

# “ACTING OUT” IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE: COMMUNITY THEATRE AND CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

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Drawing on historical and contemporary scholarship on citizenship education, I have outlined how such education both excludes those outside the normative construction of the Canadian citizen and fails to prepare students for participation in the public sphere. I argue that contemporary citizenship education is in danger of creating individualistic consumers, as opposed to citizens who participate in public life. Invoking Habermasian and Arendtian insights about the ethical requirements for a democratic public sphere, I have illustrated the potential for such participation through the example of Headline Theatre’s production of the play “Practicing Democracy.”

Key words: participatory democracy, social exclusion, public consultation, Habermas, Arendt

S’appuyant sur des recherches antérieures et plus actuelles menées dans le domaine de l’éducation à la citoyenneté, l’auteure explique comment une telle éducation exclut les personnes en dehors de la création normative du citoyen canadien et ne réussit pas à préparer les élèves à participer à la vie citoyenne. Elle fait valoir que l’éducation à la citoyenneté actuelle risque de produire des consommateurs individualistes plutôt que des citoyens impliqués. Invoquant les enseignements de Habermas et d’Arendt au sujet des exigences éthiques de la démocratie, elle illustre le potentiel de la participation citoyenne à travers l’exemple de la pièce « Practicing Democracy » présentée par le Headlines Theatre.

Mots clés: démocratie participative, exclusion sociale, consultation publique, Habermas, Arendt.

The central question driving the exploration in this article can be stated like this: Do current configurations of education for citizenship and democracy in Canada adequately prepare students to participate in the public sphere? My provisional answer would be “no,” and I will begin this article by describing why I believe this to be the case. I will then go on to elaborate upon three components of a democratic public sphere, as a place that provides space for communicative exchanges, engages with the plurality of views and experiences that mark society, and disrupts the modernist tendency to retreat into segregated enclaves that foster a politics of obliviousness. I shall then provide an example of one grassroots community theatre project to illustrate the creative potential for providing democratic education that can foster a communicative ethic, nurture plurality, and combat an increasing Canadian social tendency to retreat into oblivion. I shall conclude by considering the implications of such an example for contemporary schooling in citizenship and democracy.

#### CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION: PARTICIPATION OR CONFORMITY

Both the history of citizenship education in Canada and critical contemporary scholarship reveal a troubling picture of the aims and emphases of democratic educational practices. Arguably, citizenship education has historically been more concerned with separating the insiders from the outsiders than with instilling a sense of young people’s capacity to contribute to democratic praxis (Bannerji, 1997; Strong-Boag, 1996; Walter, 2003). Scholarly accounts of contemporary citizenship education continue to reveal the conservative ideological undercurrents that generally shape present-day curriculum (Mitchell, 2001, 2003; Westheimer & Kahne, 2003).

Canadian historian Veronica Strong-Boag (1996) notes that “Citizenship education, or what some call civics, tells the story of who gets to be considered the nation’s ‘real’, ‘normal’, ‘representative’ or ‘ideal’ citizen” (p. 128). Early citizenship education was inextricably connected to imperialism, and emphasized the relationship between the Dominion of Canada and the British Empire (Walter, 2003, p. 43). As many scholars have pointed out, the very notion of citizenship is premised upon exclusion: that is, if someone is *in* then necessarily

someone must be *out* (see, for example, Bannerji, 1997; DePass & Qureshi, 2002; Menzies, Adamoski & Chunn, 2002). Those who have traditionally been outside the norms of Canadian citizenship include women, people with disabilities, homeless people, people in prisons, Aboriginal peoples, immigrants and refugees, the working class/working poor, and gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered people.

