Engaging Young People with Social Issues through Devised Theatre and Dramaturgy

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The Forum Project
Girl Be Heard
Manhattan Theatre Club
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Narrative 4
New Victory Theatre
New York Theatre Workshop
The People’s Theatre Project
Creative Team of The Quest of Queen Thomas
Roundabout Theatre Company
The TEAM
Theatre of the Oppressed NYC
I Think Outside My Box
Creative Team of Unsorted

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Introduction

In Tom Kitt and Brian Yorkey’s 2014 musical If/Then, community organiser and housing campaigner Lucas tries to persuade city planner Stephen that the latter’s proposed plans to rebuild New York City will have a negative impact on every urban resident. Lucas’ song is like an activist’s manifesto: he’s trying to speak with those who already have a privileged place in the conversation, looking for an opportunity to be heard, and creating connections to try to bring about social change.

In July 2014, I took a sabbatical from my work in London as a theatre practitioner, education consultant, writer and fundraiser, to travel to New York City and Denver, Colorado, with a research fellowship grant from the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust. My aim was to seek out individuals and organisations working with young people and demonstrating exceptional practice in exactly what Lucas is doing here: using theatre and the arts as a means of engaging participants in social issues which affect them.

[Lucas:] (singing)

So you’ve got nothing much in common
With the artist down in Red Hook
Who lost the place he works in
So you could build some condos on the water?
But he buys coffee from the coffee guy
Who’s renting from the actor
Who’s married to the doctor
Who is in the E.R. trying to save your daughter
Ain’t no man Manhattan
No island all his own
On Roosevelt or Staten
Ain’t none of us alone
Your action’s my reaction
In ways you won’t expect
We’re all in this together
Yeah we all connect

Take the environment, or housing
Human rights, or education
Every issue is connected
To each person here,
There ain’t no separation...

‘Ain’t No Man Manhattan’ from If/Then, Tom Kitt and Brian Yorkey
The Need to Engage Young People

My research fellowship stemmed from the idea of beginning a conversation about young people and social engagement with theatre makers in two of the world’s urban centres, which mirror each other in diversity: my native London, and New York City. Theatre with youth and communities is often a local enterprise by pure necessity: the needs and challenges of our own regions are persistent and pressing, and the struggle for funding is ongoing, leaving few opportunities to share practice internationally, particularly in comparable terrain abroad. But finding innovative ways to engage young people with social issues through theatre making, and creating a conversation with artists internationally, is a necessity on both a local and global scale.

Life’s a Riot - The Local Need

I began my work as a theatre education practitioner in August 2011 at Haringey Shed, a performing arts company in Tottenham, North London, which provides theatre, music and dance workshops for children and young people. The company’s inclusive ethos and no auditions policy mean that young people of all abilities and backgrounds can join and create original theatre which is then professionally produced on London stages. Young people with Special Educational Needs or disabilities, and those who may benefit from support with communication, mobility or behaviour are welcomed and thrive at Haringey Shed. The borough of Haringey, from which the organisation takes its name, benefits from a rich and glorious diversity of inhabitants, backgrounds and traditions. Yet the area served by the company is often in the headlines for its statistics - Haringey is London’s fourth most deprived borough,¹ and yet it is also its most divided economically – of its 19 wards, four are in the richest 10% and five are in the poorest 10% of the national capital.² White Hart Lane, the area where Haringey Shed is based, is London’s third most deprived ward.³

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¹ From the Department for Communities and Local Government Indices of Deprivation, 2010: www.haringey.gov.uk/jsna-deprivation.htm
² Trust for London’s Poverty Profile, www.londonpovertyprofile.org.uk/indicators/topics/inequality/income-inequalities-within-london-boroughs
In 2011, in my first week at Haringey Shed, the London riots began in the area. After the riots, I led a discussion about the events with 20 Tottenham teenagers at Haringey Shed’s ‘Youth Forum’. After 45 minutes of solid debate, the workshop was scheduled to end, as parents waited at the studio door to collect their children. The group of 20 young people begged to stay later. They hadn’t finished saying everything that they wanted to say. They hadn’t finished asking questions, lamenting the state of their area, expressing anger at the violence, and positing solutions. They’d been given a space to talk and be heard, and they were desperate to speak and listen.

This discussion led to the creation of Life’s a Riot, an original musical about the events of that summer devised by 60 teenagers in March 2013. Concurrently, a post-riots discourse emerged from the local councils and think tanks, positing the importance of creating opportunities for young people from economically and socially underprivileged areas to speak and be heard, to participate in the conversation about creating a positive local community. The Young Foundation’s report, Tottenham Together, commissioned by the Haringey Community Panel to engage with locals about the needs of their community after the riots, found that “young people often feel that they are not being listened to by decision makers”, and recommended that “young people’s voices need to be heard and they need to be involved more in the community... They must be part of it, from the grassroots right to the top, right up to chief executive meetings in the Council, young people must be there...[we must] have “genuine conversations“ with young people...[and] help youth-focused charities to develop new, creative programmes.”

From youth, local government and the philosophers: a clear message. Young people, particularly those from ‘underserved’ areas, need creative opportunities which give them a voice to participate in the conversation about the issues which affect them: their communities, their identity, housing, health, jobs, education, language – in short, a space to talk to their peers, and to other generations, about what it means to be young.

The global (scientific) scale

When we compare local communities across the world, the issues affecting young people shift and change like a kaleidoscope. But recent scientific research posits that regardless of variation in local issues, engaging young people with their emotions through the arts is a vital part of personal development in any community. Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, associate professor at Rossier School of Education in Southern California, is an affective neuroscientist and human development psychologist who studies the neural bases of social emotion, learning and culture. Her keynote lecture at the American Alliance for Theatre and Education national conference, which I attended in Denver during my fellowship, was a clear introduction to her findings. Her research focuses on the insula cortex of the brain, which has long been understood to control the gut and visceral reactions which enabled us to survive centuries ago, by telling our bodies when to run from predators, or vomit after consuming harmful food. Immordino-Yang’s research shows that this same cortex is activated when we experience complex social emotions – compassion, inspiration or a sense of moral wrong. Immordino-Yang says “when you feel inspired by another person’s extraordinary achievements, or when you feel compassion, you are literally changing, altering and self-regulating

the very same cortex which regulates your most primitive, visceral bodily function...this suggests that the way we act in the social world, shaped by social and cultural experience and by individuals’ biological predispositions, may literally shape the process by which we build conscious experiences of ‘self’ and social emotion, cognitively.”\textsuperscript{5} Immordino-Yang states that theatre, which models and mirrors our social interactions and provides opportunities to both feel and reflect on these, is therefore an ideal learning experience for the cognitive development of these complex emotions which we need to function in society. Whilst socially engaged theatre often arises from the need to address a specific local issue in a community, such as the London riots, Immordino-Yang’s research indicates that creative projects providing opportunities for young people to engage and analyse their emotions and the world around them form a vital part of the neurological development which young people need, not just locally, but in every community on a global scale.

**The Aims of My Fellowship**

After establishing the local and global need for this work, I aimed to discover how professional artists create projects focusing on social issues which place young participants in the driver’s seat, ensuring that they were listened to rather than preached at whilst taking part in artistically innovative processes. I therefore formulated these aims for my fellowship:

- To explore how youth theatre companies in the United States are creating social issues-based theatre in original ways; to learn from organisations demonstrating innovative or exceptional practice in empowering and engaging young people through theatre.
- To focus particularly on New York as groups will have a similar demographic to those I work with, ensuring practice will be relevant (particularly, disadvantaged or minority communities).
- To bring back new approaches and techniques to the UK to improve current practice.
- To compare approaches to community theatre internationally, a rare opportunity in what is usually a very local field.
- To focus particularly on two distinct approaches to making theatre with youth: devising, and dramaturgy (creating and working with texts and scripts).

**Defining devising and dramaturgy**

Devised theatre in its many forms has long been a well-used toolkit for young ensembles creating their own work in the UK, providing opportunities for many participants to have a voice in the creative process. My research fellowship aimed to discover innovative projects which could contribute new ideas to this practice.

