

Intersections of Vulnerability: Theater [AND] Social Change

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this research project was to generate individual and social responsibility to create change that promotes social justice. The research team investigated the intersections of disproportionately vulnerable populations in Eau Claire in collaboration with Theater 490 to create an interactive devised theater program that breaks down stereotypes and raises awareness of local not-for-profit organizations (i.e., Positive Avenues, LSS and Fierce Freedom). A combination of theories and practices from the disciplines of theatre, communication, and women's studies, were integrated for participants as they walked through differently staged rooms designed to highlight oppressions of marginalized groups, emphasizing the social, economic, and political inequalities that are perpetuated by human interaction.



Student Researchers: Lillian Strehlow (left), Courtney Grieser (right)



Theater 490 student Clara Kennedy (Left), Student Researcher & Theater 490 student Emily Elliott (right)

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- Understand the intersection between scholarly research and creative works (such as devised theater).
- Investigate the changes in opinion regarding homeless and mental illness community among Theater 490 students and local residents.
- Focus on attaining Liberal Education Integrative Learning and Responsibility Learning Outcomes through special topics courses.

METHODS

ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA COLLECTION

Ethnographic research is "the study and representation of people [through] interaction." Data for this study came from personal experiences of the homeless community gathered by immersing ourselves in the culture of Positive Avenues, LSS.

DEvised THEATER PRODUCTION DEVELOPMENT

An interactive performance where testimonies of the homeless population were included in the development of new theatrical experience that engaged the audience in creative storytelling.

PRE AND POST SURVEY DATA COLLECTION

Play attendees completed a survey before and after the play indicating their level of agreement to questions their thoughts about the homeless and mentally ill community.

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY INFORMATION

Attendees provided information about gender, race, educational background, and occupation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

SOCIAL JUDGEMENT THEORY

Sherif created Social Judgement theory to categorize peoples' latitudes of acceptance, rejection, and noncommitment to ideas/statements/theories. Where they fall on this spectrum depends on their level of ego-involvement with a particular issue (Griffin, E.A., 2006).

BIRD CAGE METAPHOR

The idea of oppression is easily understood using the birdcage metaphor. If one looks closely at a bird cage, one would wonder why the bird doesn't just fly around the wire and leave. However, if one backs away from the cage, they see many wires, all intersecting to create a "A network of systematically related barriers" - a cage - from which that bird cannot fly away (Frye, M. 2010).

RESULTS

THEATER 490 REFLECTIONS

1. In what ways has integrating theatre and civic engagement in the class been beneficial to you in learning about homelessness?
 1. "Taught me not to assume things about the homeless population"
 2. "Made me realize the gravity of the issue."
 3. "It has shown me a whole new perspective on a subject I thought I already knew about. Almost nothing I knew before was correct."
 4. "Theater helps provide a creative outlook on a really serious issue. It can help an audience who could be seemingly unaware of this issue become physically and emotionally engaged in making a change."
2. How has working with community partners and learning about homeless influenced the way you think about/want to interact with society and address social concerns?
 1. "I understand that the problems that we stereotype often exist because there's a silent side of the story that we don't always see."
 2. "Many different things can happen that you have no control over can cause you to become homeless."
3. What has been the most intriguing aspect of your experience in this class?
 1. Learning how to address a social issue through creative work.
 2. Researching to ensure theatrical representations were accurate.
 3. Realization that homelessness is more prevalent and close to home than originally thought.

COMMUNITY RESPONSES TO *THE INVISIBLE TRUTH*

Demographics: Of the 76 play attendees who filled out surveys
 Age:
 • Average age: 33
 • Mean age: 20
 Gender:
 • 1 gender nonconforming person
 • 46 women
 • 26 men
 Level of Education:
 • 100% had completed High School
 • 47% indicated some level of college/Bachelor's degree
 • 29% had a Masters or PhD
 Race:
 • 98.6% identified as white
 Number of people who identified as being homeless at some point in their life: 4
 Number of people who has known someone who identified as homeless: 30

Our survey asked performance attendees to answer several questions on a scale of "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." Analyses of the following three questions establishes patterns of change.

Our data shows that those who chose to fill out our survey carried homogenous beliefs when it came to the statement "society has a responsibility to help people," suggesting that many of the people who attended our performance had a pre-existing commitment (higher ego involvement) to the issue as established by Social Judgement Theory. Those beliefs became more polarized after participating in the play, as seen in the shift from "agreement" to "strong agreement" (PRE-performance agreement: 37, PRE-performance strong agreement: 32, POST-performance agreement: 34, POST-performance strong agreement: 36).

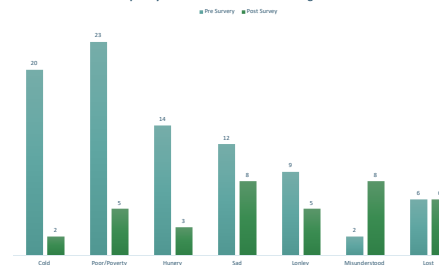
A similar shift was established for the statement, "Most poor people in this country have a chance of escaping from poverty." PRE-performance "disagreement" included 37 people, and POST-performance "disagreement" had 44 people. This indicates that attendees who marked "strong agreement", "agreement" or "no opinion" shifted to "disagreement" ("strong disagreement" maintained its numbers). This suggests that the play caused people to critically analyze the structures that sustain homelessness and then shift their beliefs away from over simplification of the problem, recognizing what Frye, M. (2010) articulated by employing the birdcage metaphor.

For the question, "The government spends too much money on poverty programs," analysis of the data reveals that while overall people moved from "disagree" to "strongly disagree", there was also movement in the opposite direction, as seen by the increase in people who marked "no opinion" or "agree." This inconclusive data signals the need for further individual analysis, as there is data that can be additionally examined.



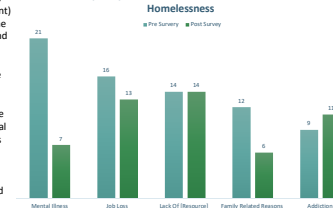
Positive Avenues Staff, Volunteers, & Peer-Support Specialists: (top) Sue, (left to right) Jean, Mark, Kathy, Larry, (bottom) Anneka

Frequency of Words Associated with Being Homeless



These two graphs reflect the most common responses (via word count) to questions asking for a list of "the first three words that come to mind when you hear the word homelessness" and "Two reasons you believe cause someone to live with homelessness." The graphs include both pre and post survey information. The shifts in language away from superficial/stereotypical descriptors reflects the audience's increased knowledge of homelessness, and Theater 490's successful adaptation of real life problems in to an in-depth devised theater production.

Frequency of Causes for a Person to Live with Homelessness



IMPLICATIONS

CLASS

The Theater 490 class reported developing an understanding of the nuances of homelessness and the factors surrounding it. The class successfully utilized UWECs liberal education learning outcomes to promote community responsibility through critical thinking and application of the theater arts in a way that broke down harmful stereotypes in themselves and others.

COMMUNITY

The local community recorded distinct changes in their beliefs about the homeless population after seeing this play. In particular, there was movement from seeing homelessness as a result of personal choice to reflecting more on systems (such as familial, capitalistic, etc.) and their failures. There is opportunity here to put on future renditions of *The Invisible Truth: Intersections of Vulnerability in Eau Claire* as a way to continue addressing the negative stigma surrounding homelessness, as well as helping the Chippewa Valley homeless population itself by continuing to function as a fundraiser for local organizations.

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