



## Sewing Stories and Acting Activism: Women's Leadership and Learning Through Drama and Craft

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### abstract

Current neo-liberal practices across Canada have profoundly negative impacts but they are not without resistance. Framed within discourses of empowerment, feminist pedagogy and imagination, this article explores two collective issue-based aesthetic learning activities – quilting in British Columbia and popular theatre in Ontario. The power of women's leadership and arts-based social learning practices lie in their ability to construct counter-narratives and make visible, stimulate reflection, verbal and non-verbal communicative action and oppositional imaginations and strengthen human agency. However, there are also risks involved in these creative public learning processes that include marginalisation and censorship. Feminist issue-based arts education constitutes an important discourse of social organisation by drawing attention to a diverse form of community educative-leadership and the potential of drama and craft as tools of critical learning that both exercise and contest power within Canada's neo-liberal landscape.

The symbolic creativity involved in making meaning – using language, having feelings, playing roles, producing rituals, and performances in relation to others – is a necessary and ordinary human activity. (Thompson, 2002: 15)

Albo argues that “for over the past two decades the ideology of neoliberalism has dominated public discourse and the modalities of the state” in Canada and around the world. Its ascendancy can be linked to economic changes introduced in the 1970s, “the rise of New Right governments across the 1980s, and the deepening internationalization of...money and industrial capital, modes of communication and governance structures in the 1990s” (2002: 1). Neoliberalism has come to mark an historic turning-point in how society is organised, social forms of economic and political power and the patterns of everyday life. “However, even economists admit it is not a “monolithic ideology or political programme” (2002: 2). And to adult educators, it is definitely not “a static and closed order, a given reality which one must accept and to which one must adjust; rather, it is a problem to be worked on” (Freire, 2002: 32).

Framed through theories of empowerment, feminist adult education, and the role of the imagination and creativity in learning, this article examines two Canadian feminist issue-based arts education projects that openly challenge neo-liberal discourses and

practices. The first story comes from British Columbia in the form of a quilt titled 'Crying the Blues'. Spearhead by Clara and Alison and collectively developed by a group of feisty Old Age Pensioners, this creative tapestry of story, image, symbol, metaphor and experience draws attention to plethora of often subversive government social programme cutbacks and their impact on the well-being and vitality of citizens. The second tale comes from Sudbury in northern Ontario. Myths and Mirrors, a feminist issue-based arts education organisation headed by Laurie, worked with six women and man tele-marketer to develop a play titled 'Get a Real Job'. Through humour, interactive scenes and pithy monologues, the working conditions and the delicate process of unionising in a Call Centre, one of the fastest growing under-employment sectors in Canada, enter the spotlight.

These projects represent "an exhilarating...[and] creative outpouring of a human community" concerned with workplace and community (Wyman, 2004: 14). An alternative to neo-liberalism can only be built through the broadest kind of activism: in our workplaces and communities. This activism cannot be separated from ideas and experience, from education and learning, from imagination and humour. Through its diverse means and methods, feminist issue-based arts education constitutes an important discourse of social organisation by drawing attention to the potential of imaginative community practices of theatre and quilting as tools of learning to exercise and challenge power and dominance within Canada's neo-liberal landscape.

## Neo-liberalism in Canada

Variety of imaginative response is humanity's great glory, and it is the height of self-delusion to believe that the human spirit can be subordinated to a tidy social vision. (Wyman, 2004: 15)

Canada was built on a tradition of collectivism and socialism. Its people worked together to establish one of "the most generous and open-handed benefit provisions to be found anywhere in the world" (Clarke, 1997: 17). Although neo-liberalism as an economic theory began having a distinctive influence on Canadian conservative parties in the mid-1970s, socially-oriented parties continued for many years to see it solely as "a form of anomalous political extremism" (Teeple, 1995: 3). However, it has become normalised to such an extreme that even when an electorate replaces a conservative party with more liberal or social democratic one, there remains the core expectation of maintaining or protecting these policies. The result has been the systematic "demise of long-established social and political institutions" (Teeple, 1995: 2).

While governments across Canada continue to espouse support for collective responsibility and rights, universal health-care, public education, democratic participation, public ownership, living wages, workers' right to organise, and protection of the environment, the 'golden rules' or practices they seem to be following are expansion of the sphere of the capitalist market, legislated discouragement of public protest, diminishment of the role of the state, and encouragement of individual private initiative which is seen to be "the best way to [bring about prosperity] and improve human welfare" (Albo, 2002; Hammond, 1998: 26; Teeple, 1995). The impact of this on communities across the country have been far reaching and hard hitting.