But theatre-makers who work with young people to create new texts are also, in many senses, dramaturgs. ‘Dramaturgy’ is a word more rarely heard in community and youth theatre contexts, and even the commercial theatre sector, its varied and porous processes mean that it can be difficult to define. Here is a definition from Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas, an

\textsuperscript{5} From Immordino-Yang’s keynote presentation at the American Alliance for Theatre Education annual conference 2014. For more information, see her TED Talk at TEDxManhattanBeach here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=RViuTHBlOq8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RViuTHBlOq8)
organisation dedicated to the practice of dramaturgy: “Working in theatres and playwrights’ organizations, in colleges and universities, and on a project-by-project basis, dramaturgs contextualize the world of a play; establish connections among the text, actors, and audience; offer opportunities for playwrights; generate projects and programs; and create conversations about plays in their communities. In the ecology of theatre-making, dramaturgs and literary managers forge a critical link between artists and institutions, and institutions and their communities.”

In practical terms, this means that dramaturgs’ work can include the following: 1) providing research about the world of the play and making suggestions for a new play’s development 2) commissioning new play texts and determining which plays are programmed by theatres 3) creating engagement with a play through education workshops or marketing. These tasks will be familiar to anyone working to create new theatre in youth and community settings – when we help our young people to develop their own work as writers and devisers, we are often not only directors: we are dramaturgs. And in taking part in our projects, young people often take on the role of dramaturgs too. In my research, I aimed to ask: when we work with young people to create new plays, what does this process look like? Who are the dramaturgs, the writers and the directors – who plays which roles? How should the project facilitator contribute to this process?

Research Methodologies

My travelling fellowship took me to New York City for nine weeks, from mid-July to the end of September 2014, and to Denver for one week in August for the American Alliance for Theatre and Education annual conference, with the theme ‘Local to Global Theatre Education’. A detailed schedule of my travelling fellowship research and meetings can be found in Appendix 1 at the end of this report. My research methodologies were flexible in order to fit with each organisation’s practice: I aimed to gain a sense of each organisation’s ethos and culture but also needed to ensure that I respected the confidentiality of participants. Research involved a combination of shadowing projects, watching rehearsals and performances, interviews, and participating in staff training workshops. My fellowship travels were timed to coincide with both summer holiday programmes, and the start of programmes in schools in September. I met with a wide range of over 20 organisations, from Broadway theatres to local community groups. I also met with funding bodies, literary departments, and attended classes in dramaturgy and applied theatre at Columbia University and City University of New York (CUNY). I’ve highlighted some of my key experiences in this report – there were many to choose from!

This report is...

an account of my findings from my travels

a series of case studies from theatre projects in New York and beyond in the USA, each with takeaways and challenges for the UK

a toolkit of techniques and processes for making theatre on social themes with young people

a collection of recommendations and questions for UK theatre education practitioners

a collage of experiences and inspirations from exceptional theatre companies, teaching artists, and young people

www.lmda.org/tags/what-dramaturgy
“Can I say something? Take more time over that line.” It’s a busy week at the offices of Telsey + Company, an award-winning casting agency next to Times Square. In several brightly-lit rehearsal studios, actors prepare for readings of new plays at tables scattered with coffee cups and candy. The performers are focused but jovial, and it wouldn’t be immediately obvious to an outsider that these casts are particularly special or unusual. Amongst the performers, CVs which count appearances on Broadway and an Emmy-winning HBO television show, and training at Yale and Juilliard. Yet these actors sit shoulder to shoulder around the table with high school student performers, many from areas of New York facing significant economic or social barriers to accessing the arts. The playwright is addressing the room. She is 16 years old, and this is her first play.

MCC Theatre Youth Company

This is FreshPlay, the annual new writing festival of the Youth Company at MCC Theater, which “merges the voices and creativity of urban youth with the experience of professionals, creating provocative, innovative, and fresh theater.” MCC is an off-Broadway theatre, founded in 1986 as Manhattan Class Company by a group of creatives aiming to take the lead on their own artistic development by running peer-led workshops. Now, MCC presents New York and world premieres of plays, and develops new work and a series of rehearsed readings throughout the year in consultation with the theatre’s busy literary department.

The MCC Theater Youth Company was the first of its kind in New York to be associated with a professional theatre, and recruits ‘underserved NYC public school students’, who participate in an Acting Lab or Writing Lab - a series of free after-school workshops and masterclasses throughout the year. A satellite youth company, the George Washington Youth Company, serves five high schools in the Washington Heights area in Northern Manhattan. The young companies create UnCensored, an annual production of their own devising, and FreshPlay, their new writing festival. I observed the company throughout rehearsals and performances for FreshPlay in late July.

FreshPlay rehearsals take place over a period of 6 days, with 8 shows by writers aged 14-19 in rehearsal. Each playwright is paired with a professional director, and a cast of actors mingling NYC professionals, high school peers, Youth Company alumni, and young brothers and sisters when the script calls for children’s roles. The directors work with the playwrights to prepare a rehearsed reading of their new work, and the process is intensive. A young writer tells me that she leaves rehearsals late in the evening and writes into the night. Does she sleep in, given that this is the school holidays? “No, I wake up with ideas,” she tells me.

The FreshPlay playwrights have no restrictions on theme or content. But at the festival I visited, these urban writers run the gamut of domestic dramas, focusing on difficulties within families, bullying, sexuality, addiction, and the struggle of leaving their area of birth for higher education. Your Name is Tattooed on My Heart tells the story of a young gay couple; Foster Play narrates the lives of children in care. These writers’ choices show that young people do not need to be ‘engaged’ with social issues by arts practitioners: what they need are opportunities to be heard, to talk about their own thoughts and observations, which are often rooted in social themes.

7 www.mcctheater.org/youthcompany/index.html
An actor comments in rehearsal, “A lot of people think that young people are stupid, that we can’t understand these issues, but these are the issues that we will be facing for the rest of our lives”.

The role of the director is of particular interest in this process of creating these socially-engaged plays. It’s clear that the young writer is at the absolute centre of this project – the directors tailor their work to the needs and interests of each writer. The writer attends each rehearsal, sitting at the table with the cast, editing the play in real time as they hear it read. The director and writer work in partnership – the director running the rehearsal so that the writer can make notes, the writer adding or deleting lines to experiment with the text. Some directors ask questions to clarify a character’s intention or emotion, or confer with the writer to make suggestions about shape and structure: “I think this is a major tonal shift”, states one director in the midst of a scene at a family dinner party, while the writer agrees and takes notes. This partnership is particularly notable as it echoes the development of new plays by professionals in the USA – the writer often attends the entire rehearsal process, to work closely with the director and make changes. In the UK, this is less common, as writers may visit throughout the process but not attend all rehearsals. It’s clear that the writer’s presence in the room is a valuable learning process in this case. The playwrights and actors also learn from each other, asking questions about characterisation, action or language. When one actor is unsure about the language which her character, an urban mother, uses to talk about her drug addiction, she addresses the writer: “People of colour do a lot of code switching. Is that what’s happening here?” The writer and actor discuss the character’s background and history to clarify, but the writer also makes a note to think about this in the next draft.

What’s striking about FreshPlay is that theatre industry professionals and youth company members work side by side and on completely equal footing throughout the process. The writers are viewed as young professionals, and accorded all the resources that they would receive for rehearsed readings at an off-Broadway theatre. Young people and staff tell me that this is an astonishing learning process for everyone involved – young writers receive mentorship from established artists, but it’s absolutely clear that this is not a one-way street: the actors comment that they learn from the writers and the characters that they create.

But despite this focus on professionalism, Carrie Azano, Director of Education and Outreach, emphasises the unique culture of MCC Youth Company: “It’s like a family”. Throughout the year, company members receive mentoring and advice on CV writing, school exams and college applications. They can also become Ambassadors, shadowing MCC Staff to learn about all aspects of creating theatre, from Marketing to Education.
The company retains particularly strong links with its alumni, many of whom act in the FreshPlay process and mentor younger members, talking about their lives at university or as arts professionals. This unique ‘family’ culture extends beyond playwriting to all aspects of members’ lives, creating a profound sense of ownership and belonging, giving them the confidence to tackle difficult and personal issues in their plays, and raising aspirations.

“The pavements are cracked but you have to learn to ride smooth”.

