A Personal Exploration Into The Ethics And Responsibilities Of A Theatre Teaching Artist

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A PERSONAL EXPLORATION
INTO THE ETHICS AND RESPONSIBILITIES
OF A THEATRE TEACHING ARTIST

by

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B.A. Eastern Kentucky University, 2005
B.M.E. Eastern Kentucky University, 2005

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ABSTRACT

As an artist in the field of theatre for young audiences, I encounter many definitions of ‘teaching artist,’ and within each definition lies a new set of physical, educational, and psychological responsibilities. While the term ‘teaching artist’ continues to evolve and grow, I am interested in exploring a common struggle among teaching artists: What does it mean to be an ethical and responsible teaching artist?

This thesis allows me to create a personal definition of ‘teaching artist’ while exploring the relationship between responsibility, ethics, and community-based teaching. I begin by formulating my current understanding and beliefs about what it means to be a responsible teaching artist. I research how others in the TYA field, specifically Michael Rohd, Stephani Etheridge Woodson and Barbara McKean have dealt with issues of ethics and responsibility through four specific questions: How does my personal culture, race, gender, sexual orientation, and beliefs positively or negatively affect the work I do with young people? How does a teaching artist manage an environment in which there are inherently therapeutic qualities, without stepping into the role of therapist, and maintain a healthy relationship with the young people and the work? How do teaching artists maneuver through a structure where the ideologies of the teacher are guiding the project on a macro level but not a micro level? Is it possible or necessary to share responsibility with young people?

As a reflective artist I can’t help but question, challenge, and rethink choices I make in facilitation. I would venture to say it would be irresponsible not to do so. I am hopeful this exploration not only will improve my personal teaching but will
allow and inspire others to take a look at their practice in terms of ethics and responsibility.
For my Daddy, Gerald C. Dunn, who always believed I could do anything.
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<td>American Alliance for Theatre in Education</td>
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<td>GRIC</td>
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<td>PVV</td>
<td>Place, Vision, and Voice</td>
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<td>TYA</td>
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INTRODUCTION

For the past ten years, I have defined myself as a “teaching artist.” It is a title and profession that must always be explained and defined when meeting someone, and still some wonder what it means. Personally, even I have struggled with defining “teaching artist” in practice. What is it I do? What are my responsibilities in this role? How do I fit into the bigger picture of Theatre for Young Audiences and Theatre Education? These are all questions that must be answered every time I step into a new project. They are exciting questions, for the most part, because they open doors, which allow for new opportunities, ideas, possibilities, and dynamic projects. But with endless options comes a challenge to constantly redefine the rules. And, for me, with each re-creation of the rules comes the question: How can I do this responsibly? Not only do I have a responsibility to the young people, but to the material and the greater community at larger.

Recently the weight of being a “responsible” or “ethical” teaching artist has been weighing on me and affecting the work I do with young people. In the past, I have feared I was being an irresponsible teacher, specifically in a community based or social change setting. This fear stifled my practice and prevented me from venturing into the kind of work I prefer to experience with young people. For this profound reason, I have decided to investigate and explore what it means to be a “responsible teaching artist.” There are a variety of questions that are ever present in my practice: How can I responsibly work with young people to explore dynamic questions and topics in a way that is both safe and
challenging? How does my personal culture, race, gender, sexual orientation, and beliefs positively or negatively affect the work I do with young people? How does a teaching artist manage an environment in which there are inherently therapeutic qualities without stepping into the role of therapist and maintain a healthy relationship with the young people and the work? How do teaching artists maneuver through a structure where personal ideologies are guiding the project on a macro level but not a micro level? Is it possible or necessary to share responsibility with young people?

I begin by defining how I currently practice being a responsible teaching artist. I explore the goals I set and the way in which I go about the work. I strive to honestly dissect choices I have made and the results I have seen from those choices. Because a teaching artist can work in many arenas, I will dissect personal experiences I’ve had within school and community settings as well as professional theatre for young audiences. Hopefully, this will allow me to create a personal pedagogy of what I see as an effective responsible teaching artist.

After the evaluation of my own practice, I researched the practice and work of others. I began researching the methods of Michael Rohd, Artistic Director of Sojourn Theatre and the author of “Theatre for Community, Conflict and Dialogue”. His work runs the gamut from interactive performance with young people through community-based work with people living with HIV/AIDS. Next, I examined pedagogy by Barbara McKeon and her book, “Teaching Artist at Work,” where she explores the variety of roles teaching artists play. And, finally, I explored the variety of research from Stephani Etheridge
Woodson, Professor of Theatre at Arizona State University, who not only has worked with young people on an Indian reservation in Arizona but also, as a reflective artist, has a variety of articles wherein she processes that work.

After establishing how others in the field are approaching responsible teaching artistry, I apply their thoughts, ideas, and practices to my own work to discover similarities and differences. Are their ideas feasible in my practice? Am I comfortable with these ideas? Would I be able to approach work in the same way? Using their theories, I evaluate my ideologies in relation to theirs to see how we compare and differ.

Finally, I redefine for myself what it means to be a responsible teaching artist. How has this research affected my definition? What about my practice would I like to change? Have any of the ideas I held previously been confirmed or negated? And what new questions have been raised for me?

Through this exploration, I attempt to create a set of standards by which I can evaluate responsible teaching methods within my work with young people and adults. I desire a tool that allows me to focus on the type of work I want to do and do it ethically and responsibly. The fear of failure and disappointment can no longer be allowed to impact my work in a negative way, and through this process I hope to find the freedom to play, work, challenge and grow with young people.
CHAPTER ONE: MY PRACTICE

Working in the field of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA), I have encountered many definitions of ‘teaching artist’, and within each definition lies a new set of physical, educational, and psychological responsibilities. While the term ‘teaching artist’ continues to evolve and grow, I continue to explore the question, what does it mean to be a responsible teaching artist?

As teaching artists, we have the power to create meaning for and explore topics with young people that some adults may find controversial. We have the opportunity to persuade, challenge, and explode a young person’s beliefs and ideas. The power of theatre as a tool for learning engages sensory awareness in young people and they are able to invest on an extremely personal level with the work. We as teaching artists are able to introduce this new style of learning to classrooms, communities, and professional theatres. Additionally, beyond content, we are engaging in discussions with young people on a personal level. Simply by living our lives and sharing ourselves with young people, we offer a different understanding of life than they may have had when we first met or began our work. This is both empowering and challenging for the TYA profession. I love the work I do, and I strive to make the most of every opportunity with each group of young people with whom I work. As I formulate my opinion about personal responsibility and my position within the field, I am intrigued by how teaching artists before me defined responsibility within their practice.
For the past ten years I have developed a teaching philosophy to guide my practice. It reads as follows:

I am passionate about the power of art in the lives of young people, and theatre is the medium through which I communicate. Through experiential learning, students in my classroom explore their world and discover where they are comfortable in it. As a student-centered teacher, I aim to enable young people to ask questions and challenge assumptions. By using a process-based approach to both classroom and production work, I generate an environment that encourages lifelong learning. When it comes to my beliefs about student-centered learning, I am reminded of the profound quote by Sara Spencer, publisher of Children’s Theatre Press, who posits, “I am inclined to trust children with the truth and allow them to draw their own conclusions. Not to tell them what to think, but require them to think.” (Jennings, inside cover). Spencer’s quote encourages me to embrace teaching as an opportunity to inspire and empower. By providing young people varying opportunities in which they can learn and grow, we, as educators, provide students with opportunities to embrace their personal learning style, as outlined by Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences. It is crucial we empower students of all ages to use education as an exploratory tool to investigate the world around them and discover their space within that world. Through the arts, both visual and performing, we can offer young people a deeper understanding of the human condition.
I have realized through practical application and professional experience that I facilitate best in a student-centered environment. Within this model students are offered a sense of ownership over their learning, and it encourages them to invest in the experience. By promoting an atmosphere of metacognition, or thinking about one's thinking, students can discover deeper meaning of art and an understanding of the role of the artist in society. In any teaching context, I work to promote student responsibility for learning by asking every individual what they will contribute to the group and how each person can participate in creating an environment that is stimulating and respectful of diverse views and experiences. To that end, I focus on active learning and the use of physical and kinestetic examples to give students tools to apply knowledge they have garnered in the classroom. Understanding that students learn better when instructors model behavior they desire to see reflected in their students, I enjoy asking guiding questions to incite dialogue, provoke thought, and encourage higher level thinking skills.

Through process-centered work, I strive to create a safe space that embraces each individual and celebrates the community as a whole. When we, as artists, see every experience as an opportunity for learning, we develop skills in communication, collaboration, and problem solving that will allow us to succeed in various areas outside the arts. Because I believe every child is an artist, I encourage students to view the world through the artists’ lens.
As a highly reflective artist, I encourage students to reflect and share their experiences from our process. Through movement, voice, writing, and visual art, I can assess the student’s knowledge, comfort, and understanding of a skill as well as an emotional response to an activity. One of the best ways to measure outcomes is to offer students the opportunity to share how they are feeling, both positive and negative. Honing in on what challenges and successes they are experiencing allows me to reflect on what my next steps should be in the planning process.

Teaching is a privileged position that demands humility as much as respect. It is crucial that teachers recognize the power inherent in their role and are self-reflective about their actions. In my teaching, I work to be mindful of my position as a role model of the kind of learning and communication I strive to promote among students. My skills as an instructor are constantly evolving, and I desire to continually grow as an artist and educator. Challenging myself to expand and stretch my comfort zone, I find I seek out those peers and mentors from my journey who can offer wisdom and advice as I move through new experiences. Teachers have a responsibility to their profession, to their students, and to themselves. It is evident, upon further reflection, that my pedagogical stance has been greatly influenced by my mentors, peers, and students. I strive to learn something new every day, and the more I teach, the more I learn.

In this fast-paced world of stress and technology, I strive to develop connections between people by fostering empathy for those around us and
promoting a community that respects, loves, and supports one another. I aim to embrace those who are seen as different and accept those who cannot accept themselves. We, as theatre artists, have the ability to reflect the world we wish to see both on stage and in our classrooms. By empowering young people to have self-confidence and pride, we enable them to go into the world and share a message of love and hope, to stand up against hatred and tell stories of compassion and trust. As an artist and educator, I can make a change in this world by affecting the lives of young people through theatre.

This teaching philosophy has guided my work and answered a variety of questions, but the more I struggle with ethical challenges, the more it seems to fall short.

While there are a variety of ways to define ‘teaching artist’, I see a teaching artist as a person who combines their skills as an artist and a teacher to facilitate discussion and promote deeper understanding in the classroom, community and professional theatre setting. The rules for this field are not clearly defined, and, because of this, many have created their own ideas about what their roles and responsibilities entail. As an emerging artist, I need to define this role for my practice.

Over the past 10 years in this field, I have experienced teaching in school settings, community establishments, as well as directing and choreographing in a professional theatre for young audiences. While the groups may vary in task, each is similar in goal. We explore what it means to be a person who contributes and feels a part of the whole, a person who feels valued and important within the group and the community-at-large. My
role as the facilitator then has similar goals, but these goals must manifest themselves differently in various settings. As I look at my practice, I can clearly see the differences between teaching drama in the school setting, the community setting, and the professional theatre setting.

As a teaching artist in the school setting, one of the most significant challenges I face is the establishment of the working relationship between the classroom teacher and the teaching artist. Setting expectation and boundaries, clear goals and objectives, and classroom management strategies are all important to the success of the project but sometimes a difficult discussion to approach. Recently, I was sent into a classroom to do a residency on community building thorough drama, and the teacher welcomed me into the classroom, introduced me to the class, and promptly sat at his desk. This is not the first time this has happened, but it certainly was exceptionally deliberate. This goes against everything in my teaching philosophy about the need for collaboration. Why wasn’t I able to negotiate this relationship better from the beginning? Do I have a responsibility to engage the teacher? The impact of the classroom teacher’s participation is palpable. So understanding this, how can I enter into a situation knowing I am setting students up for a lesser experience because their classroom teacher is not participating? In the grand scheme of things, what can I do? Ask? Demand? Require? Beg? If a teacher isn’t interested in participating, they won’t. The gatekeepers of the school system are many, and the opportunity to do this vital work with young people is a gift, but who am I responsible to as
a teaching artist? I believe it to be the students, so I should do everything in my power to make it the best possible experience for them.

