

**The Power and the Glory:
Power fields of art-making in culture and community**

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I'm gonna wake up some mornin'
With the sun in my hand.
Gonna throw the sun
Way across the land--
Cause I'm tired.
Tired as I can be.

Gonna throw the sun
In somebody's face
Recreate
The human race--
Cause I'm tired,
Tired as I can be.

When the sunstroke strikes,
Gonna rise and shine,
Take this world and
Make it mine--
Cause I'm tired,
Tired as I can be.

Don't try to figger
Out these words I sing.
They'll keep you figgerin'
To way next spring--
Cause I'm tired,
Tired as I can be.

--- Langston Hughes
(Rampersad and Roessel, eds., 1994, p. 570)

Renowned anthropologist Victor Turner used the term "power field" (Turner, 1967, p.278) to discuss relationships of individuals and groups he studied in his work focused on the rituals and rites of passage of the Ndembu of Zambia. He felt that this term more

fully expressed the dynamic nature of the social interactions of the Ndembu, and his work served to bring to light the layered nature of power - power in its ever-changing present, as well as its more traditional and constant forms. He spoke not of a balance of power, but of an imbalance, wherein the unsteady, overlapping and interpenetrating struggles between individuals and groups emerge.

Langston Hughes eloquently provides insight into the dynamics of power he experienced as an African American in the United States in the middle of the 20th century. His “jazz poetry” brought a musicality to the expression of the struggles life held for African Americans of the time. But there is more to this poem than an opportunity to express frustration or anger. Hughes’ words speak of recreating the human race, and of taking the world and making it his own. These are generative, performative expressions, that hold within them a sense of the possible. Hughes’ words remind us of the power of the creative. In the moment that one creates - even if only in the mind - one comes into one’s own power. The creative act exists only as an extension of one’s claim to one’s power, even when that which is created is an expression of a sense of powerlessness.

This article reflects on facilitated art-making processes as locus of both power and glory - power as described by Turner, holding the unsteady, overlapping, interpenetrating struggles between individuals and groups, and glory. “Glory” is used here as defined by the Proto-Indo-European meaning of the word, which is “voice.” Two situations are

reviewed here for their processes and practice that might illuminate the means by which the interplay of power fields gives voice to those engaged in them, and in so doing satisfies what we now know, through current research, constitutes culturally responsive learning. The work is seen and examined through the eyes of the two authors, and expressed herein through the perspective of the first author.

In the research of the last decades, Delpit (2012), Sleeter (2011), and other scholars (Bhabba, 1994; Banks, 2006; Nieto & Bode, 2012), reflecting on the efforts to make education more multicultural, have concluded that an essential element of educating for social justice and democracy is responsiveness to the individual identities of students, situated in their contexts. Beyond all of the cultural identities that we each have, we must allow for the individual expression of identity to exist. In order for an educator to do this, he/she must, by necessity, conduct his or her own grounded research into the identities of students, what Delpit termed the “brilliance the students bring with them ‘in their blood’” (1995, p.182). Without this, we are simply exoticizing the “other,” creating walls around our differences rather than bridges to traverse and connect ourselves within those differences. And in this approach there lies, by definition, an opening to the other, what Freire would have termed a political act (1987), reminding us that “no pedagogy is neutral” (1987, p.13). What is created moves away from transfer of knowledge methodology, toward a space within which students have agency and power. This is when learning becomes, in our current understandings, truly ‘culturally responsive.’

Art-making has always had an extraordinary capacity to provide this “third space,” a hybrid space as defined by Bhabha in his (1994) *Location of Culture*. Within this third space, the constant, traditional forms make space for the individual expression. As stated by Grumet, “The arts require choices that rely on our attention and the specificity of our own thoughts, feelings and understanding” (2004, p. 55). There are many examples of artistic forms that provide for this type of experience. Some of the best known for their use in providing for dynamic power fields would include Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed (2008) and other such forms in the dramatic realm as well as many forms of improvisation in music and dance. All provide active spaces within which the individual might express him/herself within a form and context that is pre-existing, so the traditional, constant power forms exist alongside the contemporary, in-the-moment creations of the individual. Turner’s (1967) imbalance of power is represented in these forms, wherein space is created for the individual to emerge as both powerful and agentic. My own experience of these power fields may provide some understanding of the ways that such power may play itself out in the classroom and community. Two examples will be provided here, an introductory version suited to the developmental levels of young children, and a form more suited for older students and adults. These settings and events have been selected because of their ability to illuminate specific aspects of learning. Particular conceptual frameworks were used in their review, including culturally responsive learning, critical pedagogy, educating for equity and

social justice, theories in support of multimodal learning as well as interdisciplinary theories of group dynamics and interactions.