One major impact is the closure of publicly owned and operated hospitals and care centres. Paralleling this is an open climate for creating unaccountable private enterprise. There has also been a drop in funding for public universities and schools coupled with a rise in private, for profit (but actually propped-up by taxes) educational institutions. We have begun to witness the growing phenomenon of what is known as 'under-employment'. Livingstone (1999: 1) sees this as a major social problem of our time, premised on the diminishment of "meaningful, sustaining jobs." Within Canada, Call Centres are one of the fastest growing businesses in the under-employment sector. Placed most often in remote, depressed areas, they are touted as the answer to economic development and prosperity. The vast majority of employees in call centres are women (Belt, Richardson & Webster, 2000). Keeping pace with this proliferation are contesting scholarly debates. For example, Kinnie, Hutchinson & Purcell argue that Call Centres are not the 'satanic mills' some try to make them out to be but rather sites where employers have "developed sophisticated human resource practices" which demonstrate a high employee commitment approach (2000: 967). But Belt, Richardson & Webster question whether call centre work actually offers "new opportunities for women for skill development and career progression", or whether "a more familiar trend is taking place" in which women, the vast majority of the employees "are being drawn into a highly routinized, 'de-skilled' and de-valued area of work" (2000: 66). Perhaps not surprisingly, once strong unions, the backbone of fair living wages in Canada, have been weakened, dismantled and discouraged. This has undermined common voice and past gain, narrowed working people's expectations and dashed their hopes. Worse yet, it has made working people suspicious of one another and even unions who appear powerless to stop the demise (Albo, 2002).

In Canada, as in many other countries, adults over 65 are the fastest growing segment of the population. "This demographic 'shift' is now often referred to as an 'apocalyptic demography or a 'ticking time bomb'. The younger generation is told relentlessly that they will have to carry too many "dependent elderly on their shoulders" (Narushima, 2004: 25) and that they will not be able to hang onto the universal health care system as a result but must accept privatisation. The underlying premise is that older people are draining, post-productive sector that longer makes valuable social contributions. The vast majority of the elderly, are women (Narushima, 2000). "On all sides, people withdraw into enclaves", isolate themselves from one, or engage in relentless competition for everything from jobs and services to dignity (Greenem, 1998: 48).

Against this backdrop it would be easy to lose hope. However, there is strong resistance and one form is the imaginative and innovative arts-based pedagogies that women are using to educate, empower and demand visibility and justice. These practices are highly relevant, as Appadurai argues, although the world today is "characterised by disjunctive flows that generate acute problems of social well-being, one positive force that encourages an emancipatory politics is the role of the imagination" (2001: 6).

## Empowerment, Feminist Pedagogy and the Imagination

Critical theory is concerned with empowering human beings to understand and transcend constraints placed upon them by particular ideologies, structures and cultural practices. Theories of empowerment suggest that power is the increased capacity to engage in meaningful interactions, critical thinking and leadership activities (Narushima, 2004). Feminist adult education, a pedagogy of empowerment, aims to deepen “understandings of the relations configuring one’s life” and to work towards controlling in one way or another, those conditions and to create new knowledges (Walters & Manicom, 1996: 17). It is a cultural and intellectual project and “kind of public dialogue [that] has the radically democratic development of knowledge at its heart” (Barr, 1999a: 71). Weaving a tapestry of activism and learning, people work collectively, creatively and often times subversively to challenge social inequality (Blackmore, 1999). The reflexive praxis of feminist adult education includes giving voice, critical self and social reflection and conscientization. Giving voice is beginning with the concerns that women themselves identify and creating activities and spaces that deal with the real needs that women themselves breaking silence and gaining the confidence to articulate concerns publicly (Manicom & Walters, 1997; Barr, 1999). Empowering women to speak out is premised upon finding media with which they are comfortable and which offer ways to express a diversity of feelings and perceptions. Educational practices of critical self and social reflection and conscientization and (from the Spanish *concientizacion*) work to create new understandings of daily lived/felt realities of oppression, injustice and/or inequity. They combine a political and action-oriented framework with a process of social critique based “on overcoming false consciousness by rejecting an absolute and static view of reality” and revealing hidden structures and ideologies (Greene, 1995: 61). But it is not “simply bringing what is hidden into consciousness...it is a breaking into consciousness of hidden dimensions of our reality through...reflective engagement” (Freire, cited in Heaney & Horton, 1990: 85). And consciousness, Greene reminds us, “always has an imaginative phase” (1995: 21).