When working as a teaching artist in the professional TYA field, I feel most comfortable tackling sensitive or challenging topics. Yet, somehow these topics come up far less than in other areas; here the focus is on actor training. Is there a place for dynamic process-based, social change work in the professional setting? It is generally my responsibility to teach young people how to perform a role in a play or musical, or develop skills for the next play or musical in which they will participate. I struggle with this truth because I can’t help wondering how important “acting” is in the grand scheme of life. Storytelling, confidence, empathy, articulation, presence, awareness of body, communication, social skills, problem-solving, critical thinking, respect, and a plethora of other skills that acting and theatre teach are grossly important in the grand scheme of life. These skills are the pillars of a contributing member of society. As mentioned in my teaching philosophy, I am a processed-based teacher, and this does not leave when I work in the professional setting. This process-based approach makes my work inherently different from that of the product-based work of a majority of live theatre. In process-centered drama, we are making the most of the process and focusing on exploration of ideas using drama, while product-based work focuses on creating a polished end product. Often in process-based work there is little to share at the end but the experiences gained and ideas explored. It is about engaging students in an imaginary world, making concepts experiential, and allowing students to fully explore an idea. I often struggle with this
balance. Am I doing young people a disservice by only teaching them acting techniques? Some students may continue into professional theatre, but for those who do not, we are teaching invaluable life skills in an engaging way that will remain with them for years to come. So, as a teaching artist and director, I have the responsibility to focus on developing the young person through the stories I choose and the cast I create. I also help young people develop through the activities and games I choose. And still, there is an end goal to this process... a play, a sharing, a performance. Can I ethically allow one to take precedent over the other? Or, is it unethical not to prioritize? I struggle with how to responsibly balance my process-based approach within a product-centered world.

I struggle most with issues of responsibility and ethics when serving as a teaching artist in the community setting. The variety of opportunities which present themselves are wide in scope but narrow in aim; use drama techniques to explore, dissect, explode, interrogate and investigate a specific topic. This demographic of teaching artistry is where I find myself most passionate. I had the great fortune of working at an inner city group foster care facility for two years. While there, I spent one year exploring the theme of “Hope” and the next “Listen” with a group of 15-20 students in both elementary and middle school. I loved the young people and the work we were doing, but I always had concerns and issues when it came to my role as the facilitator and the balance between facilitator and therapist. How much can you do without calling it drama therapy? Where is the line? How can I do work that raises questions but not be trained to facilitate the discussion? I also struggled with the idea of leading a group of people I do not belong to. I was never in foster care, and
I didn’t live in the inner city. How do I negotiate these tender relationships responsibly and still do the dynamic work I am longing to do? I want to explore and play and challenge, but it isn’t about me. It is about the young people I am working with and their needs. How can I shape ethically-sound residencies that will challenge these young people and honor their experiences?

I feel confident in many areas of my practice. I have developed a style of classroom management that allows for choice within structure and a variety of techniques and structures to manage behavior, focus, and flow. My lesson planning skills have grown exponentially in the past few years as I have discovered *Understanding by Design* a pedagogy style developed by Wiggins and McTighe, and embraced the need of setting clear objectives before shaping a lesson. Most important to my practice is the respect and passion I have for working with young people. I have gone to great lengths to grow as a teacher and theatre artist so that I may serve their needs as fully as possible.

The respect I have for young people has filled my practice with a variety of questions about ethical decisions. Questions I have been pondering, struggling with, fighting, placating, and reflecting on for years. I am not sure there are answers to my questions, but I am seeking a way to approach my practice so I am as ethically sound as possible. The questions have slowly begun to breed fear in my practice, and it is stifling my work on every level. To do the type of work I want to do, I must find a way to negotiate and balance these fears. I believe my responsibility is first and foremost to the young people I work with, and while that should answer all the questions, I find it complicates them more.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERARY REVIEW

Looking at the field of Theatre for Young Audiences, there are some professionals who have questioned their practice in the same way I am currently. Michael Rohd, Barbara McKean, and Dr. Stephani Etheridge Woodson are three teaching artists I explored in-depth, with anticipation to reflect, discuss, and analyze how their findings might affect my own work.

**Michael Rohd**

Michael Rohd, a theatre artist, director, and educator, is the artistic director of Sojourn Theatre Company in Portland, Oregon and the creator of *Hope is Vital*, a program that encourages and guides participants to use theatre to create community, explore conflict, and begin a dialogue within the community. In 1992, beginning with the belief that “theatre is healing” (Rohd xv), Rohd started a program in the fourth floor of a homeless shelter for adults living with HIV/AIDS. Later, he invited his high school students to join him at the shelter to act as participants in the storytelling, exploration, and dialogue. The group then took this dialogue into the city schools, allowing students to “…participate – to explore decisions, issues, and life situations” (Rohd xvi). Rohd then left the thriving group to help other communities set up similar groups to address a variety of community concerns. Rohd was:

...asked to develop programs focusing on violence, substance use, teen pregnancy, and other issues around the country. Urban and rural, East Coast and West Coast –
people are, of course, as unique as their communities. Thus, the beauty of this work as a medium for dialogue is that it is specific to the individuals with whom it occurs and to the moment in which it occurs. The tools are transferable and their use ends up where it belongs – in the hands of community members who pose the questions and create the forums needed in their own communities. (Rohd xvii)

The techniques, tools, tips, and activities outlined in his book, Theatre for Community, Conflict and Dialogue: The Hope Is Vital Training Manual, are “based on the belief that education is dialogue...we learn by doing not by being told, or even being shown” (Rohd xvii).

Rohd has been influenced heavily by Augusto Boal, creator of Theatre of the Oppressed movement, who believes that “Theatre is a language through which human beings can engage in active dialogue on what is important to them. It allows individuals to create a safe space that they may inhabit in groups and use to explore the interactions, which make up their lives. It is a lab for problem solving, for seeking options, and for practicing solutions” (Rohd xix).

Logistically, Rohd’s work has a structure that is similar to an “arc, which can apply for individual sessions as well as for a longer project, and looks like this: Warm –Ups --- Bridge Activities --- Activating Material” (Rohd 2). Using this structure, Rohd utilizes activities as building blocks to accomplish the established goals. “The process is a journey. Like any journey, it has a beginning, a route, and a schedule, but it does not have a predetermined destination. It just gives a direction to start” (Rohd 3). Each activity has a
purpose; there are no games for games sake. Warm-ups are chosen with thought and facilitated with care as they are an introduction to the work, and have a threefold purpose, “to get a group of people playing in the same space, to energize that space, and to create a sense of comfort in the collective doing of specific and structured activities” (Rohd 4). Rohd asserts that warm-ups are “all about creating moments where participation is impossible to resist, moving forward into the process you have to set up, and having fun along the way” (Rohd 4). The responsibility lies in the teaching artist choosing and constructing a set of warm-ups that will allow the participants to succeed in the goals for the project: “A good game sets up a clear task with clear boundaries and moves everyone forward together with objectives and ways of achieving them” (Rohd 9). But one might wonder as to the purpose of these warm-ups in relation to product-based theatre. These goals are not the same as those of an actor but rather a participant. Rohd demands full participation, concentration and focus in these activities and reminds participants that “concentration, even now during these ‘silly, fun, little games’ it is necessary for the group to be ready for more intense concentration later when you move on to the more complex exercises” (Rohd 9). The physical space of the environment where the work is to take place need not be a theatre, but simply a space to play. A discussion of safe space is recommended by Rohd to begin the work with young people. And he even challenges the facilitator, if they have previously worked with the group, to look back at the beginning of their relationship with the group and determine if it was the teacher who laid down the expectations and not a group discussion. If so, he encourages the facilitator to “put the idea of dialogue on the table, both in theory and in practice” (Rohd 5). The warm-ups not only encourage focus but also
introduce energy and trust into the community. These elements are vital to create what Rohd calls a ‘safe space’. From this ‘safe space’ the bridge work can begin and bring the group one step closer to being ready for the activating material.

Rohd stresses the importance of processing each of the warm-ups and activities with the group. Allowing time for participants to reflect and think back on ‘ah-ha’ moments, realizations, discomfort, and awkwardness, no matter how small. He regards this time as sacred even if no one chooses to share aloud, believing in the importance of even a moment of silence to accept or reflect on the recently shared experiences. When a dialogue is begun and developed, the facilitator is there to offer observations and connections, not opinions or judgment. A major concern many facilitators have when working in community settings in this way is the possibility and likelihood that the work will verge on therapy, something that as a teaching artist we are not, but Rohd asserts that, “...the act of creating is, in itself a healthy act, a form of finding one’s voice and seeing the world in new ways. In that sense, art is therapeutic” (Rohd 71). So with the acknowledgment that we are working in a place that can become therapeutic, how do we maintain a healthy relationship with the work and the young people? How do we protect their ideas, stories and emotions? To that Rohd responds:

The key is to remember this work steers away from being psychodrama specific to any one individual because you are not trying to use a group to work through one person’s problems. You are using a group to explore a social problem compressed
into a specific, fictional interaction that is culled from the collective consciousness of
the participants you are working with. (Rohd 71)

The goal is to “keep it [the work] safe, but not always ‘comfortable’” (Rohd 71).

With the community’s interest in mind, the question remains to be asked: Where
does the facilitator fit into the community? Should the facilitator be a part of the
community as an active participant? Being a part of the community allows the facilitator to
recognize and acknowledge when someone needs to step back, as we are not always able to
see that in ourselves until we are too far in. However, can a facilitator ethically be a part of
the group? Michael Rohd acknowledges and embraces the questions surrounding this role
when he states:

Your strength is your own self and your own style. Young people respond to
honesty, caring and to someone as interested in listening as talking. If you are
willing to learn from youth, to challenge your creative self, to examine and possibly
reconfigure your relationship with your group, to put aside messages, and to trust in
dialogue, you will find the experience of this process rewarding for those you work
with and for yourself. (Rohd 127)

In the third part of the three-step arc that Rohd advocates, the teaching artist
introduces the activating material, largely through the use of improvisation (improv).
Facilitators are encouraged to begin by allowing participants to share their personal
definitions or preconceptions about improv. As the world of short-form comedy improv
has become popular, it is important to let participants know that the goal here, in this work,
is not to entertain or get a laugh. Rohd uses the term ‘pure improv’ and defines it as “living
in a pretend world, in a given circumstance, from a character’s point of view, and playing every moment truthfully and imaginatively” (Rohd 74). Once again a discussion and reflection is encouraged after each improv, involving both the participants and the observers. When creating the activating scene Rohd posits that it “…does not show what to do. It does not have a message. It asks what can be done” (Rohd 97). Rohd is very adamant that he hates all implication that he is creating ‘message plays’. By posing questions, you are asking the audience to think, question and respond, not sit back and enjoy the journey of a protagonist. Rohd encourages the facilitator to work with the participants when creating the scene; it is not their role to be the ‘director’ but instead ask questions about what worked and what didn’t. Believing, “this work is group problem solving and dialogue” (Rohd 71). Feedback on scenes is not seen as judgment or criticism but rather as an opportunity to question, reflect and build a more activating scene for the observers.

While outlining the structure of the work is crucial, Rohd maintains there are a variety of qualities a good facilitator must possess, including that they are, “energized and enthusiastic about the process…a good listener…nonjudgmental…able to deepen discussion and move the event forward…confident in their role as a tone-setter and guide…aware of the dynamics of the room…understanding that there will be some people in the room who don’t want to be there…and asks every question truly wanting to hear the answer” (Rohd 113-115). While this seems like an intimidating checklist of requirements for teaching artists to possess before beginning the work, Rohd reminds us “the single most important thing to remember about facilitating: You get better at it as you do it” (Rohd 112).
Rohd encourages: “Theatre allows us to converse with our souls – to passionately pursue and discover ways of living with ourselves and others. We are all artists, and theatre is a language. We have no better way to work together, to learn about each other, to heal, and to grow” (Rohd xix). But acknowledging that there may be an element of fear and intimidation in that language, he also asserts in his constantly balanced practice to “remember: it is work but it is, most definitely, fun” (Rohd 127).