A standing ovation for the premiere of Cracked Pavements, a play about young people from New York City navigating the difficult paths towards their futures at the end of High School. Lucy Thurber, the Obie-award winning playwright who leads the Youth Company writing course throughout the year, stands to address the young writer as she does after each reading: praising their achievement, celebrating their particular individual qualities and their personhood. The characters in Cracked Pavements have to translate, she says. They plan to leave their disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods for a leafy college campus or a businessman’s career in Los Angeles; they have to translate their backgrounds and experiences in these new worlds and cultures where they are not always expected, where they may be a minority, where others may not always make them feel entitled; yet they plan to make themselves understood. Lucy considers the play's characters and their plans. “That is a beautiful translation”, she says to the young playwright, who will begin university in the autumn on a full scholarship for young people with exceptional potential who may be overlooked by traditional college selection processes. “You are a warrior of translation”.

These young writers in New York have complex cultural and social translations to undertake. The exemplary work of MCC Theater Youth Company leaves no doubt that they will be successful.

**Takeaways:** Young people need to be accorded the same resources as top theatre professionals, and treated as equals in the creative process. Retaining strong links with programme alumni creates a supportive, friendly culture where young people see their older peers achieving and have a sense of ownership.

**Challenges:** It’s a challenge to gain funding for this kind of creative process, as the number of participants is relatively small. Funding is a necessity in order to provide the resources needed though.

**More like this...** Several youth theatre programmes in NYC enable young people to hear their writing performed by professional actors. See New York Theatre Workshop’s intergenerational project Mind the Gap, (Part 4 of this report) and Write on the Edge project at Manhattan Theatre Club. The 52nd Street Project runs similar programmes for younger participants.
Girl Be Heard

I visited Girl Be Heard, a not-for-profit theatre collective, to discover how this company’s work empowers young women as leaders whilst exploring the challenging circumstances which they face.

Girl Be Heard was founded in 2008 when theatre director Ashley Marinaccio was asked to write a play for Estrogenius Theatre Festival, an NYC-based women’s arts festival celebrating female voices, to be performed by twelve young women from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. After meeting the girls and hearing their stories, the creative team felt that the girls should be writing the play themselves, to speak about their own lives and experiences. They formed ‘Project Girl Performance Collective’, which would become Girl Be Heard.

Dena Adriance, Director of Educational Programs, explains that Girl Be Heard now runs workshops for young women in schools and on Sundays, leading to the creation of performances focusing on issues affecting young women written by the girls themselves. The aim is to empower participants as leaders, and give them a space to write about their experiences of being a young woman in the modern world, whether challenging, difficult, personal, funny or beautiful. Recent work has included 9mm America, about how gun crime affects young women in the USA, a performance at the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in London in the summer of 2014, and Displaced, exploring issues faced by displaced people in the USA and abroad.

‘An awareness of the greater context that’s impacting their own lives’.

Dena explains that Girl Be Heard have recently undertaken the process of creating a curriculum model for engaging young women who participate in their schools’ workshops. The workshops are designed to be flexible, tailored to each school and group, and so this is by no means a school curriculum to be rigidly followed. Instead, it’s a model of social engagement with 3 flexible units: the first focusing on building ensemble and reflecting on individual identity, the second contextualising issues affecting women in the wider world, and the third bringing these themes together to query how broader world themes impact on the individual, and how the individual can themselves create positive impact. By starting with their own personal experiences of culture and society, the girls gain confidence in exploring their own identity creatively, and can then focus this engagement on issues in their society and understand how their own experiences are rooted in cultural and global frameworks or problems.

This interplay between individual cultural experience and the wider world is evident in the intergenerational workshop I visit, led by Abigail Ramsey, Director of Global Partnerships: participants have been asked to write a monologue from personal experience, and another from the
point of view of a female historical or cultural figure. Each reading is followed by the group discussing the position of the character, their struggles, humour and individuality.

Abigail’s role as Director of Global Partnerships is indicative of a key strand of Girl Be Heard’s work, which has an international focus: they’ve travelled to leadership summits for young women worldwide. The organisation has worked with Sensational Football in Denmark, who run a football program for young refugee women. Girl Be Heard explored the theme of asylum seeking by beginning with some of their own NYC members’ experience of homelessness, giving their members a framework to explore both their own experiences and those of their peers in the football tournament.

“By sharing your story, you’re frequently helping someone else.” – Dena Adriance

Dena explains that the organisation’s supportive culture is at the centre of enabling young women to explore themselves and the world around them to create their moving and memorable work. Workshop practitioners reflect on how society shapes our expectations of how women should feel, speak and behave, and this impacts their workshop leadership style. In one workshop, participants were encouraged not to apologise for their work before reading or sharing it – workshop practitioners hoped that this would encourage participants to feel a sense of ownership and pride over what they have created. As with MCC Theater, a strong network of older members and alumnae create a workshop environment which is particularly welcoming, supportive and friendly, creating a space where difficult and sensitive topics can be explored. Performances are usually a mix of monologues and group pieces, to give members the opportunity to have an individual voice yet also create a strong ensemble. Dena recounts that participants find that when they share their own difficult personal circumstances through their writing, they discover that others with similar experiences will have the courage to speak up too.

Takeaways: By beginning with exploring individual identity, and using this as a springboard for exploring global issues, Girl Be Heard can provide a space for young women to explore their own development but also become activists.

Challenges: Dena explains the need to provide support for the girls when their writing about sensitive or difficult situations from their personal lives. The company refers them to counselling or support organisations where appropriate. In September 2014, Girl Advocates, a new program, was launched, enabling participants to receive further support from project alumni and older staff members who act as mentors for the company’s young women.

More like this: Estrogenius Theatre Festival, women’s arts festival in NYC
EPIC Theatre Ensemble

Marianna has been watching and listening for too long. She knows that she’s not supposed to leave her bench in the court, where she is watching the trial of her father, fighting for the legal right to remain in New York City as he faces deportation to Mexico, his country of birth. She knows that as a teenager she’s not supposed to have a voice here. But she has evidence, she has legal knowledge, she knows that she can persuade. So she strides forward. “I have something to say which is very important. Let me speak.”

Watching this scene from EPIC Theatre Ensemble’s performance by a group of New York City High School students, this organisation’s mission is clear: to work with diverse communities to create writing for civic change. At EPIC, the link between personal artistry and social activism is central to their ethos, which focuses on:

- Inspiring students to be creative and engaged citizens
- Presenting compelling topics that transform the way people think
- Collaborating with artists, students and thought leaders to produce plays about key issues

I attended two performances by young members of the Ensemble. The second years, Tier 2, presented their new play Don’t Scratch My Surface, an immersive drama imagining a black, gay Republican candidate in a bid to become a congressman. Performers used masks to explore the differences between how their characters act to others, and what they think privately, in this examination of social, economic and political issues in contemporary New York. Audience members were met in the building’s lobby by the characters, who encouraged them to vote and handed out flyers in support of the candidate, giving the audience an opportunity to question the characters and become involved in their political rally.

In the first year’s show, Silent Ground, the cast told the story of the intertwined lives of several young Americans facing deportation and working in the police force in a series of quickly changing devised scenes. The twisting stories led to a searing end, showing the shooting of a young person by the police, in a reflection of the recent events in Ferguson. The young actors gathered slowly and sang a song of their own composition: “Land of the free, home of the brave, this is what they always say. But we won’t back down.” In their writing, the ensemble express the gulf between what America promised their characters, and their tragic reality.

“People think that I’m crazy to do this with High School students”

Melissa Friedman, Artistic Director of the ensemble, is describing the devising process which led to the creation of this moving and political show. The group aimed to explore the question, “When and how do we question authority?” To create the show, she used a long-form improvisational exercise called ‘The Harold’, developed by comic actor Del Close in the 1970s, and adopted by improv comedy groups such as the Upright Citizens Brigade in New York and Los Angeles. The group creates three scenarios, and improvises a scene for each one. Each set of three scenes forms an act, which is followed by a group game or ensemble activity. This is then repeated three times, so that each scenario progresses with a beginning, middle and end scene, before the scenarios converge at the end in a final scene. Using this long form improvisation enabled the company to choose social issues,
such as immigration, and develop these into a storyline, including the court scene described above, whilst having the scope and time to raise underlying questions and create characters with complex motives. This improvisation formed the basis of a script for the show, which was then written by the group.

