

Cocreating Spaces of Belonging: A Campus Workshop Using Research-Based Theatre for Affective Learning

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Abstract

Creating climates that embrace justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion, must involve learning by everyone in the community. Although active learning techniques for promoting cognitive learning have received much attention in recent decades, techniques for affective learning are less developed. Affective learning is, however, essential to this particular area of change. Using the example of an innovative workshop about creating more welcoming environments for Disabled people, this article demonstrates how Research-Based Theatre, in combination with other active learning techniques, can promote affective learning and encourages readers to reflect on how they might incorporate creative, arts-based, research-informed approaches.

Background

Having a sense of belonging is important for human well-being and flourishing, and is particularly important for success in higher education settings. Creating JEDI communities—climates that are conducive to belonging and which embrace justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI)—must involve all actors in the community. While cognitive learning and awareness are important, affective learning must occur before effective JEDI communities can be achieved. Affective learning can be supported through Research-Based Theatre (RBT) integrated with other active learning techniques. Cocreating spaces of belonging (CSB) is a workshop that does just that with the aim of influencing attitudes and actions toward Disabled people within higher education settings. This article describes:

- 1) educational theories and positionality informing CSB;
- 2) how an RBT was created and incorporated into the workshop; and
- 3) evidence regarding RBT's effectiveness in affective learning from both literature and workshop participant feedback (collected via anonymous surveys).

Readers are invited to listen to the RBT used in the workshop by following this [link](#) and read the script and more detailed workshop outline in the dissertation [here](#).

Cocreating Spaces of Belonging: Workshop Design

CSB is shaped by different kinds of knowledge from various sources: personal and professional values; research evidence; literature and theory; lived experience; and feedback from workshop participants.

Collaboration, equity, inclusion, and integrity, are some of my personal and professional values as a teacher that influence this workshop's design. Collaboration involves learners and teachers working together toward learning. By valuing equity I profess that all humans are of equal value and deserve access to equitable opportunities. That is, humans have the same value but should not necessarily be treated the same way. To have *equitable* opportunities, individuals might need to go about learning in different ways or with different resources. Inclusion in my teaching means embracing diverse ways of being in and perceiving the world. I invite diversity of perspectives and use various teaching approaches to meet diverse ways of understanding and knowing. Finally, I value the integrity of learners and my own integrity. In valuing learners as whole beings and acknowledging that they are more than just learners, I support their integrity as individuals and members of communities. For example, by inviting participants' input and expertise throughout the workshop, and by inviting their feedback to shape future workshops, I am valuing them not just as learners, but also as teachers. By invoking the word integrity in reference to myself, I indicate that it is important for me to maintain honesty and humility—especially when I do not know something—congruence between my values and the ways I respectfully interact, and adherence to ethics (Bulk et al., 2019; O'Sullivan et al., 1994).

Educational theories and concepts underlying CSB include transformational learning, constructivism, active learning, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). As a teacher, I hope to both engage in and facilitate transformational learning, which involves perspective transformation. Transformation involves “structural change in the way we see ourselves and our relationships” with other actors, and with the wider world and its structures (Mezirow, 1978, p. 100; Tokiwa-Fuse, 2000). This leads to transformed and wider perspectives, which, in turn, contributes to more informed choices for behaviours and occupational engagement (Tokiwa-Fuse, 2000). By presenting challenging ideas and alternate perspectives in novel ways, I encourage learners to examine their assumptions. I also invite learners into an interdependent learning community where all can be challenged to engage in critical reflection (Hartley, 2007). Drawing on Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, I hope learners will experience personal transformation as they examine previously held assumptions, and that they will act on their learning.

An initial step in my teaching is cocreating a welcoming learning space. In doing so, I recognize learner autonomy to advocate for their learning needs. For example, at the beginning of CSB, I invite learners to cocreate a space that is conducive to their learning and do what they need to in order to learn well. I invite learners to stand, sit, or move around as needed and model this by standing, sitting, and moving around as I need. I also bring stories of my experience as a Disabled healthcare professional and academic into the classroom as a way of challenging common assumptions and demonstrating vulnerability and effective use of personal story as a pedagogical tool. Cocreation of an effective learning space is important from constructivist, transformational, and trauma-informed learning perspectives (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Davidson, 2017). In this workshop, as in all teaching and learning spaces, belonging is an important factor for learning. We need to feel valued and to share in one another's transformation. Acknowledging contributions from all learners, opening space for authenticity, and endorsing collaborative learning, are some approaches to enhance belonging (Bulk, in press). Using paired and small group exercises builds connections among learners, opens space for many voices, and accelerates learning through sharing of ideas. Of note, although I can employ facilitatory strategies to

engender a learning environment like this, I recognize that inviting shared control of space does not change structural power hierarchies that exist among participants, and between myself and participants.