Feminist educators argue that innovative pedagogies are required if we are to continue to challenge, re-create or transform this world in which we live (Greene, 1995; Medel-Anonuevo, 1996; Clover, 2000; Thompson, 2002). A crucial element of innovative pedagogies is the space and ability to imagine. The opportunity to imagine “can lead to the creation of alternatives” (Greene, 1995). It provides an aesthetic space for conscientization, to see or present the world as if it should be otherwise, and defy the constraints of expectations and mythos of the everyday. There is also a strong connection between imagination, creativity and resistance to socialization which in fact takes a great deal of courage and a readiness to diverge, defy conventional opinion or go public (Crompton, 2003). To create learning opportunities to imagine new possibilities of being and action is to enlarge the scope of freedom and work towards “new forms of civic association and collaboration” (Greene, 1995: 6).

But discourses of the value of imagination as a cognitive activity of learning are often “met with deep suspicion...banished to an ontological homelessness [and regarded] with scorn, condescension and averted gaze” (Shakotko and Walker, 1999: 201). The arts are identified as “frivolous, a mere frill, irrelevant to learning in the post-industrial world”

(Greene, 1995: 125). Women's activities such as knitting circles were referred to as gossiping circles, trivial and domestic, and even feminist adult education, until recently has not looked closely at arts and crafts (Clover, 2000). But as Greene notes, of all our cognitive capacities the imagination is the one that permits us to give credence and depth to alternative realities by breaking through "the inertia of habit" (1995: 21).

## Women's Issue-Based Arts and Crafts Learning: The Stories

We now turn to how two groups of women in British Columbia and Ontario use arts-based learning to articulate the suppressed, to challenge and to re-claim. Since these projects are about both education and the arts, we examine both the process of creation as well as the images, symbols and metaphors.

### Crying the Blues

Textile practices have been treated with disregard for so long it is almost inconceivable for some critics and artists to acknowledge them as discursive formations from which meaning can emerge. (Perron, 1998: 124)



The 'Crying the Blues' quilt

The collective quilt titled 'Crying the Blues' was created by a group of women seniors who belong to the Old Age Pensioners (OAP), a radical and feisty branch of the provincial Seniors Association which has over 8,000 members across British Columbia. The purpose was to initiate a creative and innovative method for members across the province to engage in an exploration and depiction of social problems that result from

government cutbacks. The idea to create the quilt came from Clara: "I realised [one day] that many of the women who belong to seniors organisations [knew] something about quilting so it seemed a natural fit." While not all crafts could be considered 'feminist' by any means, Clara and Alison envisioned a feminist base for their work – a quilt that would become a politically active aesthetic practice. They also realised that this would work because, although not for activist purposes, it is often a craft with which many women would be familiar and feel comfortable. Moreover, it could work across health and mobility issues that many seniors face and respond to the fact that many are interested in participating in learning and change initiatives if they can do so in their own homes (MacKeracher, 1998).

Alison agreed to coordinate the effort and put the quilt together. She noted that she would rather have had a quilting bee, but the deadline was tight and the distances made it impossible. Letters containing the idea for the quilt were then sent out to 75 branches of the seniors around Vancouver Island and the mainland. There were no specifics except for size and colour: it had to be some shade related to blue. Alison had chosen blue as the colour in order to give the quilt focus. She also came up with the proposal for a name, 'Crying the Blues', to which everyone agreed. Women across the province were given three months to create their squares and, as Clara stated, "those [were] the squares we got back – all 75 of them. Now we could not use all of them as it would have made the quilt totally unmanageable."

The quilt used 32 of the 75 squares. Some of the pieces are symbolic. Symbols make connections between things that are concrete and things that are abstract. Moreover, interpretive illustrations present perspectives on objects which are not part of the ordinary experience of the objects. A single pair of scissors represents social cuts. Scales tipped are a metaphor for the social equity imbalance created by neo-liberal policies but also the reduction of funding to crown legal services which have left many unable to gain access to legal redress or support. A large H has a line drawn through it. The line is a common symbol for 'do not enter'. The image represents hospital closures but also, the growing problem of diseases people contract in hospitals due to a reduction in cleaning staff and nurses. Housing costs in major cities of the province are said to be 'going through the roof' and a clever symbolic play on words is a large hammer coming down on a house. Others combine symbols with words. For example, the words Broken Promises are severed.