Melissa stresses that this exercise is a challenge even for professional actors. For this reason, she modelled it for the young group using EPIC’s mentors – performing arts professionals who each work with three young people throughout the process of creating the show. The mentors meet with the young people each day, to set targets around areas that they wish to improve – for example, scriptwriting – and invite the young people to their own rehearsals and productions.

As the rehearsal week progressed, project facilitators found articles and links relating to the themes of American identity, police brutality and immigration which the group were exploring, for the walls of the rehearsal room, creating an environment of stimuli to explore the topics further. EPIC also brings in social activist experts on the topics covered by the group, in order to learn from a professional’s perspective.

‘Sit forward, wake up and enjoy the show’.

With these words, the first EPIC show I attended was introduced to the audience: these shows are a call to action and spectators are encouraged to engage in the discussion sparked by the performance. After each show, the director conducts ‘talkbacks’ with the cast and audience, asking spectators “What will you remember from this show, two weeks from now?” Audience members answer: “At home, teens tend not to have a voice. When we’re in programmes like EPIC, we’re encouraged to have a voice.” “I realise that I wear so many masks [in how I interact with others], and I’ll try to wear fewer masks”. As the audience members comment, the young cast seated on the stage talk back energetically and movingly – applauding in turn or shouting “Facts!” to show their approval and agreement. Their own performance is the start of a dialogue with their audiences and the wider community.

Takeaways: EPIC’s twin goals of artistic creation and social engagement mean that practitioners challenge young people to tackle both complex devising processes and difficult issues. Post-show ‘talkbacks’ engage the audience in the themes of the play to create a discussion about social problems and the possibility of change.

Challenges: Using complex artistic techniques could alienate some young performers new to the arts, but support and modelling from professional mentors ensures that everyone feels able to participate.

More like this: In 2015, the Act Like You Care programme at Brooklyn Arts Exchange will enable young people to work with experts on social issues to create original theatre.
The People’s Theatre Project

The People’s Theatre Project works in community and school settings in Washington Heights in Northern Manhattan, creating theatre projects which enable participants to become “community actors - everyday people who become expressive, critically and creatively thinking team members with a deep understanding of how the arts can change the world....” They describe the company as “a non-profit arts and social justice organization, [which] unites members of under-represented communities to raise awareness of their shared struggles through the personally and socially transformative process of collaborative theatre making...”

The People’s Theatre Project was founded in 2009 by theatre artists Mino Lora and Bob Braswell, with the goal of making the arts accessible in the area of Washington Heights. Washington Heights is home to significant Dominican and black communities, notably portrayed on the Broadway stage in Lin Manuel Miranda’s vibrant and moving musical In the Heights. The area was found to be underserved by the arts; Mino and Bob found that 85% of local residents had never attended an arts event, or had only done so once as a child, whilst 90% said that they would be interested in performing on stage.

Theatre of the Oppressed in New York City

The People’s Theatre Project uses the methodology of Theatre of the Oppressed, created by Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal in the 1960s. Theatre of the Oppressed aims to create social and political change through theatre-making by examining scenarios and power structures which cause oppression, and imagining the means of undoing these. Boal’s wide-ranging theatrical techniques include Forum Theatre, where the audience are no longer passive spectators but rather ‘spect-actors’ who can join the actors onstage in order to improvise solutions to social problems represented by the company of performers. In this way, Theatre of the Oppressed enables performers and ‘spect-actors’ to write potential solutions to social problems together during performances in a kind of ‘simultaneous dramaturgy’.

Theatre of the Oppressed is well represented in New York City by a range of organisations. Before my travels, I talked on Skype with Becca Lynch from Theatre of the Oppressed NYC, founded by Katy Rubin who trained with Augusto Boal. During my time in the city, I met with S Leigh Thompson, co-founder of The Forum Project, who work with marginalised communities and particularly with LGBTQ youth in the city. Both were able to inform me in detail about their wide ranging social activism theatre projects in New York City – more details about their work can be found on their websites (see Appendix 2).

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8 People’s Theatre Project website: www.peoplestheatreproject.org/#!programs/c14o7
9 www.peoplestheatreproject.org
Developing imagination means we can imagine social change

Whilst The People’s Theatre Project often used the Theatre of the Oppressed methodology, their after-school workshops are inspired by these techniques but may draw from others too in order to suit the needs of their community. This was the case at the workshops I visited at Harbor Heights Middle School. The workshops are designed for young people who have recently arrived in the USA; they provide an opportunity for students to have fun in a creative setting, yet they also provide a space to discuss their experience of their new community and reflect on their journeys. The People’s Theatre Project specifically caters to the needs of this group by employing workshop facilitators who speak both Spanish and English. In the workshop I observed, the two languages were often intermingled when explaining games and exercises in order to make sure that all students had understood the instructions. ‘Image Theatre’, a Theatre of the Oppressed technique, was the basis of the workshop — the facilitator whispered a picture or theme in the ear of one student, who created a still pose representing what the image meant to them. One by one, without speaking, the other participants joined the still image by creating their own positions until the picture featured eight or nine students.

The use of image theatre in this workshop was informed by the linguistic and social needs of the students — many were new to theatre making, and navigating a transition into English as their language of formal education, so this technique meant that there was no pressure to speak lines but instead to make simple physical choices which could create beautiful images. Mino, the project’s Co-Founder, explained the link between image theatre and social action. She explains that creating physical images to represent a scene, students are developing their abstract thinking and imagining possibilities. These same cognitive skills are needed to envisage solutions to social issues. Mino explains that these images are expanded into short scenes and skits which form the basis of ‘collages’ performed by the students at the end of term, often focusing on bullying, immigration and integration. In this way, physical tasks in the workshop provide a platform for the creation of issues-engaged reflection.

Takeaways: Image Theatre and physical techniques can be used to provide openings for young people who are learning English to process their experiences as immigrants. Engagement in social issues in a workshop doesn’t have to start with discussion!

Challenges: Working with local communities requires specific knowledge about their linguistic and cultural needs. Mino and Bob, the founders of The People’s Theater Project, had particular insight into the area of Washington Heights as residents of the area.

More like this: Theatre of the Oppressed NYC, The Forum Project and Falconworks all use Theatre of the Oppressed techniques in New York City.
Roundabout Theatre’s The Winslow Boy – Residency at Bronx Theatre High School

Many of the projects which I visited on my fellowship travels took place in after-school workshops and community settings. I was keen to discover whether socially-engaged theatre making is also happening in classrooms in New York, and how working within the school curriculum might present different ideas, challenges and possibilities. When observing workshops at Roundabout Theatre, which produces musicals and plays for NYC audiences, I was introduced to Jason Jacobs, a theatre director and teacher who works with Roundabout to create and facilitate education residencies relating to the plays in the theatre’s season. Discussing Jason’s work on Terrence Rattigan’s play The Winslow Boy, produced at Roundabout in autumn 2013, provided answers to many of my questions about social engagement and theatre in schools.

“Today Ronnie missed a midterm exam, because he was detained at the school entrance. Security officers received a tip that a student was bringing a weapon into school, so after x-raying Ronnie’s bag, a Police Officer took him into a private room where he conducted a personal search. No weapon was found. The teacher has not excused the absence or allowed him to make up the exam.”

What would you do if you were Ronnie’s parents? This was the question faced by students at Bronx Theatre High School in Northern Manhattan during Roundabout’s creative residency based on The Winslow Boy. At the start of the creative residency, the class of students was grouped into ‘families’. After creating names and identities for their family groups, they were presented with a profile of their child, like the example of Ronnie, facing disciplinary action at school due to complicated social challenges: these included homophobic bullying or being sent home for wearing a political badge.

This was the beginning of a series of activities: students debated their child’s case, wrote a speech on their position to present at an imaginary meeting of their child’s school board, and created scenes and press statements to show how they would raise the profile of their child’s experience in the media and with other organisations which could help them.

Through these activities, students were given opportunities to debate definitions of injustice, become informed about their rights within organisations’ codes of conduct and the law, and be advocates for a cause. Jason worked with Alison Ritz, 12th Grade Social Studies Teacher at Bronx Theatre High School, and Billy McIntyre, a student teacher, to create this classroom residency based on The Winslow Boy. Rattigan’s The Winslow Boy, inspired by a real legal case from Edwardian England, tells the story of a naval cadet who was expelled from school after accusations of stealing. The play follows his family’s journey to seek legal justice for their son.