A few examples from Canada's history will illustrate this argument. Joan Sangster (2002) analyzes how discourses of good citizenship imbued attempts to educate poor and working class Canadian youth from 1920 to 1965. Such approaches were explicitly intended to prevent them from falling into delinquency, or to re-impose social and moral norms upon those who had already so fallen. She describes the profoundly gendered ways in which citizenship education was applied to these young people, where "boys, it was assumed, should be remolded into *social* citizens with respect for democracy, law, and the work ethic, while girls needed protection, discipline, and self-control in order to become model *moral* citizens" (p. 338, italics in original). Social reformers saw their role to be partially one of compensating for the inadequate parenting assumed to be received by young people who grew up in poor and working class households. Although experts of the time would cite conditions such as poor housing as contributing to the likelihood of young people's fall into delinquency, the emphasis inevitably returned to the impact of "bad parenting." This focus on individual faults, as opposed to social and economic inequities, set the stage for the efforts of middle class reformers like the Big Sisters organization in Hamilton. The Big Sisters attempted to uplift their young charges by rallying older women who would "help girls to become good citizens" (as cited in Sangster, 2002, p. 347). The Big Sisters explicitly saw their role as ensuring the future of the nation through the development of appropriate sexual, feminine, and moral characteristics among their young charges. As noted in a speech by one Big Sister, "guidance and understanding [have] helped girls accept their place in the community as worthwhile citizens – after all, these girls are the mothers of tomorrow" (as cited in Sangster, 2002, p. 348).

Discourses of citizenship also had a profound impact on the differential treatment of young people caught in the juvenile court

systems. As Sangster (2002) notes, "The ability of boys or girls to convince judges or court workers that they were on the road to reform rested not only on their actions and demeanour, but also on their family's social persona, especially their parents' embrace of good citizenship" (p. 350). Parents who were able to establish their own willingness and capacity to live within the strictures of good citizenship – including "their own moral propriety and dedications to the work ethic, or... their churchgoing and wholesome leisure activities" (p. 350) – were more likely to prevent their children from being sentenced to training schools. If a young person were unfortunate enough to be put in a training school – institutions that, Sangster notes, were essentially correctional institutions – his or her sentencing would often be justified by the judge as a means to provide "citizenship training for children seen to be at risk of becoming adult criminals or misfits" (p. 351). Once again, this form of citizenship training took profoundly gendered and classed forms. As Sangster notes, these girls and boys were educated for "respectable" working-class labour, "in part because these working-class children were perceived to be best 'fitted' intellectually for such work" (p. 352). This labour was divided along clearly gendered lines, where girls were taught cooking, sewing, or laundry work, while boys received training in carpentry, shoe repair, barbering, maintenance, and auto mechanics (p. 353).

Lest one should think that such gendered and classed surveillance was limited to young people identified as delinquents, one needs only to look as far as schooling in the 1950s in Canada to see how discourses of normalcy penetrated every aspect of young people's education. Mary Louise Adams (1997) points to an educational film first produced in 1947 and updated in 1958, called "Are You Popular?" She describes it as follows:

To make its point the film contrasts Ginny and Caroline. Ginny is the unpopular girl, packaged in multiple working-class signifiers. Her jewellery is big and gaudy, her clothes are fussy, her hair is too old for her age, she 'yoo-hoos' the other kids in the cafeteria. And, we find out from the solemn-toned male narrator, she goes parking with boys at night. Caroline, on the other hand, is very popular, in an easy kind of way (which is, of course, the right way). She is dressed simply. She greets her friends calmly and pleasantly. She is 'interested in

girls rather than boys.' She offers to help with the school play. She does not 'park' with boys in their cars. She will, however, go on a date with a boy if it is okay with her mother. She will be home before an agreed-upon curfew. And, when she and her date arrive home, mother will greet them with a tray of fresh brownies. For both Caroline and Ginny, class, moral character, and popularity are indivisible. (p. 90)

Such educational endeavours as this film described above served to reinscribe gendered and sexualized norms upon young people in Canadian schools. They carried within them the sub-texts of citizenship, describing through myriad examples how one needed to exist within the bounds of normal. Such expressions of normalcy were, of course, also profoundly heterosexual. Queer bodies had no place in a mainstream classroom, much as they do not today. As Becki Ross (1998) notes, those who professed or acted upon same-sex desire could never be included as "fully fledged members or citizens of the Canadian nation. Rather, they were perceived as dangerous, sick, potential criminals and improperly socialized deviants" (p. 193).