Barbara McKean

Barbara McKean, an Associate Professor in Theatre and Outreach at the University of Arizona, has worked within a variety of educational theatre, community-based work and professional theatre for young audiences. Prior to teaching in secondary education, McKean was a professional actor and teaching artist. McKean’s focus is currently on training teaching artists to work with young people in the educational setting, and, in 2006, she authored the book A Teaching Artist at Work: Theatre with Young People in Educational Settings. This text is a personal look at her practice and the events, education, realizations, and experiences that have shaped it over the years. Through this process she has created a working definition of ‘teaching artist’, positing:

Teaching artists are distinguished from those who dedicate most of their time to teaching the arts in school and are licensed teachers from master – teachers who share a specific knowledge and techniques from their own work in a limited workshop type environment. Teaching Artists in education are expected to work as
artists as well as invest themselves in the creation and implementation of projects in collaboration with other teachers or educational staff. (McKean xii)

While this definition of teaching artist may seem broad to most, McKean offers a definition that allows for variety yet maintains a common goal positing:

Theatre-Teaching artists must be able to draw the students into imaginary worlds of play, engaging them in the theatrical process as a tool for exploration and learning both the art form and, by extension, other subjects. Theatre-teaching artists combine their theatrical and teaching knowledge to create projects to introduce students to the world of theatre and enable them to participate actively in the construction of those worlds. (McKean xiii)

McKean, in both practice and pedagogy, attempts to strike a balance between the joy of the work she does in educational settings along with the appeal that theatre and drama offer. She explains this using the Italian word *giuoco*, which translated means ‘play’, but not in a leisurely sense. Instead, “*giuoco* means extension of the lesson. Few lessons are complete without *giuocoing*. Contrast this with the American culture, where play is rigidly separated from work. Parents send their children to school to work, not to play” (Tuttol, quoted in McKean xiv). Grasping onto this concept, McKean understands and advocates the importance of teaching with, “*giuoco*, playful work that creates a sense of exploration and excitement in a place where teachers and young people work to play together in a spirit of camaraderie and fun, a place where meaning is co-constructed, connected to the funds and knowledge each one of us brings to the work at hand” (McKean xiv).
Advocating a reflective practice as the basis of her work, McKean believes, “Becoming a reflective practitioner is not only a desirable but also a necessary ingredient of a teaching artist’s artistry and profession. Reflecting begins by clarifying one’s own artistry” (McKean xii). This reflection allows teaching artists to create their own set of standards and guiding principals from which they will work. “Teaching artists are mavericks. Each is one of a kind, taking risks, venturing into the unknown of adventurous teaching, and employing his or her artistry along the way” (McKean 32). This process of reflection throughout and after the project, with and without young people, with and without co-teachers or school partners is essential to McKean practice.

Through this reflection process McKean acknowledges the needs to recognize self. She believes a persons’ past experiences create a personal style that makes them a unique teaching artist, stating, “By considering their autobiographies as well as their practice, teaching artists strive for an artful combination of technique and decision-making that reflects their unique qualities as individual artists and teachers” (McKean xii). This belief has been disputed by some who believe that you must separate yourself as a person from yourself a teacher. This teaching ‘persona’, as some see it, is a way in which you are able to be the teacher you want to be, separate from the personal identities we all possess. But McKean argues:

Educational researchers recognize that teachers’ autobiographies and narratives play a significant role in understanding the knowledge and experiences each individual brings to teaching. How teachers use past experiences and knowledge to inform their present and future situations are part of the professional stories each
teacher brings to the act of teaching. The artistry of the teaching artist depends on uncovering the personal and professional biography of the individual and is the first step toward understanding the unique qualities of our practice. (McKean 9)

McKean’s biography includes her work as a professional actor and she acknowledges how much that part of her life has shaped her current work as a teacher. “I view my decision to teach as grounded both in the subject - theatre – and in my desire to help young people learn” (McKean 6).

McKean also is aware of how her personal biography shapes her goals and objectives as a teaching artist. “My own starting point is a blend of the process-oriented approach of drama with the product-oriented approach of theatre. My artistry calls on my knowledge of process learned and used as an actor and those learned as a teacher” (McKean 34). Acknowledging that she is process-centered, she, as a rule, also has a dual-goal of performance within her projects, believing strongly that, “public performance conveys to the audience and the students that I take seriously the ideas and processes they have engaged in. It is in serious work and joyous fun” (McKean 53). While there are a variety of assessment tools McKean employs in both her community, educational, and professional work, including ‘process-folios’, she is most excited and driven by the use of a final product/performance, stating, “As a theatre-teaching artist interested in teaching performance, I want to keep my eye on the joy of performance while at the same time focus on the fun of getting to that place” (McKean 56). She is also supremely aware of the beliefs she holds true, no matter the audience or group. As with most teaching artists who are involved in multiple projects, McKean maintains common threads in all the work upon
which she chooses to embark, stating, “Two key assumptions guide my teaching. The first is
that everyone can participate in the theatrical experience...A second key assumption
depends on the first. If everyone can participate, then the group determines the norms for
working and the ways it will manage those occasions when the norms are not followed”
(McKean 42). In addition to the goals and objectives set forth by the teaching artist and
administrators, McKean attempts to remind us that the young people involved have goals
and objectives as well. As she works in a variety of settings, including educational,
community, and professional theatre, she reminds us that in each of these settings the
purpose for involvement on the young persons’ part will be different. “The purpose of
outside school programs is different from that of schools. For one, young people choose to
attend. For another, the educational goals are much more specific to the art form itself and
can include social, political, and cultural goals that reach beyond what occurs within the
academic focus of schools” (McKean 25). McKean encourages us to take these into account
as we enter into a new project.

When entering into this new project, McKean offers a somewhat formulaic approach
to the framework of time spent together. “Preparing, teaching and reflecting constitute the
central activities of the teaching artist at work. Taken together, these activities form a
holistic curriculum” (McKean 27). This approach can be imagined as a bull’s-eye. The
center includes the artistry of theatre and the knowledge of pedagogy. The second ring is
negotiating with context. And the last and largest ring encompassing everything is teaching,
reflecting, and preparing. These are seen as cyclical in McKean’s work, insinuating they do
not end and you are constantly working on all facets.
At the center of all aspects of McKean’s work lies a heartfelt passion for creating a constructivist classroom and environment based in the constructivist learning theory. She believes:

When we learn something new, we connect it with what we already know in order to make meaning. And through those connections, we “construct” knowledge and skills to accommodate the new ideas, concepts, techniques and processes...From a Constructivist view, curriculum is co-created. It is a negotiation between teacher and learner within the boundaries of the discipline and the developmental level of the learner. (McKean 17)

Taking this idea to heart, she holds this lens to every aspect of her work, ranging from lesson construction to classroom management. In regards to lesson creation she states:

If I embrace the constructivist tradition of teaching and learning and the aim of preparing students for living in a democracy, then my goal of creating a community of learners also includes my valuing student choice and voice. My preparation must offer students the chance to view learning as something they actively participate in rather than some disembodied subject or exercise I am interested in teaching.

(McKean 38)

On the other hand, classroom management, where most teachers and teaching artists feel somewhat uncomfortable fully embracing the constructivist model, is again embodied by McKean’s practice, believing that, “One of the most important areas of pedagogy is classroom management. In a constructivist classroom, collaboration is key...The goal of classroom management becomes one of collaboration and not competition” (McKean 18).
Further she states, “When learners, even very young learners, are actively involved in creating and maintaining collaborative conditions for learning, rather than simply responding to an adult request for ‘appropriate’ behavior, they take responsibility not only for their own learning but also for those of others” (McKean 18). This responsibility is key to McKean’s practice, believing that if the responsibility is shared, then when diving into work, you are creating a further sense of community with the knowledge that students are there to support, challenge and create alongside one another. McKean has found when students are empowered to take responsibility for themselves and their community, both parties benefit greatly.

McKean truly believes teachers should be held to the highest standards. Being proficient in one’s art form is not enough; you must also learn pedagogy. Believing the art of teaching and the art of theatre are two forms that combine to create a theatre-teaching artist, McKean prescribes to Schwab’s declaration that, “Many define teaching as an art in that it ‘has rules, but knowledge of rules does not make one an artist. Art arises as the knower of the rules learns to apply them appropriately to the particular case’” (Schwab 1983, quoted in McKean 12). The art of teaching, as defined by McKean, is an ever-constant opportunity to learn, both from students and fellow practitioners. In her text, she reminds her fellow practitioners that, “Building a community in which teaching artists regularly inquire into their own practice expands the notions of what it means to be a teaching artist and provides opportunities for the reflective practice so critical in our work” (McKean 101). Here she reaffirms the need for constant growth and reflection and never losing the sense of wonder and joy that comes with each new project. “For a teacher, every moment in
the classroom offers the promise for fresh discovery” (McKean 7). This connection to the work comes with quite the responsibility. If you allow so much of yourself into the work, what happens if it fails? To this McKean reminds us, “We must separate our students from our own sense of self-esteem, success, or failure, and attend to their needs instead of our own expectations of what we think they should do” (McKean 37).

While maintaining her constructivist approach, McKean still offers us some insight into the logistical demands of a teaching artist. First and foremost she reminds us, “The responsibility for ensuring the physical and emotional safety of the group and for maintaining the relationships, the methodology, and the organization of time and space for the work ultimately falls to the teaching artist” (McKean 42). The process is guided by the teaching artist, but not dictated. The use of ritual in the opening and closing of sessions, McKean believes, offers a comfort and predictability to the time together. She asserts that something as simple as a check-in word or exit cheer allows for further development of community and a sense of belonging. As with most teaching artists, McKean has students sit in a circle or ‘circle center’ when she needs the group together to talk, believing, “Circles enable everyone an equal place where we can see everyone else” (McKean 44). This sense of equality and openness is seen in other aspects of her practice, specifically when working with teachers and the need to make a connection, honor their work and classroom and find the place where she fits into the mix. McKean asserts, “The teaching artist must integrate him-or herself into the school environment, recognizing that he or she is working within a whole school culture and curriculum” (McKean 22). And further she advocates, “Spending time observing the class at work beforehand helps the teaching artist to see not only how
the teacher interacts with the students but also how the students interact with each other and the teacher” (McKean 23). This crucial relationship with teachers and administrators is held on equal footing as that of the young people.

McKean closes her text, A Teaching Artist at Work, by challenging her fellow artists to “...look toward the future and develop our potential as teaching artists, approach our work with care, commitment, and artistry. Engage with others to create communities of learners among both others in our profession and the young people we teach” (McKean 104). This ‘go-get-‘em’ mentality can be felt throughout her work and writing. She has and continues to advocate for the development of teaching artists, the need for the arts in education as well as the need for a reflective practice both on her part and of all those, no matter their age, with whom she works.

Stephanie Etheridge Woodson

Stephanie Etheridge Woodson, a scholar, teaching artist, and Professor at Arizona State University, has spent years working with Native American young people, specifically Pima, through Place: Vision and Voice, a digital storytelling residency at the Gila River Indian Community (GRIC). Woodson describes the project:

A digital storytelling and performance program, PVV uses narrative, theatrical, and improvisational performance, and multimedia to explore identity issues, self-concept, and the significant intersections between self and society... These pieces are
then brought back into the communities and are used as a catalyst for candid
dialogue and issues concerning the youth. (Woodson 2006, 20)

Through this and other experiences, Woodson has been able to question and challenge her
own personal beliefs and ideals that influence her practice. Acknowledging, “I can only
hope that by being totally aware of my ideologies and my value-laden prejudices that I can
make ethical decisions and choices in my practice and my life” (Woodson 2003, 128).