How do individuals find agency (self-empowerment) to question the authority of a government entity to address injustice?

For the Roundabout School residency, the teaching artists decided to explore the play’s question of how individuals can find agency to question authorities, governmental or otherwise, by enabling the students to experiment with doing this. Real props, such as letters in envelopes from the school, and live scenes, where the teachers played the role of the family lawyer, encouraged students’ engagement. In this way, the residency was a form of ‘process drama’, a technique where participants create an imaginary world to explore a challenge or problem. In process drama, participants can both take part in improvised scenes by playing characters ‘in role’, but they can also step outside these roles to reflect on their choices.
This residency not only provided students with opportunities to experience becoming advocates for a cause, it also enabled them to develop skills across several curriculum areas. The reading and writing elements of the project evidently relate to literacy and theatre: indeed, the residency helped students to contextualise *The Winslow Boy* before seeing the play at Roundabout. But the residency took place in an economics and government class: students also developed their ability to synthesise and debate legal texts and codes of conduct.

Jason highlights a key question which he asked students at the end of the residency: after your child’s case has been resolved with the school, will you continue to advocate for this cause? Do you feel like your work is finished, or do you wish to raise more awareness or reach out to others in a similar position? With this question, students reflect on moving this ‘process drama’ activism into the real world: when do we choose to act, and when is advocacy finished?

**Takeaways:** Process drama, using real props and relatable scenarios, provides young people with opportunities to devise theatre whilst experimenting with social engagement, exploring activism, advocacy, and awareness-raising. The classroom setting provides opportunities to work on literacy, PHSE, and citizenship.

**Challenges:** The storyline of the drama in this residency featured an imaginary school. Teaching artists had to emphasise that this was fictional and not related to the students’ own school. Some students might become angry or frustrated when reading about these stories of struggles with the disciplinary bodies at school. The teaching artists emphasised that to become advocates, students had to prepare speeches with detailed precise information about their legal rights, and address the school politely in order to negotiate, rather than just relying on emotion or threatening to sue the school.

**More like this:** Process drama has been recently used in a very different, but equally valuable context: NYC-based Applied Theatre Collective has used this model to explore the Arab Spring, and the theme of revolution, with young people.
At the American Alliance for Theatre and Education (AATE) conference which I attended in Denver, I discovered two new plays which were both exploring the theme of gender identity with primary school-age audiences: The Quest of Queen Thomas, by Brit Hawkins Christopher, a masters student in Theatre Education at Emerson College in Boston, and Unsorted by Wesley Middleton, commissioned by Metro Theatre Company in Saint Louis, Missouri. At the centre of each story, a playwright moved to explore this theme by recent news stories of transgender children in America, whose expression of their gender identity was restricted by objections from schools, or peers. Both playwrights hoped to provide an opportunity for young people to reflect on gender identity and feel safe to express their gender, interests and hobbies in the way that they chose, and enable their peers to feel the same. Both plays shared not only this common theme, but a common characteristic in their development process – working with dramaturgs. Whilst The Quest of Queen Thomas used dramaturgy to ground a fairy-tale story in expert research, Unsorted pioneered interactive dramaturgy, as children and young people participated as dramaturgs too.

The Quest of Queen Thomas

The Quest of Queen Thomas is a fairy-tale adventure featuring Thomas, a protagonist who likes to be called ‘she’ and enjoys wearing a tiara. Thomas ventures through magical lands, encountering a motley cast of characters - a fairy, a witch, and a speaking pile of mud - on her way. Brit Hawkins Christopher, the playwright, explains how the project’s dramaturgy informed the creation of the play at her presentation at the AATE conference. Brit stresses that whilst the play features an imaginary magical world, it was important to begin with research on gender identity: a professional dramaturg researched histories and achievements of transgender people; friends of the writer who were transgender consulted on the play, requesting changes in wording in the script where appropriate so that the writer could adapt language and ideas. Brit chose the fairy-tale setting as a way of making the play accessible, entertaining and universal, for children and young people who were familiar with its themes, and for those who may be reflecting on gender identity for the first time. The play was performed at Emerson College and Camp Aranu’tiq, a summer camp for transgender and gender-variant youth. Audience members were able to respond to the play after watching by participating in creative workshops focusing on the characters. Brit explains that no audience member responded by questioning whether Thomas was a boy or a girl, but instead they all gave individual responses to the play’s theme of “being yourself.”
Unsorted

The teacher sits in front of a huge pile of clothes. Her class of five year olds gather around, as she asks them to sort the clothes into two piles, one for boys and one for girls. “Girls!” the class shouts for a pink dress. “Boys!” for a blue t-shirt. But last in the pile, a red jumper. The group are divided. Should it go in the boys’ or the girls’ pile? Finally, one student proposes a solution. “We need a new pile.” After this is decided, the teacher asks, “But if the red hoodie can go in a new pile, what about these other clothes? What about a pink hoodie? What if a boy wore that? Is that ok?” “Yes”, the class replies. “And what if a girl wore the blue t-shirt? Is that ok?” “Yes!” the class replies.

Playwright Wesley Middleton saw this exchange in a classroom when researching an idea for a new play about identity and labels. The piles of clothes became the basis for Unsorted, a fantasy world where clothes are characters, and everyone must be sorted, according to a bully character known as Jacket. In this way, Wesley explains, she aimed to explore the themes of sorting and identity through her writing – that whilst sometimes it can be useful to sort things, sorting people can be hurtful.

Wesley spoke about her play at a conference panel, ‘Interactive Dramaturgy with Youth’. ‘Interactive Dramaturgy’ was a key aspect of her research for this work. Wesley ran a series of workshops for children and young people with theatre artist Carol North. Wesley explains that whilst the workshops were an opportunity for young people to engage with the theme of gender binaries and ‘sorting’, they also enabled the young people to inform the creation of the play at the Research and Development stage through their comments and ideas: in other words, workshop participants became dramaturgs, and the dramaturgy for the show existed in the interactive exchange between writer and young people. For example, Wesley and Carol asked the young people if there was ever a time when they would have liked to do an activity, but felt that they shouldn’t, because of their gender. They then asked young people to draw their “perfect girl world” and “perfect boy world”, and then to draw what their own perfect world would be. These comments and pictures informed the writer’s research and development of the play.

A particularly innovative aspect of this ‘Interactive Dramaturgy’ explored during the conference panel is the notion that the young people can continue to act as dramaturgs at all stages of the play’s development, and even after having seen the show. After watching Unsorted, families were given activity books and writing prompts so that they could continue responding to the show. The Playwright Suzan Zeder, who also spoke on the ‘Interactive Dramaturgy’ panel, explained that during the development of her play Aviatrix, about a female pilot, children and young people were invited to various rehearsed readings at different stages of the play’s development, commenting on what had changed since the last reading, how they felt about a character, and whether they missed aspects of the play which had been cut. Suzan explains that plays for young audiences are often only seen by young people at the end of the process, yet as the experts on what will interest them, they should be present at all stages of a show’s development. Suzan also emphasises that creative moments from the workshops held with young people for the development of Aviatrix enabled her to find solutions to questions about characters and plot through non-verbal sequences and storytelling, as the children responded in the creative workshops through movement and expression as well as verbally.
**Takeaways:** Whilst it is often necessary to undertake dramaturgical research to create new work for young audience, children can be dramaturgs! They are the experts on their interests and should be given a voice at all stages of the play’s development.

**Challenges:** Creating a play for young audiences which encourages thinking about identity and society can potentially be alienating for some young audience members, if the issues explored are too new or complicated. There’s a fine balance to be drawn between encouraging audiences to reflect whilst also creating work which is accessible and entertaining. There’s also a delicate line between preaching to an audience and allowing them to make up their own minds. Both of these plays addressed this by using an imaginary world setting, with magical characters, to explore the theme of gender identity gently through stories of characters learning to be themselves. Finding schools who are prepared to host plays on these themes is an additional challenge – *Queen Thomas* struggled to find an audience as schools were unwilling to welcome discussions about gender identity and felt that their staff were not trained to work on these themes. The creative team resolved this by reaching out to organisations who work specifically with young people in this area.