Just as class, gender, and sexuality have played key roles in constructing the concept of a normal young citizen in Canadian educational history, so race has been a central determining factor. This can be seen clearly in the traumatic history of education for Aboriginal peoples in Canada. The very conception of citizenship explicitly excluded Aboriginal peoples, and mainstream schooling has historically misrepresented and maligned the realities of Aboriginal culture and identity (as it largely continues to do today) (Battiste & Semaganis, 2002; Persson, 1986). As Battiste and Semaganis (2002) note, citizenship education "is built on the Eurocentric linguistic conception of individuality and its relations to the aristocracy and the state. It universalizes the colonizer's experience and power and establishes an unrealizable norm for others" (p. 94). Education of Aboriginal peoples throughout Canada's history has been marked by an emphasis on either civilizing or assimilating Aboriginal peoples to European settlers' norms (Frideres, 1978). As poor and working-class young delinquents were sequestered in training schools, so the Canadian state ensured the isolation of Aboriginal students in residential schools. The perception of

Aboriginal peoples that shaped these schools is reflected in this statement made by an Inspector of Schools in the mid-1800s.

Little can be done with (the Indian child). He can be taught to do a little at farming, and at stock raising, and to dress in a more civilized manner, but that is all. The child who goes to a day school learns little and what he learns is soon forgotten, while his tastes are fashioned at home, and his inherited aversion to toil is in no way combated. (as cited in Kirkness & Bowman, 1992, p. 10)

Aboriginal peoples were thus seen as outside the redemptive status of citizen, capable only of menial labour, and in sore need of civilizing. Indeed, the government made it legally impossible for an "Indian" to become a citizen of Canada. If an Aboriginal person did manage to conform to mainstream notions of success within Canadian schooling, and proceeded to university or attained a profession, the Canadian government would remove the (government-inscribed) category of Indian from that person, and allow him (never her) the right of enfranchisement (Coates, 1999). Such a practice clearly marks who was considered to belong within Canadian citizenship, and who, on the other hand, was excluded.

Such exclusionary constructions of citizenship and their impacts on citizenship education remain evident in contemporary forms of education for democratic citizenship. Although generally less explicit about who is excluded than in the past, the shifting focus of schooling towards standardized educational attainments, evaluated on the basis of provincial exams and billed as preparation for global competitiveness, renders some students inherently more desirable than others due to their ability to conform to these demands.<sup>1</sup> The recent upsurge in citizenship as a specific curricular topic in secondary schools across Western liberal democracies has been accompanied by standardized tests to evaluate how well students have absorbed these curricular mandates (Chamberlin, 2003; Myers, 2000). That the complex skills necessary to participate as a citizen in a democracy are thought to be testable in a standardized exam highlights the distance between contemporary education for citizenship, and political theories about participation in a democratic public sphere.

Various contemporary theorists have commented on these disparities. Katharyne Mitchell (2003) notes that citizenship education is beginning to accommodate neoliberal priorities; Johanna Wyn and Peter Dwyer (2000) suggest that the privatisation and marketisation of education in many English-speaking Western liberal democracies has shifted the emphasis of educational attainment towards a "new human capital approach" (p. 156). Anita Harris (2004) describes how citizenship has come to be decoupled from the notion of one's social rights and been increasingly linked to one's capacity to participate in the marketplace as a worker and a consumer. As Mitchell (2003) points out, "In this neoliberal vision of education, educating a child to be a good citizen is...about attainment of the 'complex skills' necessary for individual success in the global economy" (p. 399). What can be seen here, then, is another form of exclusion associated with educating for citizenship: when a good citizen becomes one who is successful within the global marketplace, one does not have to look far to see who is not a good citizen. Not coincidentally, those who find success within this new conception of citizenship (sometimes referred to as 'global citizenship,' see Roman, 2004) also happen to generally fit within the categories of those considered to be on the inside in Canada's history of citizenship education – white, middle-class, often male, and generally heterosexual and able-bodied.