In a second grade classroom in North Carolina, USA¹, students have been observing the life cycle of the butterfly in their classroom. They have watched each of the life stages, witnessing each transformation. In my role as teaching artist, I work with students to extend and build on their understandings of what they have seen. On this occasion, I use a traditional, African American art form, the singing game, to provide students with an opportunity to express their new knowledge and understandings of the science concepts they have observed.

First students learn the game in its traditional form. The piece is a chant, done while marching in place, and describes the life of a person, from the time when that person was a baby, to their death and beyond. The first verse states, “When I was a baby, a baby, a baby; When I was a baby, this what I’d do!” There is then a place in the chant to describe some act that would fit that stage of life. A movement is used to more fully describe the action, and the verse repeats this gesture several times. In subsequent verses, the process is repeated, wherein the next stage is named, and then gestures are utilized to describe the named stage. Children enjoy the game, and I quickly demonstrate this traditional version of the game, with students joining in for the prescribed gestures, words and movements.

¹ In this first setting, the first author of this article serves as a visiting teaching artist brought into a classroom in Raleigh, NC. My role there was to connect my art form, culture-based music, stories, and games, with the broader academic curricular goals.

Now it is time for students to use the traditional form for their own creative purposes.

First, I ask: "What is the first stage you saw when observed the life of your butterflies?"

Students call out, "Egg!" I then direct, "Show me with your bodies what it is like to be an

egg." Children respond by creating many versions of the egg. Some children are down

on the floor in a ball, others are making large circles with their arms. Occasionally, a

student is creating something that is not what I might expect. At this point, I ask that

child, "Can you tell me about what you are doing with your body?" The young student

responds with more information about their choice. If that choice is based on scientific

inaccuracies, I can then turn the question back to the larger group: "What do you think

about *Billy's* choices?" The children's responses allow for a group critique of what is

working and not working about another child's response, and collaboratively, we come

to gestures and imagery that will accurately reflect what we have come to know about

this stage of the butterfly life cycle. I am able to support this critical stance of students

by carefully selecting and highlighting aspects that students bring to the work that are

successful, even when some aspect may need adjustment to reflect more accurate

understandings. Students provide interesting and expressive ideas in this process: one

shakes, as the chrysalis shakes when the adult is emerging. Some students use their

hands to express shapes and movement; others use their whole bodies. In response to

the student's ideas, we find ourselves adding sound to some of the movements, such as

the "munching" sound of the hungry caterpillar, or the almost floating soft "Fly!" used to

describe the flight of the adult. Students are clear that they want no sound with the

movement into the “balled up” position that demonstrates our egg stage. They have created this version. It holds their ideas, and they feel a sense of ownership of the version they have created. These emotions are happy outcomes for the classroom setting, in that research has shown us that retention is much more likely when the content has an emotional connection for the learner (Pons, Hancock, Lafortune & Doudin, 2005, Jensen, 2008). The students will not forget these stages, and will more fully understand the qualities of each of the stages they had only observed up to this point. Their understanding has been expanded by the multiple modalities through which they have now engaged with that information. This transference, across mediums, serves to provide opportunities to express and assess what they know. They are now prepared for moving that information back to the written page, in drawings, and written descriptions of what they have seen and understand. As the Teaching Artist, the process is ever-changing, ever-fascinating, and illuminating. There are always moments when I am allowed to see things from the perspective of another - when their thoughts go somewhere I had never imagined. In this sharing of power and creation, my own practice as an artist is enriched. Without the entry into Turner’s “power fields,” this illumination is not possible; we are merely enacting a pre-arranged script that lives in the mind of the teacher or other who dominates and drives the experience.

In Liverpool, an integrated arts workshop offered by Aspire Trust² has three artist/facilitators³ leading a three-day session for community participants. The

² The Aspire Trust is a non-profit based in Liverpool, UK, providing innovative and creative programs in schools and communities internationally. www.aspire-trust.org

participants vary widely in their backgrounds and professional lives. There are active mask-makers, art therapy practitioners, arts and social justice activists, designers, visual artists, dramatists, and others. The work they have gathered to do centers on the experience of loss. It is part of a larger exploration of what is ‘treasured’ sponsored by the Aspire Trust⁴, and taking place in both a local school and in classroom-style space at the Liverpool Cathedral. The adults gather and are immediately led in a process drama piece exploring “the wolf”- first through the iconic story of *The Three Little Pigs*, and then through ideas of what might metaphorically represent the wolf in various scenarios. The challenge is offered repeatedly, guiding small groups to respond to related versions of the story. They create a back-story, they take on the imagined role of relatives, they create versions of “the wolf” as experienced by the New Zealanders present, when the earthquake of 2011 struck the city of Christchurch. They explore the concept of ‘wolf’ from a wide range of vantage points. The structured form of process drama holds the contained, pre-existing power structure within which participants bring their own ideas, feelings and experiences, their own power fields, to the fore.