**More like this:** True Colors at The Theatre Offensive in Boston makes theatre with “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and allied youth leaders ages 14-29”.
“We have a lot in common.” A participant at New York Theatre Workshop’s intergenerational writing project smiles at his workshop writing partner, who nods her agreement. An outside eye might notice the pair’s differences – they are 40 years apart in age, and from different religious and ethnic backgrounds – but if you’d spent some time in the workshop, you’d soon discover that these friends share a love of reality TV, pop music and gaudy humour. They are watching performances of the plays which they have written, each inspired by the life of the other. “It’s like she gave me a gift”, he says.

Many of the projects which I visited on my fellowship travels engage young people with social themes by placing the social issue at the top of the agenda: they set out to explore how young people feel about society through debates and research. Yet visiting a trio of organisations in New York City revealed another key theme: creative processes which unite people of different backgrounds and experiences, to tell and listen to stories and learn from each other. Here, the focus is not on the research brought to the group by experts, but on connection with others who we may never otherwise have the opportunity to meet, and on learning about society and the world from their perspective.

Mind The Gap

Created by the education department at New York Theatre Workshop, Mind the Gap focuses on intergenerational playwriting. Half of the participants are aged 14-19 and known as the ‘teens’; the other half are aged 50+, and sometimes referred to as the ‘elders’. The group works with theatre and playwriting tutors to explore their experiences and commonalities through writing prompts, before teens and elders pair up to interview each other about their lives and interests, eventually creating 10 minute plays inspired by the life of their partner, which are then performed by professional actors to the group.

Empathy and listening are at the core of the creative process undertaken by this diverse community of participants from many backgrounds and areas of the city: when they interview their partner to create their play, they take the time to understand their partner’s ideas, humour, culture and life experience. Brynn Thorsson, Director of Education at New York Theatre Workshop, highlights the fact that teenagers rarely have opportunities to learn about the lives of older people outside of their family, and meet an older mentor, who may have had different experiences - this is part of what makes the project so valuable.
The Creative Arts Team’s Reach Project

But even amongst the younger generation, there are gaps to be bridged, as the Creative Arts Team (CAT) shows. Based at the City University of New York, CAT runs a diverse series of theatre engagement programmes for children and young people in their schools workshops and youth companies. After receiving funding by the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development to work with schools to improve the literacy of young people who were struggling in class, CAT created ‘The Reach Project’. Two schools, one in the borough of Brooklyn, and one in the Bronx, took part in theatre and literary workshops three times a week after school. Unbeknownst to the students, they were in fact part of a twinning project with the other school. I took part in a workshop at the AATE conference where the project facilitator Brisa Muñoz showed us how the project developed. During the workshop, our group was given a mysterious parcel, from an address in Brooklyn. When we opened this, it contained pieces of a puzzle. Our group gathered around, instantly curious. The project facilitator didn’t give anything away (CAT describes the project facilitators as Actor / Teachers for the Reach Project, as they do indeed play both roles!) When we completed the puzzle, it was a missive from the ‘Reach Project’ headquarters, requesting that we introduce ourselves. For students at the Reach Project schools, this puzzle was the beginning of a series of tasks to get to know the other mystery school, by writing letters, creating freeze frames, and even inventing skits with puppets. Students led the creative process themselves by deciding how to respond to communication from the other school. Helen Wheelock, Adolescent Literacy Program Director at CAT, explained that whilst the students in both schools were in education in underprivileged areas and were struggling with literacy, they may never have had the opportunity to leave their local community to travel to other boroughs of New York, and some knew little about their partner school’s area. At the end of the project, the students from the two schools met – not only did the project prove to increase their grades in literacy, it also built bridges between two New York communities.
Narrative 4: “Like a United Nations for young storytellers”\(^\text{10}\)

Meeting with Lee Keylock, Director of Global Programs at Narrative 4, provided a further opportunity to explore the link between sharing stories, social engagement and empathy.

Narrative 4 is a global organisation for storytelling. Founded by writer and now Executive Director Lisa Consiglio after experimental workshops at a writers’ retreat, Narrative 4’s ‘story exchanges’ have taken place in diverse regions globally, from Chicago to Northern Ireland and Haiti, and the organisation receives support from a vast family of writers including Colum McCann and Salman Rushdie.

For the story exchanges, participants in Narrative 4’s workshops are paired up – each person tells their partner a story from their own life. The stories can be funny, moving, painful, or strange. The only necessities: they should be true and representative of you and your experience. After each partner has told and heard a story with their partner, they rejoin the whole group. Seated in a circle, each person retells not their own story, but the story from their partner’s life, but in the first person, beginning with “I”.

I participated in a Story Exchange in Brooklyn for teachers and arts practitioners interested in discovering more about Narrative 4. The Narrative 4 facilitators requested that stories shared in the workshop were not to be retold by other participants outside of the event, and therefore will not be documented here in this report. What I can testify to here is the astonishing power of hearing stories from people of all ages and backgrounds, and the strange and rare experience of becoming another ‘I’ for a short moment, as you tell the story of somebody else. The workshop was one of the single most moving and thought provoking moments from my fellowship, and one which I will carry with me for a long time.

Narrative 4’s aim is to promote ‘radical empathy’. Undertaking the responsibility of telling someone else’s life story to an audience requires that we first listen attentively and carefully to their experience, with respect and reverence. When we retell the story using the pronoun ‘I’, we have to understand and empathise, taking a moment to walk in another person’s shoes. Narrative 4’s involvement in communities across the world proves that the story exchange is a far-reaching and universal tool. Lee Keylock explains that storytelling can offer young people glimpses of others’ lives and experiences, which may be wildly different from their own: young people across America have been connected with survivors of the Haiti earthquake and with teenagers from the townships of South Africa. Yet the story exchange also leads pairs to find common ground, discovering that peers from very different cultures and experiences might share interests, concerns or emotions. Lee explains, “Their world expands, but it also shrinks a little”.

**Takeaways:** Empathy is one of the most powerful tools for social engagement. By connecting young people with others from diverse communities who they may never otherwise meet, they can expand their understanding but also find universal commonalities.

**Challenges:** Sharing personal stories can be difficult and sensitive and we need to make sure to create a safe space for young people where they are appropriately supported. Lee explains that Narrative 4 works with school guidance counsellors, who can follow up on the workshops where

\(^{10}\) From the Narrative 4 website [www.narrative4.com](http://www.narrative4.com)
necessary. Where similar workshops take place outside of school settings, finding ways to provide this support is a priority. Lee also explained that young people also benefit from an introduction to storytelling to help the group to retell their partners’ stories sensitively and respectfully – staff modelling the story exchange first is one good way to reflect on this.

Narrative 4 are also interested in researching how we might measure the impact of empathy and social development, and sustain these in the long term. Their research with the University of Maryland on impact measurement and with Yale University on emotional intelligence will inform the organisation’s work as it grows.

More like this: CAT’s Reach Project drew inspiration from the Contacting the World Festival at the Contact Theatre in Manchester, UK, which brings together youth theatre companies from around the world.
FreeConvo and I Think Outside My Box

During my research fellowship, “Who are your participants?” was a key question for organisations I visited. I was interested in asking “Who is in the room? Who have you recruited? And who is not included? Who’s missing from the conversation?” Were the projects reaching young people from all backgrounds? Were they inclusive?

Organisations used a variety of recruitment processes, from auditioning in schools, to referrals from peers and alumni. Yet I discovered that New York City’s ever-changing and vibrant street performance art culture provided opportunities for New Yorkers of all backgrounds to engage with theatre and community, by the logic of foot traffic: these projects were present in public parks, streets and squares. The artistic and legal history of street performance art in the city became another strand to my research.

FreeConvo creates opportunities for strangers to meet and interact, by installing groups of inflatable couches in public spaces with signs reading ‘Free Conversation’. I Think Outside My Box is a community art project, where passers-by in public places can paint a square which becomes part of an ever-changing art installation cataloguing the city’s preoccupations, thoughts and interests. These projects are not primarily focused on creating theatre, or on engaging the public with social issues.

But by reclaiming public space to provide meeting places for members of the public, they form performance art installations where people can play the role of both performer and audience member at will. Of all of the projects I visited, those in public space had the greatest diversity of participants in age, background and life experience. Public space is an underused resource for creating communities of participants which represent the demographic of the city.