An implicit and explicit focus on such global (neoliberal) citizenship rests alongside a more traditional emphasis on being loyal to the national state, deferring to authority, and believing in patriotic symbols and flags (Sears, 1996). Such an emphasis draws a direct line from more explicitly exclusionary forms of citizenship education in the past, and provides an easy complement to global citizenship. Sears and Hughes (1996) point out that even when curricular documents espouse a more activist conception of citizenship, classroom practices continue to support the elitist, traditional conception outlined above. These two forms of citizenship – global/neoliberal and elitist -- do not contradict each other, as each supports an individualistic, self-interested, passive consumer who does little to challenge unjust social structures.

Thus, although some scholars lament what they see as a lost focus on citizenship in the educational system (see, for example, Hébert, 1997;

Osborne, 2000), it might be more accurate to understand the contemporary training of citizens to be preparation for global (neoliberal) citizenship,<sup>2</sup> resting in easy camaraderie alongside traditional notions of loyalty to the state and flag. As such, little space remains for a focus on democratic practices that encourage the modes of diverse representation essential to a thriving and democratic public sphere.

#### ACTING OUT IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE: TOWARDS A DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

Through the above discussion of historical and contemporary manifestations of citizenship education, I have illustrated how such education has often been complicit in reinforcing social exclusion and, more recently, in supporting the production of neoliberal subjects. Such tendencies are antithetical to encouraging young people to become actively engaged in the public sphere. To expand this argument, I will highlight three characteristics of a democratic public sphere: it nurtures communicative (or deliberative) exchanges; it fosters plurality; and it combats our collective tendency to become oblivious to injustices. I will focus on these three both because they are demonstrably missing from mainstream Canadian citizenship education past and present, and because each is inherent to the community theatre project called "Practicing Democracy," with which I illustrate their possibilities in practice.

##### *Communicative or Deliberative Democracy*

A vast literature exists on the theory and practice of communicative or deliberative democracy. For my purposes, I will briefly discuss arguments made by two key theorists in the field: Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib.

According to Habermas (1996), deliberative democracy creates space for "communicative presuppositions that allow the better arguments to come into play in various forms of deliberation" (p. 24). He has developed a highly theoretical account of how communicative exchanges can take place (see, for example, Habermas, 1976, 1998). At the center of this account is the assumption that "language is the specific medium of



reaching understanding" and that "other forms of social action – for example, conflict, competition, strategic action in general – are derivatives of action oriented toward reaching understanding" (Habermas, 1998, p. 21). In other words, a deliberative democratic process takes place through the exchange of speech acts oriented towards developing mutual understanding, although not necessarily agreement.

Habermas (1996) argues that the communicative process should take place through "widely expanded and differentiated public spheres as well as through legally institutionalized procedures of democratic deliberation and decision-making" (p. 28). Seyla Benhabib (1996) clarifies the reason for needing such a widely differentiated public sphere, noting that "no modern society can organize its affairs along the fiction of a mass assembly carrying out its deliberations in public and collectively" (p. 73). Rather, she suggests, a deliberative model of democracy takes place within a milieu that privileges a "plurality of modes of associations," ranging from "political parties, to citizens' initiatives, to social movements, to voluntary associations, to consciousness-raising groups" (p. 73). She writes:

It is through the interlocking net of these multiple forms of associations, networks, and organizations that an anonymous "public conversation" results. It is central to the model of deliberative democracy that it privileges such a public sphere of mutually interlocking and overlapping networks and associations of deliberation, contestation, and argumentation. (Benhabib, 1996, p. 74)

In other words, to foster a democratic culture that encourages dialogue, young people must become accustomed to participating in an exchange of ideas across multiple public associations. If contemporary education for democratic citizenship emphasises global competitiveness and individuality, or if it continues to smuggle in a history of exclusion through classism, sexism, racism, and colonialism, then young people will not learn the skills necessary to participate effectively in a deliberative public sphere.