On subsequent days visual art is created, soundscapes and songs, and other structured forms with which the participants interact, each time improvising in some way. The participants move through a range of semiotic forms as they represent their ideas in

³ The first author of this article, a music-based teaching artist, assists the second author of the article, a drama specialist, in facilitating this work in Liverpool for the Aspire Trust. We were joined by a visual artist, Trudy-Ann Barrett, in facilitating this three-day event.

⁴ “Treasured” was a large scale, site response theatre production co-produced by the Aspire Trust and Cut to the Chase Productions at Liverpool Anglican Cathedral between 1 and 6 October, 2012. www.atreasuredevent.com

these varied media. In each and every instance, the work is created collaboratively, and there is the push and pull of people exerting their ideas, giving over control, reclaiming control, building on the ideas of others, being pushed out of their comfort zones, constructing their understandings through each art form. Significantly, the three facilitators trade off the work of facilitation, becoming participants at any time that they are not directly leading the work. This role change represents a distinct shift of power, and changes the sense of risk-taking of the group. It closes the gap between facilitator and participant, and allows for the power to move more easily between the group members. In the words of one participant, this risk-taking is “easier with other people who are making the same jump.” Another reflected on the vulnerability and fear that are present in the collaborative process; “It’s such a balanced thing when it works, but quite fragile...” There is discomfort, and acknowledgement of the difficulty of surrendering ideas. And the work goes on. The group reflects on their efforts repeatedly, and acknowledges that their work was different than it might have been had there been pressure to create a culminating piece. Turner’s unsteady, overlapping and interpenetrating struggles between individuals and groups are present at every turn in this work. Power fields exist here, providing for and containing the identities of the participants. As expressed in the reflections of a participant, “Every individual brings baggage of some kind to a piece of work,” and from another, “These differences stimulate new solutions and allow for further levels of complexity.”

In the work of the second graders in North Carolina as well as the Aspire project in Liverpool, there is not only the opportunity for the improvisatory ideas of participants, but there is shared critiquing of those ideas. Individuals in both groups get developmentally appropriate opportunities to collaboratively assess the success of their ideas and work, and to do this in an atmosphere that reflects an interest and valuing of individual interpretations and ideas. Even with very young children, this sets a tone for the pleasures and importance of discoveries, and of the power-full role we have as learners that allows us to imagine, explore, experiment, develop and craft our ideas, then reflect on those creations, assessing and revising what we have created. This continuous creative process makes room for the identities of each person, grounding the learning in current research recommendations for culturally responsive learning. We bring to the work not only what we are as members of cultural or social groups, but what we are as individuals.

There is, of course, another level to this idea of power fields within art-making, and that is the power field of art-making itself. In a world that values verbal linguistic modes of communicating far more than other modalities, the act of art-making opens the door to the contributions of those who function more effectively in other mediums, or simply benefit from the widening of their options for meaning-making. J. A. Clyde summarizes this well in speaking of a young student named Douglas: “To view Douglas through verbocentric eyes would miss the brilliance of this young mind, the deliberateness and sophistication of not only his inquiries but also his strategies for exploring them.” (1994,

p. 32). Without the opportunity to open the door to the interplay of power fields in different modalities such as art-making, much is lost. Educational theorist Henry Giroux (1997) speaks to the critical nature of this opportunity: "...young people need to become critical agents able to recognize, appropriate, and transform how dominant power works on and through them... In short, they need a pedagogy that provides the basis for improvisation and responsible resistance." (p. 16) Opening the door to multiple modalities for expression of meaning in essence 'levels the playing field,' providing the means by which people of all manner of proclivities and strengths have a way and means to enter into the conversation at hand. They have the tools that will allow for them to become the critical agents Giroux describes.

Those of us who work in the arts, by necessity, carry the responsibility to secure a place for the existence and expression of the individual power fields of students and adults with whom we work. Making meaning, in its most positive form, occurs when we are actively and creatively involved in that effort. When we take the risk to enter into the medium through which we are communicating with our personal power, identity, and whole selves and when there is a structure within which our power fields can interact and receive the feedback necessary to move forward in our understandings, we become the responsible agents for change that Giroux envisioned. We "wake up," as Langston Hughes wrote, "with the sun in [our] hands." We can imagine that this expression of power has the potential to provide, from the ancient meaning of the word "glory," that most important of gifts: voice.

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