Takeaways: Projects in the public spaces can bring arts engagement to the most diverse audiences.

Challenges: New York City has a long and established history of outdoor performance art which sets a precedent for the role of these projects today. The UK’s cultural history for outdoor performance art is perhaps less established. In both regions, projects should check the legal implications of working in the public space to know whether they need permission from authorities.

More like this: FreeConvo also operates in London, and is one of a collection of organisations dedicated to encouraging people to meet and interact to combat social isolation in the city. Talk to Me London shares this goal, running a range of events in the city.
During my fellowship, I visited over 20 organisations working in New York City and throughout the USA which engage young people with social issues through devised theatre and dramaturgy. The following recommendations for developing good practice in this work in the UK are based on examples of successful and innovative projects which I observed during my research. Where relevant, I’ve also provided examples of workshop activities, particularly those used by organisations which I visited but have not covered or described in detail in the case studies in parts 1-5 of this report.

- Young people are young professional artists. As such, they should be accorded the top resources (for example, working with professional directors and actors in venues with high technical specifications), matching those offered to professionals in the sector where possible.
- Provide opportunities for young people to hear their scripts being read aloud by professional actors. This is a rare and valuable learning experience for young playwrights.
- Connect your young people to experts in the topics which interest them, for example, lawyers working on immigration or activists campaigning for gender equality.
- Young people and professionals (actors, directors, experts) should work together and have equal status, roles and treatment in the rehearsal process. For example, a play could be performed by a group of professionals and high school students together. This provides the greatest opportunity for young people and professionals to learn from each other and for young participants to feel empowered by the process.
- If your project is ongoing, stay connected with your alumni in the long term and into their adulthood. They are powerful influencers and culture-makers for your next generations of participants. Involving alumni with your group as mentors or assistants can create a can-do attitude for the next generation of young people in your organisation.
- If you are writing work for young audiences, young people can and should act as dramaturgs at all stages of your play’s development. No-one else is so well equipped to tell you how your work will impact young audiences and how they will respond. Inviting young people to informal workshops and development readings of your work provides important opportunities for input and feedback. In addition, it is often easier to garner honest reactions in these informal contexts than in ‘talk backs’ or workshops of a full production at a theatre, where young people may feel pressure to ‘say the right thing’ in front of your cast or their teachers. (Recommendation from playwright Suzan Zeder, based on experiences of creating her play Aviatrix). Your dramaturgy can become an interactive process with young advisors.
- Be transparent about the social issues that are affecting you as an artist or activist and share these with young participants - bring your own humanity into the room!
- Bringing together surprising combinations of people of different ages, communities or backgrounds is a powerful way for participants to learn about each other and find commonalities. Empathy is a powerful tool of social engagement, and unusual ensembles often find new ways of addressing issues together.
• Move from the personal scale to the global scale – begin a process by asking how an issue affects young people’s own lives, and then contextualise this by looking at society or government locally and globally.

• Be curious and continue to question yourself. As workshop practitioners, we don’t have all of the answers – we can and should learn from our participants and from each workshop.

**Recommendations for Workshops with Example Activities**

• Use spectacle (create a flashmob with your staff, or start a workshop in role as a character) to excite and engage participants.
  
  **EXAMPLE EXERCISE:** At Roundabout Theatre Company’s Theatrical Teaching Institute for practitioners and drama teachers, workshop leaders began a session on spectacle by inviting participants into a room where they instantly became part of a political demonstration! We were given flags to wave and drums to bang, and listened to rallying speeches performed by Roundabout’s workshop facilitators. By beginning the workshop with an act of theatre, participants were instantly engaged and energised. Yet they were also able to reflect on the theatricality of protest and political speech-making, becoming aware of how and why they participated in the event, who they felt held the power in the room to encourage them to do so, and why they were moved and convinced (or not) by the speakers.

• Addressing social issues with young people doesn’t have to start with political debates or discussions. These activities may not always be accessible to your entire group, who may have diverse learning styles.
  
  **EXAMPLE EXERCISE:** At Stargate, Manhattan Theatre Club’s project for young men who have been involved in the criminal justice system, workshop directors began a workshop I visited with physical and character based exercises. In one exercise, two lines of participants face and then approach each other. As they cross paths, they must address each other with “Hi, how are you?” and “Fine thank you.” Ask the participants to repeat these words and these only, but now assign each line of young people a character role. For example, one line is a son sneaking back home late at night, and the other line is his mother waiting up for him. This exercise was extremely successful with this group of young men who were participating in theatre-making for the first time, as the scenario was relatable and funny. This gave the workshop facilitators the opportunity to begin developing characters for their story and talk about power roles within a family.

• If you are working with young people in a community which is new for you (for example, in a foreign country or area which you are not familiar with), choose open-ended devising exercises which enable the young people to tell you about their community and ensure that you don’t project your own ideas and assumptions. Use ensemble exercises in which everyone makes choices and has a voice.
  
  **EXAMPLE EXERCISE:** Voices of Now is a programme based at Arena Stage in Washington, DC, which has worked in India and Peru with local communities to create new devised performances about local identity and cultural questions. In one game, practitioners give the group four options to express their identity and local community using similes. For example, “Living in my community is like hot tea / cold milk / fizzy coca cola / fresh orange juice.”
Workshop leaders assign a corner of the room for each of the four choices. Participants move to the corner which best reflects their opinion and makes a sentence from their choice. Eg. ‘Living in my community is like hot tea because it is comforting, but it can also sometimes be dangerous’. Workshop leaders at Voices of Now write down the similes and often use these verbatim in the plays which they create.

- Be transparent about your process as a facilitator. S Leigh Thomson, co-founder of The Forum Project, emphasises that if we are using theatre to enable young people to understand and analyse structures of power and oppression, they should have opportunities to voice how they feel about the activities proposed by facilitators in charge of the workshop.

**EXAMPLE EXERCISE**: After a game or activity, don’t just ask young people “who enjoyed this, and why?” but also ask, “who hated this game? Why?” Young people, particularly those whose behaviour may be disruptive, will have honest opportunities to feed back to you about your workshop process and take responsibility for explaining why they chose not to participate.

And one final recommendation:

- Young people are always engaged with social issues which affect them and their world. What they need are resources, space and time to be heard and to make creative work.

**Challenges and Questions for the Future**

**Social engagement and UK grant making**

Due to funding and scheduling, projects with young people often have a clearly defined end date. This means that continuing to engage with a group as their ideas develop over time can be a challenge if projects run out of funding or if participants move outside the group’s target age bracket. Roberta Una, Senior Program Officer for Arts and Culture at the Ford Foundation, which partners with arts organisations to fund projects, stresses that funders need to focus on working with small grassroots organisations over a period of many years to ensure that their work can continue to develop – Ford Foundation’s initiatives last ten years, supporting projects from their earliest stages or partnering with local communities or arts organisations to create new schemes of work. Many funding bodies in the UK will not fund the same work twice. However, long-term relationships with organisations should be a priority for trusts and foundations, enabling the organisation to grow and sustain long-term engagement, including where a project is extended with returning participants or repeated with new participants.

**From Art to Action**

Once participants are fired up about social justice and have skills and a voice to tackle issues they care about, how do they continue to take action? Should they continue to work in theatre organisations as they develop their own voices? Should organisations refer them on to political or activist bodies? Should young people develop their own projects independently? A key area for development in the UK is reflecting on how we provide opportunities for participants to have voices in conversations about social change in the long term.
“How do we talk to young people about structural inequity?”

This question was voiced by a teacher at Narrative 4’s story exchange workshop. It’s pertinent and difficult. Broaching the topic of financial and social inequality with young people can be sensitive and tricky, particularly in groups where participants may have very different financial circumstances. Finding a way to talk honestly and openly about these topics can be a social taboo for adults. We need to develop workshop activities which give artists of all ages the opportunity to discuss these topics openly and respectfully.