Woodson reminds us, “In my experience, community-based practices bring with
them an astonishing complex set of issues for both the artist and the participants”
(Woodson 2006, 20). To combat these challenges, as with most endeavors into community-
based work, Woodson sets forth goals for herself, the young people, and the project in
general. This being a project in which the teaching artists were not invited in by the
community directly, it made the process of goal setting that much more difficult. Woodson
admits:

I started the program with several convictions, desires and goals. For one, I wanted
to integrate the participants into the entire structure of the program from the
beginning idea stage to the end editing and publication of the DVD. My original
intent was that the students would work in self-selected groups ultimately
responsible for their own creative processes, that is, the students would be
responsible for how they wished to explore and to communicate with one another
and the art form. (Woodson 2003, 124)
She and fellow teaching artist, Megan Alrutz, at the time a doctoral student at Arizona State University, facilitated this lofty goal. At the onset of the program and, one may argue, the reason for the program, was the desire to offer young people an opportunity to have their voices heard. Woodson declares:

*Fundamental to Place: Vision and Voice* is my belief that the performing arts construct experiences in which participants can struggle with the contradictions and ambiguities of life. In other words, I conceived of PVV as a way of creatively putting into practice my beliefs about the nature of truth and reality with a fundamental respect for the lived experience of being young. (Woodson 2003, 121)

So, giving the young people on the reservation (rez) an opportunity to tell their stories, stories important to them, was the impotence for the work that would become a changing force in Woodson’s ideologies, ethical decisions, and general practice.

Throughout her practice, Woodson has worked primarily within a community of people with which she is not a member, and she has self-admittedly fostered a hyperawareness of metanarratives set forth by that relationship, yet she maintains an unapologetic approach. She reminds us she is “other” in a variety of ways that are unavoidable, including ethnicity as well as age. In regards to her not being Pima and not being a youth, Woodson maintains, “The fundamental difficulty here is that I am about as ‘other’ as one can get from my students’ lives and experiences and that my thinking, my ideologies, my beliefs are classist and racist and hegemonic...In all ways I am an outsider to
the Gila River Indian Community” (Woodson 2003, 126). But, Woodson also posits that the opportunities this challenge offered were as fortunate as they were overwhelming:

This meant first, that I had to prove myself in order to gain my students’ trust. On the other hand, being so ‘other’ made it easier to allow the youth to be the primary informants of their own experiences as I could not possibly be the ‘expert’ in this situation. I found that I needed to cultivate an attitude of respectful difference which meant a constant and recursive and exhausting examination of my own practices and beliefs. This might have been both the most difficult and the most rewarding aspects of the entire experience. (Woodson 2003, 126)

By focusing on acknowledging facts about differences, we allow the group to move through them. Their differences then become attributes allowing for the acceptance of these differences without ignoring them. Woodson advocates, “An arts process understood as a ‘free space’ supports an unromantic respect for the abilities and expressive forms of young people highlighting their capacities, not their deficiencies (e.g. being at-risk)” (Woodson 2006, 23). The power of theatre and drama can be seen as the bridge for the work, as Woodson reminds us, “Performance is a social process and occurs in negotiation with self and other. My work then – like all theatrical performance – exists as a social object shaped by the tension between perception and experience, participation, and observation” (Woodson 2006, 22). Therefore, the vehicle of theatre is allowed to provide an opportunity that Woodson alone cannot offer.
Like many other teaching artists, Woodson advocates fostering a partnership with the young people with whom she is working. Setting up her projects so, 

"...the students would be responsible for how they wished to explore and to communicate with one another and the art form. A theatre practice focused on the specialness of its participants rather than the specialness of the teacher/artist or the event itself should provide multiple possibilities..." (Woodson 2003, 125). Empowering young people to speak their mind and heart, even if you don’t like what they have to say, led Woodson to understand how to, 

"...cultivate an attitude of respectful difference which meant a constant and recursive and exhausting examination of my own practice and beliefs. This might have been both the most difficult and the most rewarding aspect of the entire experience" (Woodson 2003, 126). Embracing the challenges this work presents, and negotiating these challenges should be faced head on, Woodson strives to create an environment where both she and the young people are there to offer their talents, not in a hierarchy, but on a level playing field. In all aspects of her practice Woodson acknowledges, “I believe that my theatre practice should not be something I do to students or even for student but with students” (Woodson 2003, 125).

The responsibility Woodson embraces in her personal, reflective practice not only allows for her development as a facilitator but also for the field, as we are able to learn from her experiences and become more creative, engaging, and responsible teaching artists. “Ultimately, it has been my own expectations, my own ideology that has pushed me into the chasm between my desire for TRUTH – for authenticity, for the magic push towards a more ideal world – and my conviction that there is no truth” (Woodson 2003,
This ‘truth’ that Woodson finds herself seeking is the driving force behind the process of reflection she sees as a crucial element of her teaching philosophy. This philosophy is not simply a document that is used to allow others a glimpse into her practice but, instead, a living, breathing, representation of all she strives for. “For me philosophy is deeply connected to action – just like the ‘as if’ in acting, philosophy allows us to be wholly present in the moment. Philosophy brings to consciousness, to awareness, our plan(s) of action.” (Woodson 2003, 119). Also critical to Woodson’s practice is:

Ethically...I have a responsibility to ground my practice as for and about my participants and not myself in order to create a place where ‘children can find narratives of hope, semiautonomous cultural spheres, discussions of meaningful differences, and non-market-based democratic identities’ (Giroux). My personal attitude – my ideology - then is that my theatre practice should above all else be a critical theatre practice focused on defining and capturing special moments in the here and now. (Woodson 2003, 122)

And those special moments being captured through *Place: Vision and Voice* are the words and feeling of young people who have not had a place to speak their stories.

Woodson has devoted a substantial portion of her research and writing to the construction of childhood and the representation of child on stage. An advocate to say the least, Woodson focuses on maintaining a constant awareness of the affects of ideologies on the young people she works with, beyond even what these young people may be aware of. Woodson posits:
Children do not vote, they do not have access to much social capital, they are kept on the margins of public policy and culture and so have inadequate means to acquire the many social skills needed to negotiate the public sphere. So what happens when I provide them with an opportunity to practice voice and it turns out that what they say becomes a political hot potato? (Woodson 2006, 22)

Understanding the effect her work will have on young people is a constant struggle Woodson faces as a teaching artist. But with PVV she is under a unique pressure in the Native American culture. Stating, “While I personally believe that children have the right to speak, not everyone agrees with me. As an outsider, too, sometimes I have no idea what will start tongues wagging and fingers pointing” (Woodson 2006, 22). So, in preparation for the inevitable ‘hot potato’, Woodson identifies the need to, “Train the youth in the democratic process focused on positive youth development. In this way, we are rarely surprised by political fallout and are prepared to engage in the dialogue provoked by the work in sophisticated ways” (Woodson 2006, 22). When empowering young people in this process, Woodson has found that it allows the youth to ‘fight their own battles’ in a way. They are able to maintain the voice they found through theatre and drama and apply it to other parts of their lives.

In addition to Woodson’s struggle with being ‘other’ and in relationship with responsibility she finds that power dynamics play a large role in her attempt to maintain an ethically sound practice. Woodson states, “My personal ethic is that my theatre practice should highlight the social practices of domination by providing opportunities to see differences in power, gender, class, generation, culture, ethnicity, and on and on” (Woodson
2003, 120). Along with her beliefs about shared responsibility, she finds that highlighting these issues of power have brought forth a variety of complications, explaining:

While all the PVV residencies have taught me to respect the complex processes of community-based and collaborative theatre practices, my work with indigenous youth has placed power relationships, issues of authenticity, and political presence in the foreground...Native American childhood is the battleground on which the war of cultural assimilation has played out. (Woodson 2006, 20)

So, how does she handle these complicated issues and challenges? Once again, for Woodson, the answer lies in a shared responsibility with the young people she is working with, believing, “Under the principals of deliberative democracy and everyday politics we are not giving youth power, but rather modeling for them how to take power” (Woodson 2006, 23). This philosophy inherently calls for a shift in power from the facilitator to the students.

The work Woodson has done within community-based settings has greatly influenced her opinions and goals when working in educational theatre. “I believe educational theatre needs to celebrate and to explore the selves of young people” (Woodson 2003, 122). This idea presents a stark contrast to those whose goal is to create productions and teach young people basic theatre skills, terminology and quality. Woodson subscribes to, and has been influenced by, the work of Anna Deavere Smith, who stated in a speech:
A real danger in...theatre education is the idea of ‘specialness,’ a special talent, a special gift. We tell our students...that theatre is special, and we hold up models of specialness. Something is shortsighted about that. We should be teaching them to identify the specialness in the world around them, teaching them how to perceive a special moment in time, and how to capture it. (Anna Deavere Smith, quoted by Woodson 2003, 122)

As part of Woodson's desire to create a collaborative environment with her students, she sees the necessity to empower them to be and grow as artists.

I believe that I need to treat my students as capable of producing art by allowing them to practice the identities of playwright, producer, performer, director, and designer. Students need opportunities to explore the process of becoming artists. So I believe that my theatre practice should not be something I do to students or even for students, but with them. I frankly might not always like what students have to say (or how they say it), but I believe that they have the right to express themselves. (Woodson 2003, 125).

This desire to encourage artistry for artistry's sake is a testament to the desire to allow young people their own unique voice within their culture and world. Woodson believes, “Theatre produces and is produced by culture, so I need to allow my students the ability to reflect and to construct their own versions and understandings – to tell their own stories while at the same time understanding what gets left out of others’ stories – and who might be silenced entirely” (Woodson 2003, 125). But what happens when a student creates their
own experience that does not fit within the constructs the teaching artist has set forth? As Woodson tells it, the teaching artist has a responsibility to take a look at the structure and parameters. Woodson found:

…it is impossible to work with a cultural other without explicating our own subject positions and recognizing that to a certain degree we are all complicit in racist structures. The GRIC teens were absolutely in control of the experience but they managed it differently than white kids would have. It took me a while to see this. (Woodson 2003, 127)

This reflective honesty that Woodson demands of herself and her practice led her to find, “I was still defining the ‘experience’ and I was the one who made the choice for them to be in control; I was the one defining ‘in charge.’ I was left juggling the need to craft an experience that left them feeling celebrated and successful with my desire to push them to practice agency and control” (Woodson 2003, 127). In creating a structure she believed to be empowering, she had created another level of control and power. This realization and ability to change her own expectations and goals allowed for all parties to accomplish their major objectives. Woodson posits:

…children can be powerful and create change. By building consensus and creating artwork that speaks to their people about issues important to them, the youth are engaged in public work. Art helps us to find and highlight the patterns of our existence and to reimagining them. How exciting, how dangerous, and how
necessary. These philosophies ground my artistic process with young people.

(Woodson 2006, 23)

This philosophy Woodson has created drives her practice as a collaborative artist with young people. She describes her desire for young people to create their own learning through storytelling as ‘coming to voice’. “Early on I seized onto bell hooks’ concept of ‘coming to voice’ as a central metaphor” (Woodson 2006, 22). This mantra compels her work, and student’s work to remain honest and uniquely their own, acknowledging, “Their storytelling may not have been my storytelling, but the project ultimately is more honest for it. Coming to voice is a process really, a journey not a destination...there are deeper truths that I am missing by insisting on my own truths, my own ideologies” (Woodson 2003, 128).

Woodson’s work, specifically with PPV, thrives on the idea that young people can be taught to develop and embrace their voices as an artists, but not without its downfalls. Woodson also notes, “I have discovered that ‘coming to voice’ falls short for community based performance and devising processes. ...community based performance blurs the boundaries between public and private, the systems world and the life world, work and home” (Woodson 2006, 22). How does she contend with this challenge? By once again looking to the community and herself. The work she is doing in the community is not entirely within a protected bubble, and she states she has, “also come to believe that the success of a project like PVV resides in reciprocity and authentic sharing. Here not only have the students begun to come to voice, but so have I” (Woodson 2003, 128).
For this teaching artist and professor who resides in a space of constant reflection and contemplation, she finds herself perplexed about the inherent juxtaposition of her ideology.