*Plurality in the Public Sphere*

Such an emphasis on communicative skills cannot remain the sole centre piece of a theory of the public sphere; however, it also needs to be scrutinized for the forms of exclusion that it can engender. Iris Marion Young (1990) and Nancy Fraser (1989) both provide cogent critiques of the masculinist undercurrents of Habermasian concepts of communicative dialogue. Young is concerned that any call for a “reinstitution of a civic public in which citizens transcend their particular contexts, needs, and interests to address the common good” will result in “suppressing difference,” and will “tend to exclude some voices and perspectives from the public,” because of their dominant positions in inegalitarian societies (p. 118).

Fraser (1989) similarly notes that Habermas fails to account for how citizenship is taken up differently between men and women in male-dominated societies. She notes that “citizenship, in his view, depends crucially on the capacities for consent and speech, the ability to participate on a par with others in dialogue. But these are capacities that are...in myriad ways denied to women” (p. 126). Although she does not make this point, the same might be argued of the potential for equal participation by people of colour, poor people, and queer people in a society marked by racism, classism, and homophobia, among other inequities.

Such concerns highlight the need for additional considerations to be incorporated into an understanding of the public sphere. Not only must it be a place where communicative exchanges take place within a multitude of interlocking networks, it must also be a place that actively fosters and nurtures plurality. Hannah Arendt has most provocatively theorized the importance of this characteristic for a democratic public sphere.

Hannah Arendt argues that human plurality is marked by both equality and distinction (1998). That is, human plurality exists in the paradox of both sharing a common public space, and of the fact that every human being who has ever lived has been utterly unique. It is only through acting and speaking in the public realm, she suggests, that human beings can demonstrate their uniqueness, their “who”-ness.

This disclosure of "who" in contradistinction to "what" somebody is – his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide – is implicit in everything somebody says and does. It can be hidden only by complete silence and perfect passivity, but its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a wilful purpose, as though one possessed and could dispose of this "who" in the same manner he has and can dispose of his qualities. On the contrary, it is more than likely that the "who," which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself. (Arendt, 1998, p. 179)

Kimberley Curtis (1999) notes that "[Arendt's] theory is a kind of pedagogy about the wonder of human plurality and our obligation to it" (p. 10). Curtis sees Arendt's political theory as attempting to "re-sacralize our feeling for human particularity, to teach us to feel quickened, awed, and pleased by it" (p. 12). The need for this recognition of plurality is an ethical one, in that a truly democratic public sphere cannot exist without it. The problem is that an individual may not even realize that he or she is missing plurality in his or her life until confronted with it. As Curtis (1997) notes, "[H]owever intense or real our feelings and our inner life may seem, however poignant and piercing, a full sense of reality is possible only in a world capable of supporting, sustaining, and stimulating multiple and conflicting voices and strivings" (p. 31). Thus a democratic public sphere both provides the grounds within which individuals can express their unique human attributes – their "whoness" – through their interactions with others, and it is constituted by the very plurality that it helps to showcase.

#### *Combatting Oblivion*

Because of this inextricable quality of plurality within a democratic public sphere, the possibility of challenging one's own complacency, ignorance, and tendency towards oblivion can emerge. Kimberley Curtis (1997) suggests that it has never been more necessary for those individuals in positions of privilege to make an active choice to remain aware of the inequalities that surround them, and to avoid a dangerous tendency to retreat into exclusive enclaves. This is particularly the case in the major cities of Canada and the United States where provincial and state governments have become experts at hiding poverty through the

ghettoization of the poor into under-resourced social housing and mental health institutions, and the ever-increasing criminalization of poverty (Fine & Weis, 1998; Katz, 2004; Rebick, 2000). For example, the latter tactic has been employed of late by the British Columbia provincial government, which recently implemented its "Safe Streets Act," a piece of legislation that directly imitates Ontario's earlier Act of the same name. The Safe Streets Acts in both Ontario and British Columbia make it illegal to panhandle "aggressively," including outlawing the practice of squeegee kids, who would wash windshields at intersections in exchange for a few dollars. The practical result of such legislation is to drive street-involved young people out of the public eye, and into more dangerous, and hidden, circumstances (O'Grady & Greene, 2003). Other examples of state interventions that serve to foster a politics of oblivion include government land-use policies to encourage the segregation of populations by ethnicity and class (Sugrue, 1996) and parallel policies that permit the building and policing of gated communities (Curtis, 1999). In these ways and others, the state is complicit in fostering a politics of oblivion, thus countering the possibility of a truly democratic public sphere.