A few squares draw attention directly to problems faced by seniors. The contribution from Cumberland on Vancouver Island depicts a woman aged 104 denied home care. The 'universal' health care system of which Canadians are so proud is being subversively dismantled (read privatisation) to such an extent that care centres are closed, beds removed from hospitals and seniors now face what they call 'home invasions'. Medical staff actually enter their homes to check to see if a) they are really seniors; b) they are really sick/disabled; or c) they are really poor. But the vast majority address issues that go beyond the specific concerns of seniors.

In addition to the problem of hospital beds and care centre closures, the closing down of maternity beds is depicted. While seniors are beyond this stage of life, it is gratifying to see this 'gender' issue on the list of concerns. Many images address or represent attacks

against organised labour and the cuts to people's jobs, benefits packages and wages. Another major issue is both the privatisation of schooling and the rise in university and college tuition fees. This affects 'grandchildren' and society as whole as the 'haves' are able to attend while the 'have-nots' are 'weeded' out as other images show. There are also depictions of cutbacks to ferry services and the privatisation of roads. Much of the B.C. coastline is an archipelago and these ferries are the only link to the mainland. Moreover, B.C. is often referred to as the vertical province as it is primarily mountainous. Roads are few so their ownership matters. Other squares allude to the rising prices of gas but also, to the war and violence that is now irrevocably linked with this fossil fuel. The women have also uncovered the debates around the decimation of the forests and the destruction of the environment. They are displayed with passion and artistry. This is most interesting because the environment is so often seen to be a young person's issue.

Alison sewed the stories, ideas and concerns together with care. She herself developed the central image of the quilt, a woman with her arms in the air, to symbolise her understanding of the overall theme of the quilt: "We are really *up in arms* about everything." Alison also created the tear-drops sprinkled throughout the cloth. This a working and storied quilt. As Alison suggested, "We have tapped into a deep, common concern, using a traditional form of expression. The people who have contributed might not feel comfortable protesting in the streets but they have something to say and the craft to make an artistic statement." So now, the question was what to do with the quilt.

One idea was to give the completed quilt to Mr. Campbell, the Premier of the province. But people throughout the province said absolutely "No Way!" They felt he would rip it apart. So then the question was asked: "If not to Campbell then what can we do with it?" The OAP members discussed giving the quilt to a museum, but after much thought, decided it should be kept and used as a tool of education and debate. Since Clara had actually promised in her letter that accompanied the squares that it would be taken to the Legislature Building in Victoria, they made arrangements with the leader of the opposition (the New Democratic Party) to display the quilt one day for the media. While the quilt did appear in the local newspaper, nothing appeared on television although all the cameras were there and the quilt is extremely photogenic. The mainstream media had in the end, marginalised the quilt and silenced the voices of the seniors.

But the voices have not been silenced in other venues. Across the province, directors of the local organisations have asked to borrow the quilt to show to their members and get them involved in doing something creative and political. The quilt was also put on display at an international adult education conference that was held at the University of Victoria in May 2004 and traveled to New Zealand in January 2005 to be part of two exhibitions of Subversive Quilts. As Clara notes "the quilt is traveling and it's not going to stop!"

The power of any educational practice is how it responds to the needs of a community. This project was in fact an extremely effective response. As Clara noted:

I think in Victoria we've taken the leadership in demonstrations and this sort of thing – campaigns and writing. But I think all together the hardships that older people are facing are making people think, well what can we do about it? How can we keep learning and doing?

This project enabled those in distant parts of the country to be involved and it touched upon a skill, sewing and an artistic side to people which encouraged broad participation.

### Get A Real Job

Creativity needs to be recognised as an important part of social activism. Claiming and developing our creativity is an integral part of our work to reclaim control over our lives and economies. (Wolfwood, No Date: 1)



'Get a Real Job': Opening recruitment scene. Actor is found sufficiently malleable and desperate for employment to be hired.