Here I am, I’ve thought about these issues; I believe in them; I consider myself ethical, and socially responsible, and open to the specialness of my students. What I’ve discovered in practice however is that this kind of rhetoric is still very much about me. And that my ideology – this ethical and socially responsible ideology – still can be about celebrating how wonderfully progressive (a la not racist, classist, or any other –ist) I am. Rather than focused on my students. (Woodson 2003, 125)

In celebrating the responsibility and ethical merit of your ideology, your practice may suffer? Yes! And that is acceptable for Woodson, who believes that we should be, “Arguing for an arts practice steeped in an awareness of cultural and market politics and the language of participatory democracy - as opposed to meritocracy, which tends to condescend to youth as a ‘protected’ class who cannot be trusted to speak for themselves” (Woodson 2006, 23).
CHAPTER THREE: REFLECTION

After researching and analyzing the ideologies and practices of Michael Rohd, Barbara McKean, and Stephani Etheridge Woodson, I have found a variety of connections to my own practice. These three artists have been powerful influences in my academic career, and I now use their experiences and ideologies to question and challenge my work in theory and in practice. Through this analysis I will more fully understand and codify my own beliefs about the work I facilitate with young people.

Michael Rohd

I was introduced to Michael Rohd’s book, Theatre for Community Conflict and Dialogue, during my first summer as an intern at Lexington Children’s Theatre. I immediately found a connection with Rohd’s style of pedagogy. I was drawn to the honesty and heart that seemed to leap from each and every page. Yet, while I was drawn to the strategies Rohd embraced, I was afraid to attempt this type of work. I found the text again after entering graduate school. With a bit more confidence, I began to infuse some of the activities into my work at a group foster care facility. This group of young people lived in residential foster care and had little-to-no skills in group problem solving and collaboration. I wasn’t ready to create a full unit based on Rohd’s work, but I did find great success with the games and activities aimed at building community.

Still wanting to know more, and hopefully gain the courage to explore this process further, I went to Portland in the summer of 2009 for a week-long summer intensive
workshop with Michael Rohd and the members of Sojourn Theatre Company. This was quite an eye-opening week for me. I realized I was substantially utilizing Rohd’s methodologies in my work as a theatre artist. Over that week spent devising, creating, and engaging in dialogue, I realized I had so overcomplicated the process that I didn’t see it in my own work. I have been a fan of Michael Rohd for quite some time now, but taking a closer look into his text, I can begin to explore the instances where my ideologies are similar and different. One thing is certain: Michael Rohd has forced me to examine, process, and redefine my ethical practice more than once since beginning my work as a teaching artist.

Over the past ten years, I have worked with young people from a variety of backgrounds, from the inner city to Appalachia, and they all face unique challenges. I, like Rohd, have experienced first hand the fact that “theatre is healing” (Rohd xv). Theatre and drama allow us to share and observe the human condition. To find people and experiences with which we connect, as well as people and experiences that we have never imagined possible. This connection to the human condition strengthens empathy for others, be it the performer or audience. But I, as a teaching artist, constantly teeter on the line between challenging participants to honestly explore these inherent emotions with the fear that I am stepping into the role of therapist. I am not a trained therapist; I do not understand the complexities of the brain; nor am I equipped to help a participant though an emotional or psychological trauma. I do, however, want my practice to teach empathy, compassion, and incite dialogue about the common challenges we all face. How do I find a place to do this?
Through Rohd, I have realized if I take the focus off a singular personal experience and create work based on a collective consciousness, then I, as the teaching artist, am not serving as therapist for one person but facilitating the shared feeling, opinions, concerns, ideas, and experiences of the entire group. This idea of group consciousness also allows the participants to step back and observe something other than their personal experience, and know that others have similar struggles, fears, and challenges. It also provides the opportunity to discuss and reflect on the experience on multiple levels, based on the various experiences of the group. I realize this approach is not flawless; someone may have an overwhelming connection to the experience and may need to process this. But, in utilizing the collective consciousness model, we can help that person as a group, and the full responsibility does not fall to me as the facilitator.

This process of group collective consciousness also feeds into the development of expectations for the group. Rohd advocates for the groups’ need and ability to create their own expectations. As a member of the community, I have the right to add some expectations that are important to me; first and foremost, we will maintain a ‘safe space’. Over the years, I have developed specific requirements that I include in the definition of ‘safe space’: respect for other’s ideas, opinions, and beliefs; physical safety; and personal acknowledgment of physical and emotional boundaries. But I am left wondering if I should allow the participants to define what ‘safe space’ means to them? My definition is based on my needs for the group, not theirs. When Rohd talks about a ‘safe space’, I am curious as to his parameters. Who decides what makes us safe? And more importantly, in my role, how
do I determine if the group truly feels we are working in a safe space? I find relief in Rohd’s proposal that this work is “safe, but not always comfortable” (Rohd 71). Yet, I am left wondering, where is the line that divides the two? What if someone’s definition of ‘safe space’ is that they are comfortable? Can we promise that and still explore this work to its fullest?

I am intrigued by the ideas brought forth by Rohd in regards to reflective dialogue with participants. I am led to believe that Rohd feels reflection should sit on level ground with the activity. Or is it possibly more important? Rohd stresses that we learn by doing, not by hearing or talking. How do we balance these ideas? I, self-admittedly, like the ‘doing’ part far more than the discussion. Recently, I have worked as a teaching artist with a theatre company on a residency entitled “A Place for Everyone: Building Community Through Drama.” The lesson plan calls for a thorough reflection after each activity, and I am noticing that with reflection and dialogue, the work is able to grow exponentially from day to day. The students are making connections to their life and their choices. Connections they may not have discovered had we not taken the time to sit and spend our time reflecting on the experience of the activity. Also, students develop the ability to see others, specifically their peers, facing some of the same struggles, joys, and experiences as they, which ultimately brings them closer as a community. But, why have I not seen the importance until now? It has to do with my comfort as a facilitator. I like to ‘do’. That is where I am comfortable, where I feel safe. My energy in the classroom is big, and to take that energy and sit in a circle and spend 10 minutes in reflection feels slightly awkward and
uncomfortable. Now this isn’t to say I don’t reflect on activities during class. But with the goals Rohd sets forth about facilitation, I recognize I am only skimming the surface. If you are in a fast-paced classroom, like I tend to lead, and you offer no genuine time for the processing of the event, then you really have no idea what you have experienced...other than it was fun! Now seeing reflection as a crucial element, I am faced with a new challenge -- I was never taught to facilitate a discussion. Where do you learn that? Rohd adamantly believes it is the role of the facilitator to ask dynamic and engaging questions. But how do I choose these? I have learned hundreds of games and activities; I even keep a journal of all of them divided by purpose so I can always find just the perfect one. But no one ever taught me about leading a reflection or discussion. How do you ask open-ended questions and not lead young people to the answer you want to hear, instead of what they want to say? How do you incite dialogue? How do you encourage young people to disagree? Can the shaping of dynamic questions be taught? What if no one has anything to say? Rohd’s assertion to this last question is that this time is important, even if no one chooses to talk. The time is needed for self-evaluation and the goal may not be to start a dialogue but simply to process the experience. This sounded so beautifully poetic until I was in the classroom one day and tried it. The kids looked at me like I was crazy. In analyzing this part of my practice, I have come to realize that I need to find a way for me and my students to make the discussion equally as engaging as the activity that has led to the discussion. The value I placed on the discussion was nowhere near the value I placed on the activity. This value then is passed onto the participants. How can I change my approach in reflection so it is equally engaging? I don’t want fun to be the only thing participants take away from our time together.
As most educators are angered about ‘teaching to the test’, I find myself angered by the idea that I have to ‘teach to the play’. I understand it is hard to see growth or development in theatre skills without a culmination, but the idea that all processes must culminate in a production style assessment is infuriating and diminishes all the growth that has occurred during the dramatic process. Rohd is an advocate of the process and the freedom that comes when the work is about the participants and not the product at the end of the day. I would like to find more ways to assess knowledge, document growth, and observe skills in my work with young people. It seems as though a performance is the easiest way to do this, but I am only comfortable with this choice when the group has other goals.

One ideology where Rohd and I differ is the use of the word ‘games’. It may seem insignificant to some, but I don’t play theatre games; I facilitate theatre activities. As a theatre teaching artist, I have worked with young people in a variety of settings. But at least once in each setting I have had a parent say to me, “I asked Bobby what you did today and he said, ‘We played games’.” While some parents will listen to the explanation that these ‘games’ are chosen with care and each has a goal in mind, others immediately wonder why they have paid money to send their child to a drama class so that they can ‘play games’ no matter the context of a community, professional, or educational setting. I feel the term ‘games’ diminishes what we are doing through theatre and drama. The definition of ‘game’ in the Oxford dictionary is, “a form of play or sport, especially a competitive one played according to rules and decided by skill, strength, or luck” (Oxford 752). This definition contradicts the work we are attempting to do. How can we expect young people to play
‘games’ to build community and honor everyone’s unique perspective if games are about competition and skill or luck? Activities are better suited for my goals as a facilitator. It is important to share with participants the purpose of each activity, either before or after. This allows the participants, at 3 years old or 30 years old, to understand the importance and purpose of doing the activity. Now, I am in no way trying to imply that each activity must be of life-changing importance; sometimes you simply need an activity that allows participants to release their energy in preparation for the work to come. This is a valid reason for doing the activity.

The three-fold approach to choosing activities (games) or warm-ups that Rohd suggests seems quite sensible and a great way to pinpoint the best activity for that session. When choosing activities, especially for the first few in a lesson, I am struck by Rohd’s suggestion that a teaching artist must create, “a moment where participation is impossible to resist” (Rohd 4). It is this quality which allows activities to be utilized in such a dynamic way. Rohd also advocates that you can set up expectations and rules through activities. By allowing participants to ‘do’ the expectation, or perhaps the opposite of the expectation, we are making a kinesthetic connection. I have found this technique to be quite successful, because it allows the group to return to an activity over and over again if they need to be reminded of certain expectations or objectives.

Rohd’s assertion that “your personality is your strength” (Rohd 127) gives me the biggest sigh of relief. I have always felt the student/teacher connection is most beneficial when both parties feel comfortable enough to truly be themselves. As a teaching artist who
generally goes by Ms. Amie and not Ms. Dunn, wears yoga pants more days than not, can’t spell very well, and talks way too fast when she gets excited, it is hard to feel this is acceptable teaching behavior. In my first years as a teaching artist, I tried to appear older than I was and act “like a teacher.” Most teachers I had were poised, articulate, and would never ask the class how to spell a word. Yet, I have found the times I try to be that “perfect” teacher, I am not able to make as significant a connection with my students. They still listen and are respectful, but there is not the magical connection I know can exist. When I am Ms. Amie, who is honest about her flaws, students allow themselves to be honest about theirs as well. This speaks to the power of theatre. A place where we create characters who are not perfect but flawed. The fact I am called Ms. Amie upsets some classroom teachers, but as we dive into our work, they soon see that students not only still respect me, but, in fact, respond in a positive way. Sometimes it even allows the classroom teacher to let students see them on a more personal level. Whenever this happens, I can’t help but smile. If we, as teachers, allow students to think we are perfect, they might believe we expect them to be perfect. The greatest joy I find in teaching is when a student feels they may truly be themselves, flaws and all, in my classroom. I don’t ever expect perfection; I expect honesty.

I am intrigued by the way in which Rohd utilizes ‘pure improv’ to incite dialogue. This structure allows students the opportunity to take on a character, as a way to ask a question of the audience. This powerful construct provides a space for participants to be ‘in’ the situation and present the circumstance, instead of just talking about it. Rohd and I share a hatred for ‘message plays’. I have been to show after show where the message is
clear, and even if I agree, I am angered by the simplicity that generally comes with this style of performance. Yes, drugs are bad, but it isn't that simple for a young person. Rohd advocates that we should use ‘pure improv’ to devise a realistic scene, that asks a question, and then provide the unique opportunity to talk about the problem. There isn’t one ‘right’ answer, and to imply to young people that there is insults their intelligence. This discussion and dialogue allows the conversation and message to continue far outside the walls of a theatre.