Creating a ‘safe space’ for young people

Throughout this report, I’ve described projects which give young people the opportunity to discuss issues which may be difficult, personal and sensitive. Learning how these organisations ensure that they have appropriate pastoral support and child protection policies was an integral and vital part of my research. Young people may voice experiences which may be hurtful or difficult for themselves or others present. If practitioners give young people free rein to talk about what’s affecting them, they may risk moving into the terrain of drama therapists or social workers, and may not have the training and resources to respond to young people if they are upset or make a disclosure. If practitioners place limitations on what young people can discuss, they may be restricting freedom of speech. Answers to this difficulty varied at different organisations I visited – whilst some liaised with school counsellors or external organisations providing support for young people to ensure that any problems were appropriately addressed, others took the approach of Augusto Boal in his writings on Theatre of the Oppressed – that making theatre is not always a safe environment, but that participants should be trusted to explore what they are comfortable with individually by making their own choices.

What is absolutely clear is that it is imperative for each organisation to find their way of supporting members appropriately. They should liaise with professional social workers, counsellors or drama therapists where necessary, and have clear policies on child protection and training offered to staff.

What I plan do after my fellowship

I plan to disseminate my findings from my fellowship by sharing this report with organisations working with young people in the UK, and seeking opportunities to present my findings at conferences and meetings with other UK arts practitioners. I plan to offer training to practitioners at organisations where I work and those working in the fields of theatre education, social activism and youth work, and at arts institutions and university courses for students of applied theatre. The training will focus on sharing practice from my fellowship, providing a forum for practitioners to experiment with planning projects based on the skills and techniques I have discovered so that they can use these in their own communities, and chairing a discussion about issues-based theatre with young people in the UK. My research has certainly given me many ideas for my own practice, and I hope to model some of the techniques and ideas that I have learnt in the organisations where I work. I particularly hope to continue my conversation with organisations in the USA by creating projects which give young people in London and New York City the opportunity to engage with each other through arts organisations. I also hope to develop new programmes which enable young people write new plays relating to issues which affect them.
Conclusion

“Every issue is connected to each person here, there ain’t no separation”, sings Lucas, the housing activist in 2014 musical If/Then who had the first words in this report. Making these connections is the key to socially-engaged theatre making with young people.

Seeking out conversations with other storytellers internationally is not only wonderfully enriching for theatre-makers: my time in New York has shown me that this need for connection is also an important driving force in creating great projects for our young people. Successful work happens when young people are given opportunities to talk about issues which affect them by connecting to others – those who already have a prominent place in the conversation, such as politicians, those who can empathise through shared experience, such as peers from another geographical area, or those who they may rarely meet, such as older citizens from their neighbourhood. When theatres regard young people as artists, and offer them the same resources accorded to professionals, young people can then turn these conversations into engaging and beautiful writing.
Appendix 1: Travel and Meeting Schedule

Week beginning 14th July 2014
- Arrival in NYC
- Observed: FreshPlay rehearsals and readings throughout the week with MCC Theater
- Performance: ‘Mind The Gap’ at DOROT Jewish Community Centre

Week beginning 21st July
- Observed: FreshPlay rehearsals and readings throughout the week with MCC Theater
- Meeting: David Shookhoff, Director of Education at Manhattan Theatre Club
- Observed: Stargate workshop for court-involved youth at Manhattan Theatre Club
- Meeting: Roberta Uno, Senior Program Officer, and Margaret Perkins, Research Consultant, Arts and Culture Department at the Ford Foundation.
- Meeting: Bryn Thorsson, Director of Education at New York Theatre Workshop

Week beginning 28th July
- Performance: New York Theatre Workshop’s ‘Mind The Gap’
- Travelled to Denver for American Alliance for Theatre and Education conference
- Attended AATE conference (July 30th – August 3rd)

4th August – 14th August: Holiday in Colorado and California

Week from 15th August
- Arrived back in NYC
- Performance and workshop: City University of New York’s MA Applied Theatre Intergenerational project
- Workshops: Roundabout Theatre’s Teaching Institute

Week beginning 18th August
- Meeting: Stephen Willems, Literary Manager/Resident Dramaturg, MCC Theater
- Workshop: Roundabout Theatre’s Teaching Institute
- Meeting: Dena Adriance, Director of Educational Programs at Girl Be Heard
- Workshop: Girl Be Heard intergenerational writing workshop
- Performances: two youth company shows at EPIC Theatre Ensemble

Week beginning 25th August
- Meeting: Lee Keylock, Director of Global Programs, Narrative 4
- Workshop: MCC Youth Company with Red Garnet Theatre Company
- Observation: Rehearsals with The TEAM
- Workshop: Roundabout Theatre at Franklin Della Roosevelt High School

Week beginning 1st September
- Meeting: Michelle O’Connor, Executive Director, Applied Theatre Collective
- Meeting: Abigail Ramsey, Director of Global Partnerships, Girl Be Heard
- Meetings and observations: Creative Arts Team (CAT)

Week beginning 8th September
- Meeting: Erica Reinsch, Education Programs Manager, New Victory Theatre
- Meeting: FreeConvo

Week beginning 15th September
- Workshops: Roundabout Theatre
- Meeting: Jason Jacobs at Roundabout Theatre
- Meeting: S Leigh Thompson, Executive Director, The Forum Project
- Observation: Applied Theatre Class at CUNY
- Workshop: Narrative 4 Story Exchange

**Week beginning 22nd September**
- Observation: CAT early years workshop
- Meeting and workshop observation: Mino Lora, Co-founder, People’s Theatre Project

**Week beginning 29th September**
- Observation: Directing workshop, Dramaturgy MA, Columbia University
- Meeting: Daniel Carlton, Teaching Fellow for Act Like You Care at Brooklyn Arts Exchange
- Tuesday 20th September: Return to London

**Appendix 2: Directory of Organisations mentioned**

**UK**
Contact Theatre Manchester: [www.contactmcr.com](http://www.contactmcr.com)
Crying Out Loud (link to my project with the company, ‘Dormez-vous?): [www.cryingoutloud.org/projects/dormez-vous/](http://www.cryingoutloud.org/projects/dormez-vous/)
FreeConvo London: [www.facebook.com/freeconvolondon](http://www.facebook.com/freeconvolondon)
Haringey Shed: [www.haringeyshed.org](http://www.haringeyshed.org)
Little Angel Theatre: [www.littleangeltheatre.com](http://www.littleangeltheatre.com)
Shakespeare Schools Festival: [www.ssf.uk.com](http://www.ssf.uk.com)
Talk to Me London: [www.talktomelondon.org](http://www.talktomelondon.org)

**USA**
The American Alliance for Theatre and Education: [www.aate.com](http://www.aate.com)
The Applied Theatre Collective: [www.appliedtheatrecollective.com](http://www.appliedtheatrecollective.com)
Brooklyn Arts Exchange: [www.bax.org](http://www.bax.org)
Creative Arts Team: [www.creativeartsteam.org](http://www.creativeartsteam.org)
EPIC Theatre Ensemble: [www.epictheatreensemble.org](http://www.epictheatreensemble.org)
FreeConvo: [www.free convo.com](http://www.free convo.com)
The Ford Foundation: [www.fordfoundation.org](http://www.fordfoundation.org)
The Forum Project: [www.theforumproject.org](http://www.theforumproject.org)
Girl Be Heard: [www.girlbeheard.org](http://www.girlbeheard.org)
Manhattan Theatre Club: [www.manhattantheatreclub.com](http://www.manhattantheatreclub.com)
MCC Theatre: [www.mcctheater.org](http://www.mcctheater.org)
Narrative 4: [www.narrative4.com](http://www.narrative4.com)
New York Theatre Workshop: [www.newyorktheatreworkshop.org](http://www.newyorktheatreworkshop.org)
The People’s Theatre Project: [www.peoplestheatreproject.org](http://www.peoplestheatreproject.org)
Roundabout Theatre: [www.roundabouttheatre.org](http://www.roundabouttheatre.org)
Theatre of the Oppressed NYC: [www.theatreoftheoppressednyc.org](http://www.theatreoftheoppressednyc.org)
I Think Outside My Box: [www.ithinkoutsidemybox.blogspot.co.uk](http://www.ithinkoutsidemybox.blogspot.co.uk)
True Colors at the Theatre Offensive, Boston: [www.thetheateroffensive.org](http://www.thetheateroffensive.org)
Unsorted: [www.unsortedtoolkit.org](http://www.unsortedtoolkit.org)
Voices of Now: [www.arenastage.org/education/voices-of-now/](http://www.arenastage.org/education/voices-of-now/)