Created by a group of six female tele-marketers and one male, 'Get a Real Job' is a popular theatre piece about the working conditions in a Call Centre in Sudbury, Ontario. Sudbury is now a very depressed town with a legacy of joblessness and pollution resulting from the pull-out of mining and other resource-based activities. The development of the play was facilitated by Laurie, a feminist popular educator who runs an organisation titled Myths and Mirrors. When Laurie first approached the people at the Call Centre, by invitation from the union, the workers were shy and frightened. But seven people soon agreed mainly because they thought it would be fun. It has been much more than that.

The first activity undertaken by the group was research. They engaged in conversations with other telemarketers across the country. The purpose of these investigations was to uncover the experiences of others in order to analyse their own work through both a personal and a larger social frame of reference. Armed with ideas and knowledge, the core group met every Sunday morning – the only time everyone was free – for one year. The title of the play was a phrase that kept appearing when they were improvising around the comments received from other tele-marketers as well as people on the other phones. 'You know', actor tele-marketer Cheryl noted, 'Get a real job!' You hear that so often when you call people. We talked about this a lot because so many people do not understand it is a 'real' job. They just think it's a fly by night kind of thing. We're not considered real, legitimate workers. The purpose of the play was to raise awareness of what working in this type of industry is really like, to share their struggles and gains



from unionising and to “let people know we are ‘people’ and we are doing a job, just like everybody else.”

In the beginning, Laurie noticed that in spite of the enthusiasm, not to mention giving up their Sunday mornings, the actors ironically did not take too easily to doing theatre. As Laurie noted “there was a lot of resistance to actually doing theatre exercises. I’d go with wherever they wanted to go. I certainly wasn’t going to force them into anything.” Perhaps this fear comes in part from arts education experiences that marginalised and discouraged, as Greene (1995) suggests. Since the theatre seemed so intimidating, Laurie suggested they begin with song-writing. This they took to as it was creative but not as intimidating. Tele-marketer Wendy explained their activities around the songs: “I’m not sure how we came up with the songs...we just brainstormed and then we came up with melodies. But for sure they were all around stress and things that do happen in the call centre.” Laurie then encouraged them to create ‘monologues’ about their own specific situations and feelings and this worked extremely well. While Laurie suggests the script for the play “came together from the discussions, the songs the written monologues”, the women say it was from ‘the venting’.

The play begins with the recruitment process. People who apply are told there will be a substantial benefits package, flexible working hours, a relaxed atmosphere, excellent pay, private lockers, child-care, and possibilities for a spa. There is music, balloons, free food and drinks. All the actors are there to sign-up and they pull two people from the audience. However, those two are quickly eliminated from the selection process. The actors are all hired because they are seen to be sufficiently subdued, malleable and desperate for employment.

The next scene is a bank of telephones. Sitting side by side with an incessant cacophony of ringing in the background to provide atmosphere, they make their calls. One woman’s eardrum is blown out by a disgruntled male who let off an air-horn into her ear. She is immediately fired for being ‘disabled’. Other women are sexually harassed. Lonely men answer the phone and begin speaking ‘dirty and worse’ (and here the audience is treated to a mime so use your imagination). Others end up reaching older people which has its own problematic:

You spend the first five minutes trying to sell them something and the rest of the time trying to talk them out of it. You know they don’t need it. They are buying it because they are lonely and they want someone to talk to. You feel bad. But it’s my job and if you get caught, you lose your job.

Soon the women at the Centre begin to encounter more and more internal harassment. The heels of their shoes are measured, the lengths of their skirts are discussed.

After each scene of phone calling and inter-action, an actor individually moves to a microphone set off to one side to tell her or his personal story. It always begins with their hopes and dreams for this work, and ends with their humiliations and fears. The hours are not flexible, the pay is not good and there are no benefits, no lockers, no child-care and no spa. As the play progresses, the actors begin to organise themselves to unionise and discuss the difficulties involved. As the play comes to a close, we learn that they have been successful and what things have changed as a result such as now.

For example, whenever a woman is hassled about her heels, she simply calls the union steward and it is immediately dropped. So while things are not perfect, they are better.