As I reflect on the times I have used Rohd's techniques, I am left wondering how I stand in regards to his checklist of qualities he uses to describe a good facilitator. I am “energetic and enthusiastic about the process” (Rohd 113). I try my best to be “a good listener” (Rohd 113), but feel I need to work on listening to what participants are really saying and not just want I want to hear. I attempt to be nonjudgmental but also try to be honest with myself and admit when I am. I hope to “deepen discussion” (Rohd 113), but this is where I may need to focus the most in my growth. I am very “confident in my role as a tone setter and guide” (Rohd 113) and feel this strength has led me to this work. I make every effort to be “aware of the dynamics of the room” (Rohd 114) and feel this intuition is strong. I practice patience knowing “there will be people in the room who do not want to be there” (Rohd 114). And I work very hard to “ask every question truly wanting to hear the answer” (Rohd 115), but also feel I need to work on being aware of leading participants to the answer I want to hear, instead of their honest answer. All in all, I am pretty well-suited to Rohd’s guidelines for a facilitator. Yet, looking at my own practice and what would be on
my checklist, I am left wondering why there isn’t a reflective component. I learn so much during reflection of my time in the classroom. Rohd is such an advocate for reflection in the classroom with students; I am slightly taken aback by the lack of reflection on the part of the facilitator.

I admire Michael Rohd because our philosophies are in line with one another. He is doing work that excites me and makes me question my practice and challenge my ideologies. Other than a few disagreements on semantics, we have similar goals to our practice and energy to our facilitation that encompass our work. As I dive deeper into community-based work, I still have fears, but this is healthy. I take the advice of Rohd, as he believes this work is about healing as much as it is growth. I, as a person and teaching artist, want to continue to grow with my students. I want to challenge them to have deeper discussions and honestly reflect on their emotions. Most importantly, in my struggles with responsibility and ethics in this role as teaching artist, I need to remember that it should be fun; so simple, but so true. Fear of failure is not something I can bring into the classroom; it isn’t fair to the participants or myself.

Barbara McKean

I chose to research Barbara McKean’s practice because, through her articles and her book, A Teaching Artist at Work, she strives to examine her practice through reflection and critical pedagogy, much like I am doing in this thesis. When applying McKean’s methodology to my own I am struck by her use of, and conviction to, a constructivist classroom. I make every attempt to employ constructivist techniques whenever possible,
but McKean’s interpretation has made me further analyze the depth to which I do so. This approach to co-constructing a classroom environment, as well as the curriculum with students is simultaneously exciting and daunting. Experience has shown me when students take ownership over their learning, the impact is far greater than when determined by someone else. Yet, the knowledge of this and the application seem to be a constant struggle in my practice as well as personally.

I would like to think I employ constructivist techniques at all times during my teaching, but I admit that I struggle. This student-centered approach demands the teaching artist be willing to share power and construct all decisions together with the participants, and I find all too often my personal agenda gets in the way; specifically when approaching a constructivist view of classroom management. McKean believes, “everyone can participate and...the group determines the norms and the ways [she] will manage those occasions where the norms are not followed” (McKean 42). But I wonder why should the teaching artist alone be in control of the consequences? How in a constructivist classroom does this seem fair? I begin each workshop, no matter the setting, by allowing participants to tell me what they feel the expectations should be; we write them down, sign them, and post them on the wall. But I realize it ends there. I don’t allow the participants to create the consequences. And, if they do not meet these expectations, I certainly don’t allow them to peer-monitor. So, after this beautiful beginning of a constructivist model of classroom management, I take on the role of judge and jury. What gives me that right? Some would say, “Well, you are the teacher.” And yes, I am the teacher. But I didn’t create the rules; they
did. So what right do I have to be the only person to enforce them? How can I empower students to take ownership over the consequences and possibly enforcement? And who holds me accountable to these expectations? The struggle I am facing, I believe, is based in fear and power. I am afraid if I allow participants to take on these responsibilities, then I have lost all control. Let’s face it, as teachers we like the power and control afforded to us in the classroom. Without it, the fear is chaos will ensue. But, on the other hand, I trust young people. So, how can I say I trust them and not allow them to share power? What does that negotiation look like? And what must I do to show them I do trust their judgments and decisions? Taking a cue from McKean, I need to remember it is my role as the teaching artist to guide the process, not dictate. I hope to find a balance where the participants see me as the guide through our journey, where we are a community of learners.

I appreciate the respect for teaching artistry, as stressed by McKean. There have been times when I am made to feel insignificant or lesser than as a drama or theatre teaching artist, in comparison to those teachers who teach full time in a school. But we must learn to acknowledge that the roles are different. Agreeing with McKean, I have a responsibility, and the unique opportunity, to focus on my artistry as well as teaching. But I must not allow myself to forget I am an artist as well as a teacher. It is crucial that we acknowledge these differences and the unique opportunities that a collaboration of these two roles could provide for young people. Yet, all too often, as a teaching artist I assume I have nothing to offer if working in tandem with a classroom theatre teacher.
I am intrigued by the role of ‘giuoco’ in the classroom. Translated, giuoco means ‘play’, but not in a leisurely sense as it is an extension of the lesson. This extension of the lesson is a majority of what I do in my work. Yet, the reminder that it is one of the most important aspects of a lesson, and a lesson is not complete without the use of ‘giuoco’, is quite enlightening for me. This type of playing is the ‘doing’ highly advocated by multiple teaching artists, including McKean, and I have seen positive effects in my own practice. The introduction of this term into my practice is a beautiful reminder of the importance of play in the work we do.

As a reflective practitioner, I appreciate that McKean acknowledges the importance of reflection in our work as teaching artists. What I find exciting about McKean’s approach is the idea of reflection on multiple levels. The need to reflect with students, co-teachers, and partners as well as by yourself adds such an interesting layer to the solitary reflection I am accustomed to. All too often I look at reflection as a private event where I look back on the lesson and use those observations to guide my work in the next session. Taking a cue from McKean, the opportunity to include the participants in my reflection not only allows for a more inclusive and constructivist classroom, but the feedback will be far more holistic and allow for a more well-rounded reflection to further the unit.

I have always struggled with my personal ideas, beliefs, and ideologies affecting my practice in a negative way. But I find solace in McKean’s assertion that your personal autobiography makes you a unique teacher. Different than Rohd’s assertion that personality makes you more connected to participants, McKean feels the experiences you
have had as an artist and what led you to teaching are also qualities to be acknowledged and celebrated. Your personal autobiography allows your subject position to be known by others and makes your unique perspective valuable within the group. McKean makes it clear that her background is in acting, and therefore parts of her philosophy are based on that fact. For me, the fact that I have always considered myself to be a teacher is of the utmost importance. I loved theatre from the time I was in my first play in 3rd grade. But I was always seeking new areas in which to be involved. I wanted to know everything. I enjoyed acting, but I wanted to build costumes. I have skills to be a stage manager, but I also am interested in how marketing, lights, and sound play a role. Throughout my undergraduate career I dabbled in every aspect of theatre but found no specific place where my heart and passion lay, until I directed my first show. There I found my niche. Through the years I have found that directing and teaching are quite similar. When directing, I take every opportunity to teach. When teaching, I always have my eyes open as a director, shaper, and storyteller. The theatre-narrative that led me to teaching has also been highly influenced by my personal-narrative; something that McKean talks little about but I believe affects my teaching on every level. The death of a parent, strong paternal support, a Christian upbringing, being raised in the south, lower middle class socioeconomic status, only child, and a variety of other personal choices and happenings all come into play when I am in the classroom. I am beginning to embrace these things as positive, and if nothing else, I am aware of them so they don’t consciously affect my work, although that is not always possible. I am hopeful the theatre and personal narratives as
well as the autobiography I possess will both support the work I do as well as make me aware of the biases, ideas, and opinions I bring to the table.

One area where I find challenge with McKean’s ideologies is her assertion that we, as teaching artists, should separate our students’ success or failure from our own self-esteem. In light of the above-mentioned goals of sharing your personal narrative with participants and creating a constructivist classroom I am left wondering: How is this possible? While I agree with the idea in theory, I must admit that in practice I can’t seem to understand. If my goal is to create a constructivist classroom where knowledge is co-constructed with participants, then if one fails, all fail. And I am part of that community, which means I fail too. The catch is I don’t always see failure as a negative thing. We learn by being challenged, and sometimes we fail when we are challenged. If we always set up students for a successful experience, how are they going to grow? This failure can be used as a catalyst for both the participants and me to figure out what didn’t work. I can’t separate myself from that because it implies I am not a part of the community, and I am. I shouldn’t beat myself up about this failure but instead reflect on what has happened with the participants and try again.

Another area where I struggle with McKean’s practice is that she claims to be process-based while at the same time feeling, for validity’s sake, she must work toward a final performance. How can she be process-based yet product focused? Doesn’t the need for product cloud the process? The idea that public performance is the only way to convey we are serious about what we do is absurd to me. Yes, a majority of theatre work focuses on
creating a product. But how can we as teaching artists stress the process with participants and then demand a performance to justify our experience? My goals shift with each group I work. These goals must be clearly identified by the group either before the first session or during the first session, so we are all aware of the outcomes. If participants know there will be a performance, then that will be what they are working toward. While you, as the teaching artist, can highlight the process as you work, the objective remains the product. There is nothing negative about product, if that is your goal. But to feel that there must be a product diminishes the joy of the process and takes the focus away from it.

One of the unique challenges we face in our role as teaching artist is that we are invited into a variety of settings: educational, professional, and community-based. This opportunity presents a new challenge as we step into each session, but since no two are the same, the objectives must be re-imagined for every experience. If we are rigid in our objectives and outcomes, it doesn’t allow for the influences or needs of the group to be met. McKean reminds me I need to acknowledge that the young people have goals and objectives in mind as well when they enter into a project. These objectives could come from a variety of places, such as past experiences, understanding of what they have signed up to do, as well as their own personal narratives. If everyone’s goals are shared, including my own, then even if all goals are not met, they can still be acknowledged and understood by the group.

I found a way to visualize the shape of my practice when I was introduced to McKean’s framework for time spent in a unit. The idea that preparing, teaching, and
reflecting go on simultaneously throughout is crucial to a well-rounded and energized unit. This also reinforced again that while these are the biggest steps, central to the whole process are your personal skills as an artist and teacher. Pedagogy and the skills of teaching are highlighted in McKean’s work as she reminds us repeatedly that it is not enough to be a talented artist in this profession. One must also hone their pedagogical skills and become an artful teacher. This seems like a large undertaking, that one must be of sound artistry and pedagogy, but McKean encourages that we grow more skilled by surrounding ourselves with other practitioners in our field. This desire for a community of teaching artists can be somewhat seen under umbrella organizations such as the American Alliance for Theatre in Education (AATE) and Theatre for Young Audiences in the USA (TYA/USA), but I am enthralled by the idea of a community of people purely devoted to the advancement of teaching artistry. What an amazing opportunity this would be for teaching artists to meet and share their challenges and celebrations. Until this is created, a commitment to finding teaching artists with whom you can brainstorm, celebrate, and be pushed to do more creative and dynamic work will have to suffice.

When building community with participants, McKean advocates the use of ritual. I myself have seen the powerful effect ritual can have on a group, but for some reason I don’t feel I employ these principals as often as I could. I am fond of sharing ‘Pows’ (something you didn’t like about the session) and ‘Wows’ (something you did like about the session) as a way to end each session. And while a ritual, it is really more about my personal assessment of the lesson and less about creating community. If I were to use more ritual at
the top of the class, I may be able to strengthen the community throughout the unit as opposed to just the first few classes, when community building is the focus. Allowing students to know there will be at least one or two constants can be comforting when exploring drama, especially when you never know what the next class may hold.

The most successful residencies and workshops are created when the teaching artist respects and embraces the school community as equally as the school community respects and embraces the teaching artist. As McKean cites, integrating into the school environment is crucial for teaching artists entering a community not their own. It is essential to observe the class in which you will be working. The objectives of this time being to find out the classroom expectations, observe student interaction, as well as gain insight into the teacher/student dynamic. I believe the invitation of the classroom teacher into the work is a crucial buy-in for the students. If the teacher, as they do in some cases, chooses to sit and grade papers during your time in the classroom, the teaching artist can be viewed by the students as no more than a distraction from instructional time, instead of an addition to, or new way of learning. This element of integrating ourselves into the learning environment of the participants is vital for optimum success.