Examples such as these illustrate the ease with which those individuals who live in relative privilege can be lulled into believing that they have seen all there is to see within the confines of their own worlds. When state policies serve to hide inequalities, it becomes increasingly difficult to know what citizens need to know to be ethical members of their own communities. Their challenge, as members of a democracy, is to face their own oblivion; their task is to resist the enclaving that exists between the privileged classes and those who have been marginalized in various ways, to not retreat into the pretense that all is well in the world or to absolve themselves of responsibility for creating change. This is why confrontations of plurality are an ethical imperative in a democratic society: so that those with privilege are not allowed to lull themselves into believing that everyone lives with the same comforts that they do. Likewise, those individuals concerned with educating young people to participate in a democracy must help them to confront their own practices of oblivion.

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"PRACTICING DEMOCRACY" IN A THEATRICAL PUBLIC SPHERE

Headlines Theatre, a Vancouver-based, not-for-profit theatre company, has a long history of staging provocative theatre pieces designed to initiate and support public debate.<sup>3</sup> In 2003, Headlines approached Vancouver City Council to solicit their cooperation in creating a theatre piece to directly contribute to democratic decision making in Vancouver. Their plan was to make use of a technique called forum theatre (described below) to generate a report on the public's view of a key social issue; in light of this focus on democratic process, they called their play "Practicing Democracy." The Council, largely made up of members of the left-leaning Coalition of Progressive Electors, voted unanimously to accept the recommendations that came out of the theatre piece as part of their deliberation. City Council provided a short-list of four topics on which they would like input: implementing a ward system in Vancouver, the relationship between youth and police, safety for seniors in the city, or mediating the results of cuts to welfare anticipated by the BC provincial government in March 2004. Headlines Theatre solicited input from Vancouver residents on which topic they would most like to see addressed, and the overwhelming majority voted for looking at the cuts to welfare.<sup>4</sup>

The development of the play began in February 2004. At this time, 30 people were chosen to participate in a week-long workshop. All the participants had been affected by the cuts to welfare, and together, through the use of interactive theatre games, they developed the core material for the play. Five of the participants and one professional actor then worked with David Diamond, the artistic director of Headlines, to create the play that was performed from March 3 to 21, 2004. The play was performed in three venues across Vancouver, encompassing east, west, and central Vancouver.

The performance of the play followed a technique called forum theatre, which happens in two parts. First, as in traditional theatre, the actors performed the play without interruption; "Practicing Democracy" ran about 20 minutes. Next, the "Joker," in this case David Diamond, invited the audience to watch the play again, this time intervening at any appropriate point in the action by yelling "Stop." The role of the Joker was to encourage the participation of the audience and facilitate the

conversation that emerged out of an audience's attempts to resolve the issues in the play. When an audience member shouted "Stop," he or she took the place of one of the actors, and improvised with the remaining actors to offer solutions to the problem. In the case of "Practicing Democracy," David Diamond then turned to the wider audience and asked for their input on this issue, and prompted them to consider specific policy suggestions for Vancouver's City Council. The suggestions were recorded by a lawyer, and then turned into a report; this report was presented to City Council. As of this writing, many of the recommendations that came out of the play have been incorporated into the work of various committees of the City of Vancouver. Outstanding issues are still under consideration by the Council.<sup>5</sup>

