

The theatre of life: *Collective narrative practice with young trans people*

Dane Duncan Mills, Maria Castro Romero and Jesse Ashman

As part of my doctoral thesis, supervised by Maria, I (Dane) worked alongside a group of trans young people, part of the community-interest group Gendered Intelligence, to co-produce a structure for speaking and recording diverse and owned trans narratives. These detail responses to everyday oppression, otherwise known as creative resistance. This was facilitated through the aid of a poster and the metaphor of a theatre stage to guide stories, which also provided a safe position from which to tell these. This practice was named 'the theatre of life' (Mills, 2017), and it is hoped it may open up doors by inspiring audience members with whom these stories may resonate, in order to create social action within community, institutional and political spheres.

What is collective narrative practice?

Collective narrative practice has sprung from the narrative framework, which emerged in Australia and New Zealand in the 1980s from the collaboration of Michael White and David Epston (1990). While both were family therapists, the framework differentiated itself as they began to give less focus to the systemic metaphor for people's lives and became more interested in a narrative metaphor and the power of a person becoming the author of their own life story.

Some practitioners have noticed that, when people come together and create spaces to tell stories of hardship and survival in ways which make them stronger, this can open up new possibilities in their relationships and communities. Groups, clubs, communities and collectives with whom this practice has resonated the most includes survivors of trauma, oppression and inequality. If one voice is an instrument, then multiple voices can become a symphony. The upshot of successful groups is written documents which detail the skills and knowledge of survivors of bullying, worry and misery (Lowell, 2008).

When telling stories of survival, it can be helpful to use metaphors to guide a narrative, keep it balanced, and help to create a protected position for those telling their stories to speak from. These ideas grow in the work of transformative practice by Ncazelo Ncube (2006) and David Denborough (2008), who

developed the successful 'tree of life' in South Africa with child survivors of grief, which has internationally inspired other metaphors for life, such as 'The Beads of Life' (Portnoy *et al.*, 2015) with young people living with cancer.

Metaphors can provide a less direct medium through which to tell stories and, since how we story what we have lived shapes how we understand ourselves, a metaphor can help to create an alternative territory of identity (White, 2005) to help explore problems, but also solutions that tell us something about the narrators' values. The metaphor of life as a theatre performance could help young trans people to feel a sense of pride, ownership and design towards how their life stories are told, as well as enabling consideration towards their chosen families as cast and crew. It also invites the idea that audiences can take important messages forward into their own lives.

The theatre of life

Although we are beginning to learn more about the multiple forms of oppression faced by young trans people, including the impact of under- and misrepresentation of trans stories in the media and academia, there is relatively very little known about how to support this population and the systems put into place to support them. The theatre of life (Mills, 2017) is a fun, artistic and politically engaging practice which helps to narrate life stories, designed by young trans people, for young trans people. It is the product of collaborative work

(participatory action research) between myself and a London-based community group called Gendered Intelligence. We were guided by Denborough's (2008) 'Themes & Dreams' for working with groups in this way. First of all, this included thinking carefully about how to create a context for speaking about trans lives which is most comfortable. This allowed the group to voice their desire to find a way to hear about how oppression was already being resisted, and to record this in the form of stories, before finding a relevant audience with whom these stories will resonate.

The group wanted to create a session for youth groups who meet monthly, under the topic of mental health and well-being. We experimented with ways to narrate life stories in fun, creative yet therapeutic ways. Recording life stories would allow us to share these with other young trans people in different contexts who may feel isolated. One hope was that such stories would not just help individuals, but also help the systems of support for trans people in making effective changes.

The group came up with a theatre-based poster template, a familiar image for those involved in theatre productions. Each section of the template represented a part of a person's life, areas which felt right in the eyes of group members. The template was digitally produced by an artist in the group and labeled with guiding questions such as, "What is the behind the scenes support that helps you to be you, to get ready to tell your story?". The session allowed group members to take turns to be in an