In closing, as I look at McKean’s practice, we have similar ideologies to our work, but we have different ways of approaching it. I am not a product-centered teaching artist but see the value in it. I also do not feel an energy to her work that excites me, but I respect the constructs from which she operates. Based on her experience in a variety of settings, I do wish I could be a part of her community of teaching artists who will challenge one another
and help the profession grow into the respected place it deserves. Her ideas have challenged my thinking in a way that codifies the beliefs I hold true about my work, and for that I am very appreciative.

Stephani Etheridge Woodson

When originally introduced to Woodson’s writings, I must admit, I was somewhat taken aback by her highly academic and scholarly approach to the work of being a teaching artist. But as I dive into her writing, I have found that this approach is the way in which she keeps her practice ethically sound and responsible. Using her skills as an academic, she has been able to dissect her practice on a level inaccessible by most professional teaching artists. I am also in agreement with Woodson, in that I “can only hope that by being totally aware of my ideologies and my value-laden prejudices that I can make ethical decisions and choices in my practice and my life” (Woodson 2003, 128). Her constant reflection and analysis of every part of her artistry has led to discoveries that would otherwise be unrevealed. In many ways, her practice has led me to think about the lack of deeper understanding I find behind failures and successes in my work as a teaching artist.

I am intrigued by the idea Woodson presents through bell hooks term, ‘coming to voice’. The empowerment of the student to share their own story, in a way that suits them, is both exhilarating and daunting for me as a teaching artist. But I wonder how we empower students to share not what they think we want to hear but truly how they feel? This ‘voice’ is something I, as an adult, struggle with on a daily basis, so challenging young people with that honesty is quite difficult. I agree with Woodson that art, and specifically
theatre and drama, inherently allow for struggles with contradictions and ambiguities to come to life and be played out by others and ourselves. Theatre presents stories that explore and explode the human condition and therefore allow a perfect opportunity for young people to discover what it means to be young and what it means to be human. Theatre and drama can be used as a bridge for young people’s perceptions and oppressions to be shared with the larger community and society as a whole.

While this process of ‘coming to voice’ is important to Woodson and me, we are both aware of the obstacles. What happens when we empower young people to share their voice and it becomes, as Woodson puts it, “a political hot potato” (Woodson 2006, 22)? Young people have very little social capital. If they raise their newly found voice loudly and it contradicts those voices with more social capital, primarily adults, what are we to do? If we are asking young people to develop this voice and encouraging it, do we have the right to disagree with what they have to say? Is it our place to disagree? My initial answer would be no. But is it that simple? Don’t we have a responsibility to make them aware of the consequences of having a controversial opinion? Aren’t we responsible for helping them with the aftermath of their voice, whether we agree or not? Woodson advocates training young people in the democratic process and educating them in the variety of other voices. We should allow them to understand the various ideas that surround theirs. This process allows young people the opportunity to intelligently debate and engage in dialogue. And isn’t theatre about creating dialogue and seeing the world from a variety of perspectives? Woodson has centered her work on the education and awareness of social domination, and
therefore is aware that when diving into topics of power and capital, we will inevitably run into a few "hot potatoes." For the preparation of this task Woodson advocates a shared responsibility where “we are not giving youth power, but rather modeling for them how to take power” (Woodson 2006, 23). By empowering young people to share their voice, we must also empower them to respectfully engage in dialogue about what they have chosen to say.

I was drawn to Woodson’s work after hearing about her residencies with students who were from a different socioeconomic class, culture, religion, and ideology than her own. I appreciate Woodson’s idea of ‘free space’; she advocates as a way to highlight capacities and not the deficiencies or identities that hold us back. I have worked with a variety of young people but must admit that when I stepped into a room of twelve foster care, elementary age young people from the inner city, my first thought was, “Will these kids listen to the little, white girl, from Kentucky?” I knew I had a lot to share, and they most definitely had a lot to share...but how do we get there? I, like Woodson, was about as ‘other’ as you could get. I was forced to acknowledge that. As we played our first activity, I was immediately asked about my ‘country accent’. No one in the group had ever been outside the state, so the only perceptions they had about Kentucky were of fried chicken, plaid, and country music. So, we told stories, we shared likes and dislikes, we laughed together and over the weeks I learned to ‘crunk’ and they began to lovingly imitate my accent. The sense of ‘other’ became an attribute and a way to bring to light the differences and similarities that make us human. I used to claim I was colorblind in the classroom. I
was proud to proclaim I didn’t see the color of my students. I now look back on that with embarrassment. Our race, culture, and nationality are a part of who we are. To acknowledge difference feels uncomfortable at times, but I have a responsibility to embrace students for their individuality, not treat them as ‘cookie cutter’ children. The students knew immediately I was not from their community; I was the one who was forced to admit it made a difference. In any instance I am coming into a group, I am seen as other. The acknowledgement of that fact and the ability to embrace it as an attribute is something I am already seeing sneak into my work. My teaching experiences have been quite the opportunity to embrace a new way of thinking and responding to the words of young people. As Woodson puts it, “there are deeper truths I am missing by insisting on my own truths, my own ideologies” (Woodson 2003, 128).

Woodson admits to setting goals for the participants, herself, and the project before she begins. But she tries to maintain an openness and awareness that allows for the reshaping of these goals by the young people and the project. I struggle with this balance in my own practice. I find it irresponsible to go into a project without clear goals and objectives, but once those goals are set, I find it takes a lot for me to move away from them. I am willing to add goals or objectives, but the idea of giving up on a predetermined one is really hard. This fact sets me, and the group, up for failure. You can only accomplish a certain number of things in your time together, and to muddy up clear and provocative objectives with ones I am holding onto because they were the initial idea seems ridiculous. I wonder if I see letting these go as failing? Either I failed to set ‘good’ objectives or I failed
to accomplish what I set out to do. Either way, I need to be more aware of this aspect of my practice so the more important group objectives and goals can be tackled and met with success.

Woodson also tackles the idea of specialness; an idea brought forth by Anna Deavere Smith in her work with educational theatre, which is something I never really thought about. The idea that some young people have a gift or talent and, therefore, in educational theatre, we pluck them out and reinforce their specialness, seems like a benefit to the young person, and a way to encourage their artistic growth. But there is a danger, as Woodson through Smith warns, “Something is shortsighted about that. We should be teaching them to identify the specialness in the world around them, teaching them how to perceive a special moment in time, and how to capture it” (Anna Deavere Smith, quoted by Woodson 2003, 122). But I am not sure I fully agree. Can’t we do both? Can’t we celebrate a young person’s gift while finding specialness in the world and sharing that through our work? Why does it have to be one or the other? Through professional theatre for young audiences as well as educational theatre, I have seen those young people who possess a special gift flourish as they are given confidence and guidance. I would be heartbroken if my practice didn’t acknowledge those special gifts and use them as a model to show to other students. Now, this must be done carefully, but it can be done; every child has a special gift. Woodson states in one of her articles that theatre should “celebrate and explore the selves of young people” (Woodson 2003, 122). I agree; so what if their ‘self’ is a
gift in performance through theatre? Don’t they deserve to have that celebrated and fostered?

In regards to educational theater, Woodson also believes that we, as teaching artists, have the responsibility to practice and develop the multiple identities of theatre artistry with our students. These identities of designer, director, dramaturg, stage manager, and playwright are as valuable to the student as actor or performer. This opportunity for students not only to become well-rounded theatre artists but also people is critical to their future. Yet, as I sit here agreeing, I realize I rarely allow students to embrace and grow these identities as theatre artists. Why? The simple answer would be time, and possibly interest. How do you find the time to dive into and discover the possibilities of each of these roles? Especially when, as most who are involved in theatre as an adult can attest, when you start out, you want to be the star. But is that because we focus on this role the most? The role we put on a pedestal and call ‘special’? With this statement I now question my previous belief that we should celebrate the specialness of our students. Are we only holding up one model of specialness? Are we encouraging the stigma that to be a talented artist in theatre means being the star? This devastates me. Yes, we should celebrate the specialness of our students but only if we are able to hold up a variety of models of specialness. Otherwise, we will lose the most talented lighting designer because he or she was not able to portray the role of Sarah Brown or Shylock effectively. What message does this send our young people if we only teach the art of performance in education, even if it is
all they want to learn? Or is it all they want to learn because it is all that we tell them is important?

Woodson, like many others, advocates the practice of co-creating the learning environment, as she states in one of my favorite quotes, “I believe that my theatre practice should not be something I do to students or even for student but with students” (Woodson 2003, 125). This beautiful placement of herself as teaching artist in a community of learners makes me believe she is truly a collaborative artist with young people. Her devotion to maintaining an equal yet respectful relationship allows both herself and the young people to offer skills, talents, and ideas into the process. But she is honest about her struggles to bring these ideologies into practice. Woodson advocates that if we as artists focus on the skills and talents of the young people instead of our own, we are again making them responsible for co-creating the learning, and creating many more opportunities for growth. Through constant analysis and reflection Woodson finds a way to keep her practice centered on the needs of her students.

To speak on Woodson’s reflective practice seems almost incomprehensible, as her whole practice revolves around her need to analyze and reflect upon the choices and decisions she makes in the classroom and beyond. This reflection is of the utmost importance for Woodson, and me. I have been reminded that the ability to ‘tune in’ with young people in invaluable. It allows me to see when they may be creating their own constructs, which are equally as valuable, yet different from my own. To see what young
people are doing as different, but equally as valuable, is a lesson in co-creating that takes constant examination as the project progresses.

On the other hand, the perpetual reflection and dissection of my practice seems to, as Woodson also argues, be about me. This whole thesis is about me and my work as an artist in the field. Is this time spent valid? Shouldn’t I be writing about young people? Woodson argues it is important for teaching artists to focus on themselves and their practice. But how much does my reflection help the students I work with? How does this constant reflection allow my work to grow as a co-creator with youth? Woodson believes that to, “cultivate an attitude of respectful difference, means a constant and recursive examination of my own practices and beliefs” (Woodson 2003, 126). This time spent in reflection is about acknowledging where we might not be making the best choices to support our personal teaching philosophy. For Woodson, reflection is a way of connecting theory and practice.

I have never been one to embrace philosophy, I learn by doing. The philosophy part was something I did to appease the higher ups, believing it was they who needed this information. I am now unbelievably ashamed by this thought. It isn’t about or for anyone but me. My philosophy should guide my work, not my work guiding my philosophy. I will admit this has been the case for years. I used to pride myself on being a reflective artist who had a passion and energy for teaching. But that seems ridiculous now. What was I reflecting on? If I didn’t respect or use the ideologies of my teaching philosophy in my work, then what could I possibly be holding my work up to? How would I know if I had
accomplished my goals? This realization has shaken me to the core. I must be of sound philosophy if I am attempting to create an ethical practice, as they go hand in hand.

In closing, the most valuable lesson I have garnered from Woodson is the importance of a solid ideological base. Without which we are just wandering from project to project attempting to do our best on a case-by-case basis. Something must guide our work. The academic and philosophical base is crucial to be able to analyze our work on a deeper level. The joy in all of this unbelievably hard work is that we, as teaching artists, are able to offer so much more to our students by connecting our work to our academic self and discoveries. The celebration and success that can be found in the work of a teaching artist lies on many levels. Woodson reminds us that, “the success of a project like PVV resides in reciprocity and authentic sharing. Here not only have the students begun to come to voice, but so have I” (Woodson 2003 128).
CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

Looking back on the consistencies within the work of Rohd, McKeane and Woodson, I am enthralled by the ideologies they share. Each artist believes the work should be fun, reflection is key, your unique characteristics and personal identity are invaluable, and process remains the major objective. While each artist defines these qualities in his/her own way, and in connection to their practice, I find it enlightening how similar they are.