*"Practicing Democracy" as a Deliberative Process*

The forum theatre process that "Practicing Democracy" used can easily be seen as belonging within the spectrum of Habermas' (1996) "widely expanded and differentiated public spheres" (p. 24), or Benhabib's (1996) "plurality of modes of association" (p. 73). Indeed, the innovative manner in which Headlines Theatre attempted to bridge their own realm within civil society with that of formal municipal politics is of note in and of itself. The Headlines play was also designed to bring citizens together into a "public communication oriented to mutual understanding" (Habermas, 1996, p. 24). The process whereby audience members were encouraged to participate to resolve the dilemmas they witnessed on the stage, and the facilitated discussion that took place after each intervention, are examples of how Headlines fostered a public communicative space intended to create mutual understanding. Habermas (1996) also notes that "[t]he public opinion that is worked up via democratic procedures into communicative power cannot 'rule' by itself, but can only point the use of administrative power in specific directions" (p. 29). This, too, is exactly the process that Headlines Theatre undertook, by soliciting the cooperation of Vancouver City Council and hiring a lawyer to create a report from the recommendations that arose during the play. With all this in mind, it is quite plausible to understand "Practicing Democracy" as a process of deliberative democracy.

*"Practicing Democracy" as a Theatre of Appearances*

"Practicing Democracy" did more, however, than create a space for creative communicative exchanges to shape administrative power in specific directions. It also provided a medium for actors and audience members alike to demonstrate their "who-ness" through the "space of appearances" (Arendt, 1971, pp. 37-40) that marks the public sphere and theatre alike. Indeed, Arendt makes extensive use of the metaphor of theatre when describing her understanding of the public sphere. The two are akin because all citizens are actors, playing a role; their very actions conceal who they are from the rest of the world, while also, somewhat paradoxically, making possible a public exchange of ideas and perceptions (Villa, 1997). Kimberley Curtis (1997) describes how Arendt's use of theatre as a metaphor illuminates the dynamics between plurality and the public sphere.

As the reference for the actor on a stage is always a specific audience, so too our efforts at self-presentation always "play" to a specific community. Intrinsic to our effort at self-presentation is a deliberate responding to and moving toward the plural world of others. We offer ourselves – that is, our take on the world – in eliciting presentation, and we depend upon our world's perceptivity, upon others' own urge, in turn, to make their presence in the world felt through self-display. (p. 41)

The process of "Practicing Democracy" can be mapped directly onto this description of the process of self-presentation and response that happens in the public sphere. The actors on stage were, of course, performing to a specific community, a community of Vancouver residents. The actors offered themselves and their take on the world, as developed through their participation in the Headlines Theatre workshop alongside others who had been affected by the cuts to welfare. The actors then relied on "others' own urge, in turn, to make their presence in the world felt through self-display" (Curtis, 1997, p 41); that is, they relied on audience members to yell "Stop" and to intervene in the action to try a new resolution to the issue at hand.

The experience for the audience of "Practicing Democracy" was thus completely different from the experience of an audience at a more

traditional theatrical show. Whereas in traditional theatre, the audience remains passive and largely veiled from the actors on stage, "Practicing Democracy" required the audience to become the show, to try on different personae, to carry their appearances with them onto that vulnerable space that is the stage. There were moments when it seemed as if no one would intervene in the action, and the audience would remain passive. But always, someone spoke up, got up from his or her seat in the audience and stepped onto the stage. I, too, felt compelled to get up, although I was ostensibly taking notes for this research; before I knew it, I had yelled "Stop" and stepped onto the stage to carry out my vision of a possible solution to the issue at hand. Even those who remained in the audience were hardly passive recipients of information; David Diamond would regularly cut off the flow of discussion in the interest of time constraints. That this could take place, especially in a consumer culture that has become so accustomed to being passively entertained, perhaps supports Arendt's belief, as stated by Curtis (1997), that although "all forms of human togetherness give us some sensation of reality ... the potential for intensifying our awareness of reality, making it fuller and deeper, is greatest in the merciless brightness of the public realm" (p. 46).

