciting, and so forth, in ways that—at least partially—are just as reproductive of dominant discourses and subject positions as the process I have described in my narrative.

Despite the fact that I could have been more aware of differences in status and thereby perhaps have handled the situation better, it is important to stress that tensions in the interplay of power can never be eradicated. However, it is through a critical reflexive analysis of tensions in the specific situation that we get an opportunity to develop our sensitivity and humility when coproducing knowledge with our partners. The more awareness of and courage to react to emotionally discomfiting tensions, the greater the opportunity to learn from them in collaboration with our partners. That is why I underline that a critical, reflexive approach to the tensions inherent in work with “empowering methods” such as Forum Theater is crucial in order not to more-or-less blindly reproduce prevailing power relations.

While working on this article, I have been through a painful critical self-reflection on how my own feelings of being uncomfortable with my privileged position made me conceal the differences between the young refugees and me. What is left is to emphasize that emergence is an inherent part of the situated and complex character of reflexive processes. If we dare to share our critical reflexive analysis of tensions resulting from the power dynamics in all knowledge production, including a focus on our own positions in the field of study, then I believe we can further the inclusion of marginalized voices while using collaborative methods. As Freire says, “without hope there is little we can do” (Freire, 2004, p. 9).

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