

Performance Ethnography: Scholarly inquiry in the here and now

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1. Abstract:

Performance ethnography, an emerging arts-based method of qualitative inquiry, presents a tangible opportunity to bridge the gap between scholarly activity and teaching and learning. By using the theatre as a place of research, performance ethnography transforms the theatre from a place of entertainment to a venue for participatory action research that extends beyond the performance itself (Alexander, 2005; Finley, 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Performance ethnography is concerned with the 'here and now' of enhancing a vision for dignity and democracy in the world through the exploration of social practice (Finley; Kemmis & McTaggart). A forum for cultural exchange, the power of performance ethnography lies in its potential for illumination and engagement of all involved- researchers, participants and audience. For minority and marginalized populations of race, gender, age, class, etc., the emancipatory possibilities are significant. Through re-enacted performance the oppression of socially imposed roles is unveiled on stage and examined by both audience and actors simultaneously, thereby enabling a transformative critique of values, attitudes and practices (Alexander; Denzin, 2003).

Key Words:

Performance ethnography, minority and marginalized populations, emancipatory, theatre, qualitative inquiry

2. Setting the Stage

American dancer/choreographer Bill T. Jones offers a glimpse into the process of performance ethnography in his DVD *Still/Here* with Bill Moyers (Jones, 1997). Jones explored what it was like to live with a life-threatening illness by inviting those with terminal illness to participate in a series of workshops where they first talked about and then translated their experiences and emotions into original movements. These movements were then choreographed into a dance called *Still/Here*. *Still/Here* was first performed live by Jones' company dancers in Lyon, France in 1994 and later made into a PBS documentary with Bill Moyers. Throughout this interactive process everyone was impacted, evolving to new and different understandings of the initial question of living with terminal illness.

3. Images of Performance Ethnography Application

As an educator concerned with elderhood, best practice and quality of life, performance ethnography offers a relevant context for exploring and examining social practices around ageing. In order to move towards a more age-inclusive society, the whys and wherefores of current values about ageing must be questioned, critiqued and

explored in a social, dialogical venue. The implications of investigating these attitudes impacts not only the current values that shape societal beliefs about ageing but the vision that addresses the present and future needs and consequent well being of elders. In a rapidly ageing society, these implications embrace an ever growing percentage of the population.

Bill Thomas (2004), in his book "What are old people for?", identifies and advocates the state of elderhood as a distinct and separate state of being from adulthood that is characterized by the legacy of elder wisdom to future generations. Like the process Jones used to explore terminal illness, attitudes toward elderhood and ageing might be investigated, understood and transformed through the collection and performance of elder culture or 'ethnography'- its stories, practices and desires (Alexander, 2005). The process of collecting these stories might in itself be a social process engaging a diversity of age groups and cultural backgrounds. These elder contributions might then be re-enacted or performed, for example, through a live, community-based performance in collaboration with a youth theatre group or dance company. In addition, these stories might further be illustrated by kindergarten to grade twelve art students, set to music by community-based musicians or published in local newspapers, etc. The applications are endless, each facilitating a dynamic, cross-cultural process of reflection-in-action that encourages a socio-cultural shift in attitudes, values and actions (Alexander, 2005; Finley, 2005).

4. Performance Ethnography in the College Classroom

Performance ethnography has relevant applications to student learning in the college classroom. As a forum for dialogical exchange, performance ethnography may be used to facilitate other perspective taking, enabling students to "walk a mile" in the shoes of others for the purpose of peer understanding, illumination and transformation of current attitudes (Alexander, 2005).

As an example, students might be sent out to investigate or research a social issue, perhaps an injustice noted in the media. By collecting the stories of the people involved through interviews, observations and the subsequent re-enactment in the classroom, new light is shed on current attitudes that facilitate new understandings, potential solutions and constructive dialogue. A reflective essay based on these experiences helps the teacher assess student learning.

For both the academic and vocational college classroom, performance ethnography acts as a catalyst to critical thinking and reflection, important applications of scholarship to teaching and learning. In a culturally diverse society, the learning tool of performance ethnography encourages students to enter the workforce better prepared to implement inclusive practices in their chosen careers.

5. Future Developments and Implications

As an emerging new form for qualitative inquiry concerned with social science participatory action research, performance ethnography has arisen out of an expressed need for research methodologies that are practical and useful among every day life (Alexander, 2005; Finley, 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

By conducting research in the everyday realm of human experience performance ethnography actively challenges the validity and effectiveness of traditional methods of social inquiry that conduct research from the outside looking in and where researchers are far removed from the subjects of inquiry (Denzin, 2003).

Alexander (2005) and Denzin (2003) further emphasize the need for effective research methods based on the idea that social change comes from within society rather than imposed from without. In this capacity performance ethnography acts as a social conscience and tool of liberation gravitating away from the academic notion of research grounded in facts and science and toward research situated in the midst of human experience.

This type of research calls for a shift in skill base from what was previously expected among social researchers including the cultivation of imagination, perception, qualitative interpretation and artistic skill mastery (Finley, 2005). This shift in skill base not only complements established forms of quantitative and qualitative research it acts as an important catalyst to evolving values for diverse research methodologies in our academic institutions.

6. Summary

Using the framework of the arts, performance ethnography invites people into dialogue, the essential ingredient for facilitating socio-cultural change. From an academic perspective this method of inquiry brings research alive, translating theory into practice among ordinary people and everyday experience. The following quotation from William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* offers a fitting conclusion to this brief reflection on performance ethnography as scholarly activity in the midst of teaching and learning:

*All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages...*

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