There were challenges along the way. Firstly, there was a lot of suspicion about what this play was all about and questions such as, “Are you guys slagging the Call Centre?” were common in the beginning. Secondly, and related, there was the real concern that creating this play could result in people actually losing their jobs. Since this was certainly was not part of the exercise, they treaded carefully. The group showed the play first outside their own community to the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) at their annual general meeting. They also performed at the above mentioned international adult education conference where they received a standing ovation. It was with much fear and trepidation that they showed the play at home to friends, family and colleagues. But now they are off and running, re-enacting the play for unions and communities across Canada. The actors, as Sheryl articulates so well, are very proud of their accomplishment:

When we did finally end up with a final product, it was something that was so amazing and something that was built on experience and built on the knowledge of the telemarketers. It took on a life of its own. I don't think any of us really realised where we were going with this play. It really gave people [in the audience] the opportunity to open a dialogue because what they had actually seen in the play, they had experienced, they had *lived!* We had one lady who spoke afterwards and she was in tears. She said, “I could see myself up on stage. I could see it and I could relate!”

This latter point is reflected in the work of O'Toole & Lepp (2000) who argue that “drama is always in some way a special event that provides the motivation...It is also intimate – it speaks personally, communally and viscerally [and] sometimes people discover something through the language of theatre.” It also involves what Heng calls “listening with the heart, an attentiveness that includes emotional responsiveness” (1996: 217).

## Oppositional Imaginations

In their own unique ways, the women in these projects made visible and construct counter-narratives by weaving them into a tangible object of imagination or a disarmingly simple and provocative little play. Stories are what we use to portray the personal. And this is why stories work so well. They signify and encapsulate a “structure of feeling, and this tacit, underlying way of seeing and responding to one's circumstances contributes to forms of consciousness” (Beyer, 2000: 69). But these stories go beyond the personal. In fact, they were informed by the social and political landscapes around them. Manicom & Walters argue that this is very important in terms of learning because unless the personal “is informed by an appreciation and analysis of the broader developments that are refracted in the local milieu...[the] potential to effect and consolidate substantive changes in women's lives is diminished” (1997: 71).

Adding to the above, is the strengthening of human agency through critical self and social reflection. On one hand, education must strengthen confidence in the individual and build self-esteem. But it must also help to develop an “active, engaged citizenship”

(Thompson, 2002: 34). Both projects allowed for individuality, a certain amount of anonymity and yet a collectively and publicness. In the play, they were 'actors', playing parts of others yet their monologues were their lived realities openly voiced. They played individual parts, but the overall power came from the collective production of inter-weaving stories and experiences. While the squares were created individually and anonymously (if you wished), the quilt is a collective voice but its power lies in the collectivity and diversity of issues it explores and portrays. In short, like society, the final products represent multiple and individual realities and stories, addressing a broad array of ideas and experiences and fashioning them into something that is at the same time similar and diverse, individual yet collective.

In addition, the making of collective artworks presupposes a long process, from a stage of imagination and representation in people's minds to the final product. It is a continuous process of negotiation between initial designs and dreams and the possibilities offered by the chosen form of representation – in this case a quilt and a play. Choices of materials or techniques are neither passive nor individual. In the actual coming into existence of a collective artwork, as people discover more materials or ideas, and as people come to understand better the possibilities, design alters, taking on new shapes and forms. Perhaps it is this slowness and multiplicity that allows for deeper reflections on why one is making the quilt or creating the play, and this act of sustained contemplation imbued in and through the artwork in turn provides a space of critical reflection. And any dialogical education activity must have at its centre this space "reflection on individual and social transformation – consciousness-raising" (Barr, 1999a: 15).

During a speech in Toronto, Canadian feminist Ursula Franklin addressed the propensity to over critique by saying: "having taken the dim view, now what?" This is an important question in terms of maintaining hope and engaging people's attention. The quilts and the play are poignant, but they are also very funny and irreverent. Roy (2004: 59) writes that humour is often "a sign of rebelliousness; laughter can defeat the fear of the unknown." Humour works as a metaphor "for transformation...a communal response of sensuous solidarity as it implies common understanding with others.. [and helps people] to cope with the situation of the world" (2004: 59). Making people laugh, as the arts can do so well, has proven to be an effective way to address issues which might otherwise have people shutting down or turning away. This does not mean that they are trivial and mindless, but rather that they are versatile and provide opportunities for creative self and social critique.

