

Cultivating Justice: The Effects of a Performance-Based Food Education with the Agriculture, Community, and Theater (ACT) Project

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Introduction

In the past decade, the United States has witnessed incredible growth in the literature and popular debate surrounding urban food insecurity. Much of this conversation has centered on the concept of a *food desert* – a setting that, via a number of geographic and social characteristics, has limited access to fresh, nutritious, and affordable food. In response, a bloom of programming emerged to target low-income communities with limited or no access to grocery stores, and proliferated educational garden programs like the Edible Schoolyard in Berkeley, the Food Project in Boston, Massachusetts, and the Harlem Children's Zone in New York City.

However, as the number of gardening programs has grown, so has the level of criticism directed at these projects. In spite of this, many studies point to other outcomes associated with these programs that are not focused on health or cultural interventions.

Intervention or Education?

"By exalting a set of food choices, the alternative food movement tends to give rise to a missionary impulse" (Guthman 2011, 141) that projects outside values on to another cultural community

School gardens are "responsible for robbing an increasing number of American schoolchildren of hours they might otherwise have spent reading important books or learning higher math" (Flanagan 2010)

The distinguishing feature of the John Hope ACT project is the use of theater and performance making as a tool for community engagement and dialogue. Historically, Brazilian theater artist and activist Augusto Boal has used improvisatory and dialogue-driven theater techniques that emphasize audience participation. Boal asserts that spectators should be transformed into *spect-actors*, with "the duality of the word 'act,' to perform and to take action, [at] the heart of the work" (Boal 2002, xiv).

The Site



The ACT Project

The Agriculture, Community, and Theater (ACT) project was a summer-long program developed and taught at John Hope Settlement House in Providence, R.I. In an effort to deconstruct the typical methods of community-based gardening programs, arts and performance were integrated into the curriculum for the 9-12 year-olds who took part in the project during their summer camp programming.

A number of studies have explored health and food awareness in low-income communities, particularly the effectiveness of hands-on gardening training in supplementing these types of nutrition education programs. However, in this study I have examined the benefits and challenges of a theater and performance-based curriculum in telling accurate stories of community food behaviors and cultural values.

Performance as Research

Based on my assumption that performance can provide new frames for educational concepts, provoke awareness, and open dialogue, I hypothesize that the theater curriculum will augment the impact of the hands-on gardening training and measurably improve the buy-in and participation of students. With the addition of performance games and concepts of play, this project aims to contribute to a broader example of co-learning between sponsor institution and community organization by enhancing honest dialogue between program coordinator and participant.

Methods

This study relies on a number of established practices in social science research. In response to the many criticisms of this method, Burawoy (1989, 4) claims that social science research requires neither:

...the need to strip ourselves of biases, but rather the purpose of self-knowledge; for this is an illusory goal; nor to celebrate those biases as the authorial voice of the ethnographer, but rather to discover and perhaps change our biases through interaction with others.

This study uses multiple methods, including participant observation, interviews, and surveys. The addition of these methodologies, and their use in conjunction, is called triangulation, named by Webb et al. (1966) and regarded by Denzin (1978) as "the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon."

My participant observation occurred from April 2010 to March 2011 working and teaching at John Hope. For interviews, I spoke with John Hope staff and students who had direct interaction with the program. Two informal surveys were administered to provide supplemental insights.

In this study, performance and theater games were used as an alternative social science research method. Specifically, the use of improvisatory play allowed for student-initiated dialogue that was personally specific and reflective.

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Findings

Social Cohesion Among Students and Between Students and Myself

"I've never seen a border or things that make people look stupid on purpose. It made it easier to try things" – Student, August 22, 2011

"For me, the biggest takeaway from the summer was the benefit of modeling in getting students to try new foods and new ideas" – Staff, February 18, 2012

"I was surprised to hear about other kids cooking at home; it makes me want to cook more" – Student, August 4, 2011

Increased social cohesion was one of the main results of the students' summer at play in the garden, measured by observed positive and hostile student interactions with each other and myself, the willingness of students to take part in group programming, and perceived feelings of community, bonding, and other shared interactions in follow-up interviews.

Added Opportunities for Cultural Exchange and Open Dialogue

"Using your body helps you to say things you might have already forgotten" – Student, August 9, 2011

"My mom is Indian and my dad is Black. Shows it's always a fight – spicy chicken or mac and cheese?" – Student, August 4, 2011

"In the Great Depression like the bread line at John Hope, but all the time?" – Student, August 4, 2011

One of this project's main findings was the promotion of cultural exchange and storytelling, concepts at the heart of any theatrical endeavor. As a result, the lessons were structured around a performance-based approach, working primarily with exercises that ranged from Boal's Forum Theater to mapping storytelling, cooking shows, and roleplaying work. Students also used these exercises as an opportunity to push back against the stereotypes of their neighborhood usually cast in food equity discussions.

Performance Can Offer Group Insight

	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Student 6	Student 7
BREAKFAST	Cereal Crackers	Bacon Hash Browns	Hash Browns Fast food	Cinnamon Oat Crunch	Hash Browns Fast food	Fish Coffee	Cereal Milk
LUNCH	Turkey sandwich (John Hope Soda	Burger (Fast food)	BBQ (Slow-cooked) Soda	Subway sandwich (John Hope) Soda	Pizza juice	Turkey Submarine juice	Tortilla wrap juice
DINNER	Feed Chicken Mashed Potatoes	Rice Beans	Chicken fingers (Fast food)	Chicken Rice	Spanish Meatball Grinder	Protein Shake	Tortillas Soda
MODES OF TRANSPORT	Walks 2 Drives 1	Drives to 3 meals	Walks to 3	Walks 2 meals	Drives to 1	Drives to 3 meals	Walks to 1

Figure 1. During a personal mapping exercise, students acted out their different consumption patterns and modes of transport. The results of this research method are summarized above.

Students Had Different Takeaways from the Summer Program

3 students brought seeds home to start small gardens
of carrots, cukes, and sunflowers

"Who needs veggies; money changes the system" – Student, August 6, 2011

"I think we made a community with the theater group; a community of being uncomfortable at first" – Student, August 21, 2011



Figure 2. Students take part in a performance exercise, Real vs. Ideal, to comment on community food access and distribution

Sample Lesson: Real vs. Ideal

In this lesson, students were asked to work together and generate a series of performance tableaus in order to transform a food injustice in their neighborhood. Taking it from the real world to the ideal world, the group identified five specific steps to get them between the phases and were required to workshop each idea through an improvisation exercise, seeing if the choices made panned out well for the participants.

While seemingly simple and idealistic, the group mastered a fairly sophisticated lesson through this activity – change is not simple. In the finalized sequence, no one was hurt. However, this only happened after multiple attempts to rehearse reality, where ideas panned out into a messy protest and a fist fight. This lesson was completed at the end of the summer, and students took part equally, switching back and forth between director and actor roles. In the frozen tableau, students flexed negotiation and leadership skills they had developed during the summer.

Conclusion

The addition of performance and theater to garden curricula can yield a number of unexpected benefits. Aside from the communication and social skills inherent to any performance work, simply working on a collaborative process can produce myriad opportunities for the youth involved in the program, including social cohesion, opening up communication channels, and promoting cultural sharing.

What does this mean? For starters, these findings would encourage more gardening programs to take on a multi-goaled perspective; from the review of existing literature, many of the gaps in supportive studies point to the fact that most garden-based research rests firmly in the sphere of nutrition education. Like most student learners, the students at John Hope require a more complex engagement; adding in arts and performance create an additional dimension to this work that takes ecological awareness into the social and health sphere by imbuing real world experiences into the curriculum.

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