The belief that theatre work should be fun is something most people would assume, whether or not they are involved in theatre. The fact that theatre is inherently fun is generally the reason we, as teaching artists, are brought into educational settings and community projects. Using theatre as a conduit through which to teach other subject areas or explore social constructs allows participants to play while learning. Rohd believes we should begin work by choosing warm-ups “where participation is impossible to resist” (Rohd 4), and continue to find ways to have fun throughout the work. The ability to make learning interactive and fun is a crucial element to learning in a new way. McKeane reminds us to ‘guico’, or extend the lesson through play, which is a vital part of the process and “few lessons are complete without giuocing” (McKeane xiv). While Woodson utilizes fun activities as a way to bridge the gap between herself as ‘other’ and the young people she is working with. We strengthen the bond that allows us to dive into more complicated work through each experience where we are able to let our guard down and enjoy the company and community of those around us. As a reflective practitioner, I have been inspired by the variety of ways each of these artists uses reflection to strengthen their practice. While Rohd
does not speak to personal reflection, he highly advocates the need to reflect on experiences with young people and use this reflection as a catalyst for dialogue. McKean uses a more typical approach of reflection, as she believes the goal of the reflective process is to strengthen your philosophical and ideological stance as a teacher. Woodson goes even further as she sees “philosophy is deeply connected to action ...philosophy bring to consciousness, to awareness, our plan(s) of action” (Woodson 2003, 119), and therefore her reflection does not seek to strengthen her ideologies but instead assure that she is, in fact, fulfilling her philosophy. The consensus among these artists has led me, who previously valued my reflective practice, to embrace a new and crucial layer. Previously, my reflection centered on “what happened in this lesson?” and “what can I do better in the next lesson?” Now I see the importance of reflecting on my philosophy and holding my practice to it as a guide for my work.

The debate between process-based and product-based teaching has been going on for years, and I imagine it will continue to do so. I find it quite interesting all these artists declare themselves processed-based. Yet each of them spoke only about the processes that led them to an amazing final production. Working primarily with community members, Rohd advocates process on many levels from structure to the opportunity for audience members to process the experience through questioning. McKean argues the process gains validity through the creation of a product. Woodson promotes the idea that as young people ‘come to voice’, they should be given the opportunity to share their voice through a final product. While all these artists claim process as the key for growth, I am still left
wondering. Must there be a product to justify the process we have experienced? Do we as theatre artists simply have a need to share with the world what we have been doing? Why do we, and I include myself, constantly aim for a product to conclude our work? While I am not sure this is always the case, I would venture to guess we simply want to create a way for young people to share their growth. While I don't believe a product is always in the best interest of the process, I now understand the desire to culminate and assess the progress that has been made though our process. As long as the process is the focus, and you don't allow the need for a final product to take over the project, you are indeed a process-centered artist.

Finally, these teaching artists all speak about the importance and strength of your personal style and narrative as a teaching artist. I have struggled with this as an emerging artist. But through this research I have come to realize it is truly the most important tool we have as artists. Rohd posits, “Your strength is your own self and your own style. Young people respond to honesty…” (Rohd 127). McKean feels that a persons’ past experiences and personal style make them a unique teaching artist, and advocates that we must acknowledge the unique narratives that have brought us to teaching and to theatre. While Woodson promotes the acceptance of self, so we may be aware of all the ways in which we are ‘other’ from the young people we work with. By admitting who we are and where we come from, we are making our subject position known and acknowledging biases. And on a more personal level, by allowing our personal style and personality to shine through as we teach, we are empowering young people to embrace all the aspects of who they are.
Rohd offers very little in terms of his feelings on co-constructing learning with participants. But having worked with him, I can confidently say he very much sees his role as a co-creator in the experience. Yet, in his book, he never speaks on this topic. McKean and Woodson do, however. McKean focuses her practice with a constructivist view, feeling the curriculum should be co-created along with young people so they are able to more fully participate and take ownership in the experience. Woodson, on the other hand, advocates a shared responsibility with students as a way of empowering them. There is no hierarchy in her classroom; each individual is given the opportunity to shape the work based on their experiences and talents. The most valuable aspect of the shared space, for me, is the weight of responsibility lifted from the teaching artist. It isn’t my sole responsibility to create the experience. In this way I can become the ears that hear what participants need and desire and the vehicle through which new opportunities can take place. This goal, more than any other, requires teaching artists to listen and hear what participants need to move forward in the process, as opposed to what they may want.

While Woodson does not speak to a formulaic structure within her work, I have found connections about structure through Rohd and McKean. Both of these artists have created a ‘broad strokes’ structure from which they generally operate. Personally, I have found no one structure that works for me in a variety of settings, but I definitely embrace the structures put forth by Rohd for creating dialogue and McKean for educational settings. What I appreciate about these structures is that they offer the teaching artist a frame from
which to work or deviate. Stepping into a new project with an empty canvas can be challenging, and these structures offer a solid way to begin the process.

In addition to the similar ideologies, I have found at least one specific idea from each of these artists I would like to embrace in my practice as a teaching artist. From Rohd, I have gained a desire to raise questions in my work. From McKean, I have been reminded of the significance of our field, as well as the need to develop a community of supportive teaching artists. Finally, from Woodson, I have gained the importance of developing the whole child as an artist, and furthermore the need to hold up a variety of models of specialness to aid in this development.

From theory to practice I appreciate Rohd’s style of devising as a way to ask questions. His practice is centered around the need to ask questions of yourself, the group, and even the audience or community. The goal of these questions is to incite dialogue that can bring change. The dialogue is the vital catalyst for change, which Rohd believes is the true outcome of his work. The answers are not given to us, and we realize that possibly there is no answer. But, as in life, you must make the best possible decision for you. The ability to observe and question the idea is key. From these questions comes the opportunity to talk about our fears and challenges and the way in which we will operate in the future. If in these discussions we are able to see another’s point of view and understand where they are coming from, then it is the most powerful tool we possess. I can only hope I am able to embrace Rohd’s ideology to strengthen the work I do with youth, because the skills garnered here will help them in the years to come.
I have always known my role as a teaching artist is valuable and unique, but upon reading McKean’s view, I now feel I have the ability to defend and validate the special work we do with others. If we do not advocate for our role, then who will? I now see and understand the need to educate others about our field and the importance not only of arts in education but teaching artistry in education. The differences between a teaching artist and a classroom teacher are quite clear to me now, and I am able to see the places where each could grow from the others’ skills. I am also extremely excited by the idea of creating a personal community of teaching artists with whom I can grow. Every teaching artist has a different style and approach to what they do, and to have the opportunity to share ideas and challenge objectives with these fellow artists would allow my practice to improve exponentially.

The area I am most excited to begin exploring in my practice is developing the whole artist within a child, as discussed by Woodson. I have always focused on the areas where young people excel most or where they are most excited to grow. I now see I am doing them a huge disservice. By challenging young people to use their skills as a playwright, designer, director, etc, as well as a performer, we are supporting the artist within, instead of just the performer within. I am ashamed that, for the most part, I have only focused on the performance aspect when creating work with young people. I must begin to hold up more ‘models of specialness’ in my work if I want the young people I work with to think critically about the work we do as artists. Not only will this teach respect for
the challenges of other roles, but it will also allow students to experience and explore other avenues by which they can do this valuable work.

Reflecting back on this process, there are some elements of my practice I am interested in changing. First, the acknowledgment that fear is a healthy emotion. My graduate advisor, Dr. Megan Alrutz, told me during my first month of graduate school, “If you weren’t a little afraid, I would be worried. Fear keeps you reflective.” I didn’t understand this fully until this thesis process. My fear is healthy, and I need to listen closely to my instincts. As the three artists I studied have confirmed, there is no ‘right’ answer, and in seeking one I have frozen in panic. I will no longer use my fear as a roadblock but instead will use it as a reminder to remain present in the moment and reflect on the work. Second, in regards to reflection, I must maintain a fluid teaching philosophy I can use as a guide for my work with young people. I can no longer see this document as separate from my work; it is vital to my work. Third, I must embrace my personal narrative and acknowledge the impact it has on my practice. For good or bad, I am an individual artist and person. The qualities that make me who I am are as important to my practice as the work we are doing. If I don’t allow myself to acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses I have, I will not be able to connect with young people in honest work. Furthermore, my ability to own my personal narrative will hopefully empower young people to do the same. By changing these three aspects of my practice, I believe all the other realizations I have made also will find a voice in my work.
Through this process, I have discovered elements of my practice I am interested in maintaining as well. Primarily the energy and passion with which I approach the projects I do. This passion is contagious, and if I am not able to get excited about a project, then I shouldn’t be doing it. I also want to continue to challenge young people and myself through this dynamic work. We cannot remain stagnant in our goals. The ‘burnout’ factor is far too high, and by challenging young people to constantly push their skills as well as their ideas, we are strengthening them as people. However, we as teaching artists must also push ourselves, by continuing to shape our practice with every opportunity to grow.

As my connection to theory evolves, I now find it necessary to identify my personal beliefs. While this remains a fluid document, I need to have a firm base from which I approach all projects. The following Statement of Ethics will guide and reaffirm my beliefs as a teaching artist.

I believe...

- Young people have power.
- Young people deserve to be heard.
- Young people deserve quality artistic experiences.
- Young people should be empowered to speak their mind.
- Young people should be respected physically and emotionally.
• Young people should feel a part of the community.

• Young people have emotional wisdom.

• Young people should be given the freedom to play.

• Young people are intelligent.

• Young people should be treated as unique individuals.

These ethical beliefs will serve as a basis from which I will work and offer a place to reflect as I struggle with challenges.

I have created also an inventory of objectives I now feel should be embodied by each project of which I am a part. While they are broad strokes, I am now confident my individual practice must have a base from which to work and each of these objectives is crucial to my personal practice.

Students will...

• Have opportunities to develop the whole artist within.

• Explore social constructs that affect their daily life.

• Be encouraged to acknowledge personal bias and opinions in a respectful and intelligent way.

• Be given the opportunity to co-construct their learning.
• Create meaning through quality artistic experiences.

• Engage in dynamic dialogue where everyone’s voice is heard and valued.

With these objectives in place I am setting up a project for success and allowing the project to be about the participants, not myself.

After defining these ethical beliefs and objectives, I am left pondering, what next? In response, I have created three short-term and three long-term goals for myself, in an attempt to begin the process of connecting my theory to my practice. In the short term, I will:

• Focus on and create opportunities to co-construct learning with young people.

• Practice and develop my ability to ask engaging questions, therefore acknowledging the equal importance of activities and discussion.

• Embrace my personal narrative and the ways in which it affects my teaching.

These goals all have come from my research, and I feel I can begin the process of incorporating them into my practice the next time I step into a classroom. In regards to long-term goals, I have decided I will:

• Build a community of teaching artists from whom I can learn and challenge others to do the best possible work with young people.
- Develop community partners with a symbiotic relationship where both parties see the value and importance of the projects we undertake.

- Continue to be a reflective practitioner.

The first two goals will take some time to develop, as these relationships will need to be nurtured. The third goal is one I always will be working on. The ability to truly be reflective is a lifelong process and one that can never be taken for granted. When I stop reflecting on my work, its challenges, and successes, I will cease to do quality work.

I began this process, as well as graduate school, in an attempt to seek the answer to the question, “How does one make themselves an ethically sound and responsible teaching artist?” I thought there was a ‘correct’ answer. I now realize the answer I seek does not exist. There is no magic formula, and the qualities are different for each individual teaching artist. What I have gained, above all else, is the ability to see the connection between theory and practice. These elements are not separate, as I once thought, but intrinsically tied, one feeding off the other. If I want to be a responsible artist, then I must find a way to embrace my theoretical self and in all ways connect my practice to it. Reflection is key, as it is the link between the two, the element that allows us to constantly keep our priorities in check and allow our best work to come forward. As McKean states, “reflecting begins by clarifying one’s own artistry” (McKean xii). As I have now clarified my artistry, I am ready to step back into my practice with new eyes. Realizing, of course, I will be back to theory soon in an attempt to sort out the next challenge my practice faces.
REFERENCES