Through this process of revealing individuals' "who-ness" in the public sphere of appearances, the true nature of their constitutive plurality is revealed. This is not the same as a call for diversity, which often gets reduced to a tokenistic inclusion of people who are supposed to represent their communities. Rather, it is an opportunity to deeply understand the plurality of experiences and insights that belong to the people who share democratic spaces. A truly ethical public sphere, from an Arendtian perspective, creates space for as wide a range of human plurality as possible. Through the use of a forum theatre piece explicitly based on the experiences of people generally marginalized in an inegalitarian society, Headlines Theatre succeeded in creating a public sphere far more ethical than most other forms of civic deliberation through its foregrounding of plurality.



*"Practicing Democracy" as a Challenge to Oblivion*

In addition to providing a space whereby the actors' and audience's unique humanity and shared interests could be explored within a plural public/theatrical sphere, "Practicing Democracy" also posed a powerful challenge to any oblivious tendencies the audience members might have carried into the theatre that night. Through both subject matter and participants, it brought to light that which is often hidden from view: the stories of those living on the margins, stigmatized by the label of being on welfare, or living on the street. In his role as the Joker, David Diamond made use of this shock of reality to urge the audience to intervene on stage. In one scene, two actors were fighting over a stash of stolen fruit. The scene rolled on, and the audience members sat in silence; nobody would intervene in this scene. David Diamond stopped the action and turned to the audience: "I need you to know that people are fighting over food in food line-ups now." At this point, a man spoke up with his intervention and suggestion. David Diamond turned to the audience at the end of the intervention and said, "You understand that intervening on this stage is important."<sup>6</sup> This was not a question but a statement. He was challenging the audience to face its own reluctance to know what was happening in Vancouver, its reluctance to become involved and thus lose a protective layer of oblivion.

## CONCLUSIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

On the surface, as a medium of consultation "Practicing Democracy" contained the same limits as any other process – time and space constraints allowed only a few voices to be heard, the process could only be as good as its facilitator, and the consultation was only as representative as those who bothered to attend. However, when considered in light of Arendt's political thought and the scholarship of those who take inspiration from her, "Practicing Democracy" contributed to democracy in ways that are both unique and necessary. It also served as an example of a community-based pedagogical experiment, simultaneously educating the citizens of Vancouver about the realities of living in poverty in an affluent city, and engaging people in a democratic practice designed to expand their role as citizens.

In addition, by analyzing “Practicing Democracy” in light of political theories of the public sphere, I have illustrated how it poses a powerful challenge to conceptions of democracy and citizenship in mainstream Canadian schooling. Whereas educating for citizenship has historically been marked by forms of exclusion wrought from prevailing social inequalities, and contemporary citizenship education is in danger of being co-opted by a neoliberal discourse concerned with producing good consumers, Headlines Theatre’s “Practicing Democracy” serves as a reminder of what it means to participate in a democratic public sphere. Exposing Canadian students to such exercises in democracy could be one way to expand the dialogue around citizenship education. A more important lesson, however, is to critically assess what kinds of democratic citizenship schools are producing. Can Canadian schooling encourage communicative exchanges, honour and nurture plurality, and challenge the politics of oblivion? Although such goals may seem impossibly abstract, the lessons of “Practicing Democracy” are that creative alternatives to democratic participation do exist, and can be usefully taken up to create more genuinely egalitarian spaces of learning.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For example, studies have shown that middle class children from the dominant (generally white) culture tend to do best on standardized testing because of the cultural capital they have accrued through their family background (Neito, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Katharyne Mitchell (2003) also calls this form of citizenship “cosmopolitan citizenship.”

<sup>3</sup> For more information on Headlines Theatre and their work, see [www.headlinestheatre.com](http://www.headlinestheatre.com).

<sup>4</sup> I have taken all details of the preparation, planning and implementation of the play from David Diamond’s introduction to the

performance of "Practicing Democracy" on March 17, 2004, and from Headlines Theatre's website: <http://www.headlinestheatre.com/pd/index.html>

<sup>5</sup> Information on this process found at <http://www.headlinestheatre.com/pw-set.htm>, retrieved February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2005

<sup>6</sup> All David Diamond quotes are from my notes on the performance at St. James Community Hall, March 17, 2004.

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