THE THEATRE OF LIFE

DESIGNED BY GI AMBASSADORS

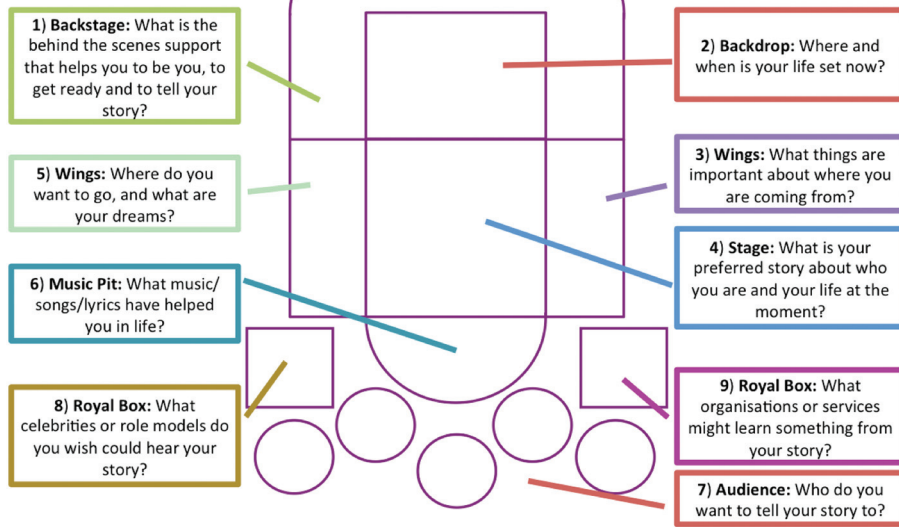


Figure 1: Digital theatre of life template and guiding questions.

audience position and narrator position, in a 'show and tell' format.

The power of the theatre of life for young trans people

This methodology was, and continues to be, remarkably powerful for the young trans people who took part in the designing and sessions. In the words of one participant:

"I really enjoyed the freedom to say as much or as little as we wanted to in what we made and what we shared. Also, it was good to hear other people's stories and that reminded me that other people are going through similar things."

This methodology strikes a balance between bearing witness to stories of hardship, without neglecting the often subjugated stories of how people challenged, resisted, overcame or ultimately survived. The term "creative resistance" (Afuape, 2016, p. 33) has been used to describe resistance that is expansive and opens up new opportunities and possibilities; as there are initiatives to "reduce or redress the harm and/or to care for and protect others" (Denborough, 2008, p. 198) hidden in peoples' responses to oppression.

Crucially, we created a safer space for co-authoring stories of collective identity, allowing for a diverse array of ideas, language and identities to come together, weaving a patchwork quilt of trans personhood, one which can grow and comfort continuously. This is most

important for minority communities, given the collective voice is central in constructing both the self and the collective-self due to the barriers of oppression (Gal *et al.*, 2015).

Allowing participants to feel pre-prepared at different stages was another unique feature of the methodology. For example, creating a poster in the first instance allows for participants to reflect on what feels comfortable enough to go on to share with words. As well as written words, participants sometimes used images, symbols and drawing to depict the unsayable. Painting a 'backdrop' of life allowed young people to place their life story in a historical and political context, whilst the 'orchestra pit' invited participants to share soundtracks of life, lyrics and songs, and describe how we can use creativity to communicate what is otherwise difficult to say.

It was important for participants to consider who the wider audience would be. As a gay man, I (Dane) related to an extent to how cautious I was as a teenager in guarding information which may impact on my safety and social life. Having participants take charge of their preferred audience, depicted in the 'audience' section of their poster was, therefore, a very useful aspect of the session. Common preferred audience-members included young trans and queer people who may be isolated from community but also transphobic people, or non-allies who saw trans issues as irrelevant. In the 'royal box' participants

invoked the broader institutional and political audience such as child and adolescent mental health services, schools, gender clinics, and politicians. This helped us to consider who to contact in order to share these stories and honour the young people's words.

The physical setting used was also a remarkable learning point. Mental health clinics can be experienced as unsafe and stigmatised places for young trans people, who often have to navigate complex referral-systems, waiting lists, and may attract stigmatising and deficit-based labels, which may further confuse a young person's own identity, in order to access resources. We were inspired by the report from the Trans Community Conference (Stewart, 2008) in which delegates advocated for the importance of "using art, writing, theatre, performance, film and oral history to discuss gender diversity in our communities" (p. 33). Wernick *et al.* (2014) also found that a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender theatre group in the United States used theatre to create community, build critical consciousness and effect community change. Getting out of the clinic and moving to a theatre space, the preferred physical setting chosen by the community group, seemed really important. This space invited pride and joy, and connected to the many creative arts projects which the group had produced in the past.

Future directions

The future dreams of 'the theatre of life' are to firstly share trans stories. This needs not be limited to the PowerPoint based echo chambers of academia. Stories have long been shared in the creative arts and, arguably, may extend a broader reach than journal articles and conferences. For instance, through 'political theatre' which emerged from the work of critical playwright Bertolt Brecht (1964); and in a similar terrain, 'forum theatre' a form of 'theatre of the oppressed' from the work of Augusto Boal (2002).

Another dream is for other young people to connect with their trans, queer and chosen family and build upon this method in order to harness their unique creative resistance. This may include connecting with other marginalised groups to fulfill the dream proposed by Freire (1970, p. 157) for building "unity in diversity".