John Dewey argued many years ago that the imagination was not "a special, self-contained faculty, differing from others in possession of mysterious potencies" (1934: 237). Rather, it was a faculty that informed daily life in myriad ways. The imagination animates and pervades all processes of making and observation. It is a way of seeing and feeling things, a "blending of interests where the mind comes in contact with world" (1934: 237). These project stimulated oppositional imaginations. Oppositional imaginations emerge from daily lived reality of inequity or oppression. They make critical and creative meaning out of common lives, providing new ways of speaking and being heard through imagery and form. Oppositional imaginations destabilise fixed ideas of the 'world' and our ways of experiencing and understanding the familiar which

brings about complexity and challenge. Ironically, quilts are something normally used for comfort, warmth and security. These women turned them into a backdrop for prickly images and ideas not always apparent in the fabric of society. "The combination of unconventional representations of knowing in a conventional framework such as a quilt creates a powerful tool for representing patterns and themes that are different from those we are told to believe" (Halsall and Ali, 2004: 139). Popular theatre is inherently oppositional and imaginative. It is both a concrete and metaphoric representation of human behaviour. It carries a multiplicity of often conflicting messages with a strong analysis on both discourses of power and pleasure and hope. The actors convey and reinforce certain types of knowledge and experiences but are also "entirely passive in terms of their permission to engage in dialogue with the ideas being purveyed" (O'Toole and Lepp, 2000: 27).

These types of educational practices are time-consuming, risky and have their limits. They do not, for example, stop neo-liberalism in its tracks. They do not completely transform working conditions in Call Centres. (Well, yet anyway). The quilts were ignored by TV (although picked-up enthusiastically by the local papers), silencing through this major medium an important voice so seldom heard in Canadian society. They were also barred from hanging the quilt in the Legislature. The play is predominantly confined to union meetings and some of the scenes were 'modified' for the local audience out of fear of reprisal (job loss). People often do not engage in public learning activities such as these out of fear of reprisal. Because as Cropley puts it, "people who produce novelty in settings that are not open for it are likely to suffer various kinds of negative sanctions" (2003: 3). But they also do not take part in arts-based learning activities because in the process of growing up, adults are told that there are certain legitimate public behaviours for adults and creativity is a gift with which people are born, i.e. artists. Therefore, people will often restrict their responses and activities "to a narrow range of socially tolerated behaviours" (Cropley, 2003: 3). But these women dared to use the arts as a tool of protest, of investigation, of engagement and learning, of visibility and for this they must be seen as nothing less than courageous. These defiantly public acts are important because it is often from discomfort and challenge that we learn the most. They force us to at least acknowledge alternative realities. After seeing the play, a number of people acknowledged that they had been rude on many occasions to a call centre worker. Others who viewed the quilt suggested that they had ignored the views of an older person in their lives.

The women actors in *Get a Real Job* have joined Myths and Mirrors as board and/or advisory members and are now actively involved in their communities as activists but also, as artists, something they never would have believed themselves to be. The quilt has had an impact in terms of the revival of women's crafts and a difference in how they are viewed:

I think it was a great idea to plug into a craft that hasn't been used, as far as I know, very much for political purposes in Canada. I'm really fascinated by the way crafts and fabric arts have developed because I think there was a great hiatus where you didn't do that because granny did it. So I think in a way the resurgence of women's arts and crafts is a political statement (Alison).

Also, there are now in community meetings more and more women bringing something to do: knitting, or embroidery. As Alison noted, "you now see these women at meetings and they actually bring their knitting. Actually, we now see more women."

The power of women's leadership and issue-based aesthetic learning activities lie in their ability to construct counter-narratives and to make visible the concerns and daily-lived realities of people whose voices are seldom heard. In both cases, many of the women involved have gone on to engage more actively in their communities and/or workplaces as a result of these empowering activities. They are valuable educational practices that engage people in verbal and non-verbal action, stimulate oppositional imaginations and demonstrate a more critical and socially-oriented form of arts-based inquiry. Through humour, image, monologue, inter-action and defiance, they empower. However, there are also risks involved in using such public arts-based learning practices. The participants in their own diverse ways faced marginalisation and censorship and Canada is not yet a bastion of social reform.

Feminist issue-based arts education constitutes an important discourse of social organisation by drawing attention to an imaginative form of community educative-leadership by women and the potential of theatre and crafts to be both objects of art as well as tools of critical learning that exercise and contest power. Through image, fabric, song and story women make visible fundamental mythos of neoliberal ideology and challenge us to work for a more socially humane, just, pluralistic, imaginative and joyful society.

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