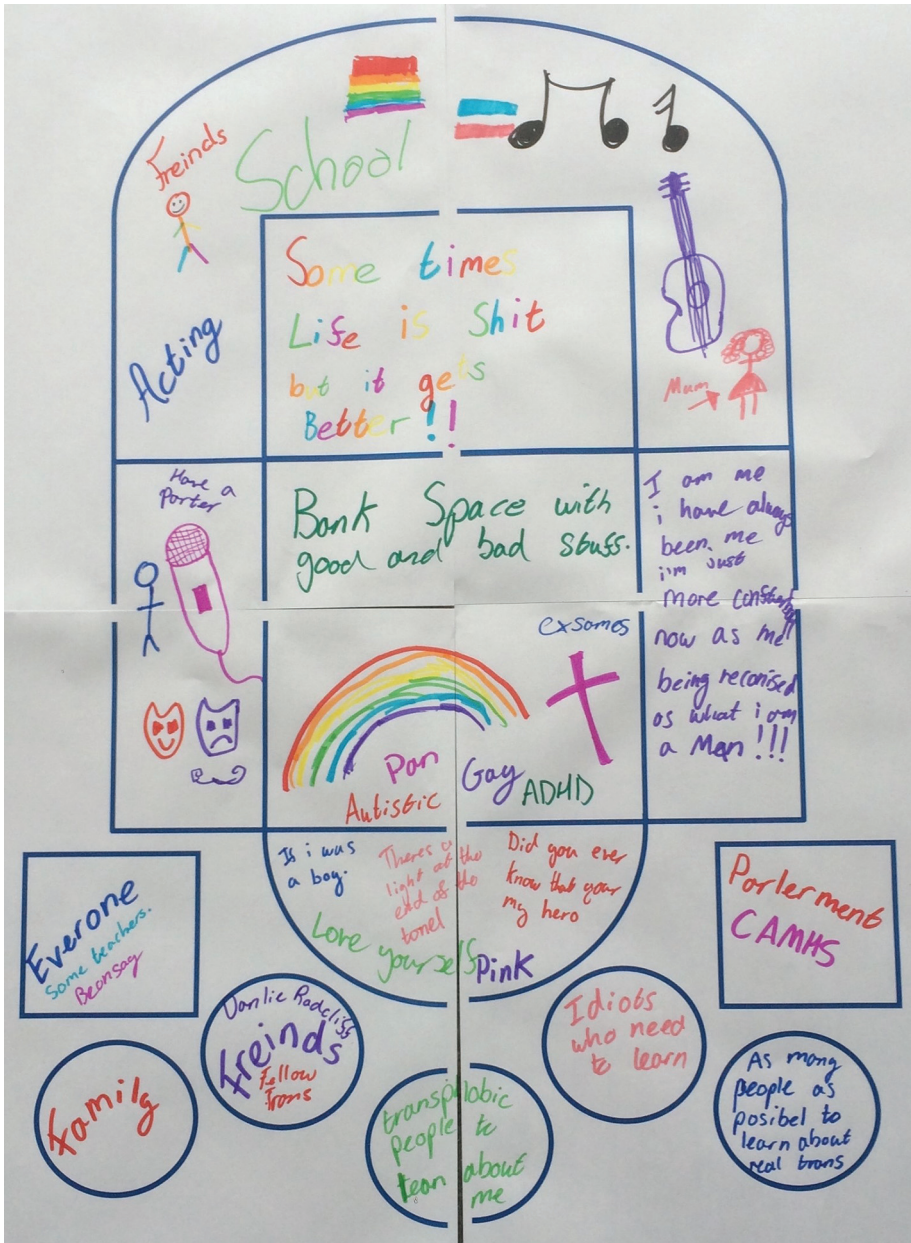


Figure 2: Steve's theatre of life: 'The light at the end of the tunnel' – what can't be said can be sung

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Useful websites:

<http://dulwichcentre.com.au>

<http://genderedintelligence.co.uk>



Dane Duncan Mills: Whilst I have noticed my identity seems to shift across different geographical, relational and spiritual spaces, I identify as a northern white gay man, with strong working class roots. I am an aspiring Buddhist. I have trained as a clinical psychologist, with a special interest in community and liberation psychology. I hope to take an active trans ally role. My preferred pronouns are he/him/his.

Maria Castro Romero: I am a senior lecturer and academic tutor in clinical psychology at the University of East London. I have had a long history as a narrative and community psychologist, advocate, researcher, writer and trainer. I have a commitment to creative and collaborative narrative and liberation praxis with minorities and other historically and still today largely marginalised groups, people who seek help or use mental health services, their families and communities, to construct humanising alternatives reflective and respectful of the pluralistic societies in which we live; a psychology for social inclusion and equality.

Jesse Ashman: I currently work for the Gendered Intelligence speaker's programme and volunteer as a youth worker. I've previously worked with other LGBT organisations and as a mental health support worker. I use he/him pronouns and am bisexual, trans, polyamorous, white, working class, dyslexic, dyspraxic, able-bodied and have recently moved to London after living most of my life in Essex. I was involved with the Theatre of Life in helping design the project and facilitating the sessions.