Constructivist learning theory postulates that learners build knowledge actively in the context of previous knowledge and social experiences (Cummings et al., 2014). In CSB I facilitate active learning through a variety of evidence-based activities, such as paired and group discussion, interactive lecturing, and scenario-based learning (Barkley & Major, 2020; Cummings et al., 2014; Hackathorn et al., 2011). Although being told “the answer” may seem easier in some instances, the creation of a constructive and challenging environment is ultimately better for learning. For example, rather than providing a list of problems and solutions, in CSB I use scenarios and discussion to encourage critical thinking, collaboration, resource seeking, knowledge application in both solving and reframing “problems.” Throughout the workshop, learners are not passive recipients of, but, rather, are co-constructors of knowledge. In keeping with a constructivist approach, my role as a teacher reflects being a facilitator of knowledge co-construction, rather than an expert transmitting information into the minds of learners (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).

Flexibility allows more space for learners to collaborate in building knowledge. Flexibility aligns with both constructivism and UDL. CSB is designed to allow the greatest possible degree of flexibility in the means of representation, expression, and engagement (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2020; Rose & Meyer, 2002). Flexibility is incorporated as I plan multiple options for learning activities in order to adapt to participant needs, while meeting the meta-objectives of the activity. I also use multiple means of representation of information, such as giving information verbally and visually. For example, the goals of an activity may be to provide space for participants to begin reflecting on their existing knowledge, and to start thinking about some important topics related to the experience of disability. This activity may be a virtual quiz. The facilitator shows questions on screen, participants can read the question on their own device, and the facilitator reads the question aloud—providing multiple means of accessing the information. The activity’s meta-objectives could also be met using a paper-based quiz, or self-reflection guided by questions, or something else. CSB is designed using various active learning techniques, including RBT, to facilitate learners achieving five objectives.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this workshop participants will be able to:

- 1) Apply knowledge from this workshop and previous experiences to discuss what disability is, including appropriate and inappropriate terms to use.
- 2) Describe some barriers Disabled people experience to belonging in academia.
- 3) Discuss respectful ways to interact with Disabled people.
- 4) Identify at least three strategies for making your own spaces more welcoming to Disabled people.
- 5) Reflect greater appreciation for some of the nuances of the realities of Disabled people in academia, and how some of these concepts may extend to other equity-seeking groups.

Research-Based Theatre as an Affective Learning Tool

What Is RBT?

Although research-based theatre (RBT) can at first-read be understood as theatre that is based on research, it is far more complex. RBT has become understood as a method and methodology for sharing and creating knowledge (Belliveau & Lea, 2011). As a research tool, RBT is said to open spaces of empathetic power (Mieniczakowski & Moore, 2008) that “[enhance] understanding of lived experience in different groups and communities” (Mitchell et al., 2006, p. 198). It humanizes data by maintaining the voices, stories, and unique humanities, of those involved (Belliveau & Nichols, 2017; Donmoyer & Donmoyer, 2008; Mieniczakowski & Moore, 2008; Saldaña, 2008). RBT is more than using theatre at the end of a project to share findings. RBT can also include incorporating theatre at various phases in the process and inviting continued engagement in research processes throughout research phases (Belliveau & Lea, 2011).

Why RBT and Affective Learning?

In this section I discuss the connection between RBT and affective learning, using examples and evidence from CSB participants and from the literature. Bloom’s taxonomy describes learning in three domains: affective, cognitive, and psychomotor (Bloom et al., 1956). All three domains are addressed by the learning objectives in this workshop. The affective domain involves learner attitudes, beliefs, and values (Krathwohl et al., 1964; Pierre & Oughton, 2007; Savinckiene, 2010). Addressing *affective* learning objectives is often cited as a key challenge for both novice and experienced teachers (Pierre & Oughton, 2007; Savinckiene, 2010). Affective learning can be addressed through witnessing others’ perspectives and being open to challenging one’s previously held beliefs, values, and attitudes (Krathwohl et al., 1964). Noting RBT’s empathetic power and strong foundation of evidence, I pursued RBT as an evidence-informed affective teaching tool. I am not alone in this endeavour. For example, when Segedin (2017) employed RBT in professional development with educators, their participants said RBT is more effective than traditional professional development for promoting long-lasting learning that provokes emotion and is oriented toward action. One participant said that CSB:

[. . .] is clearly backed by extensive research done on the topic . . . she presented various perspectives/aspects of disability as diversity and encouraged self-reflective and dynamic dialogues to happen. The theatre and story-sharing component adds an affective touch to the workshop that makes this workshop not only informative but also memorable.

Bird and Donelan (2020) found that the form of RBT they used—an interactive ethnographic performance—in a professional learning context fostered critical reflection and effective collective learning. One CSB participant noted the RBT “helped me reflect more on everything I [had] learnt to that point . . . on what it meant in my practice and how I can better adjust those practices” and another that “it caused me to consider how I perpetuate ableism.”

Where RBT opens space of cocreation between audience and actor (Lea, 2012; Mienczakowski & Moore, 2008), RBT in the workshop context may enhance co-construction of knowledge between learners and facilitators. A CSB participant said of the RBT: “it was a great way to engage the audience and to create a form of shared experience . . . it was encouraging to see authentic uses of facilitation/pedagogy to engage the participants.” And yet another: “it was surprising, engaging, and added an emotional element to the ideas that was especially powerful.” By prompting emotional and cognitive recall, RBT opens a shared space for learners to co-construct new affective knowledge. Through theatre, learners are encouraged to consider and enter into perspectives of people who are different from themselves (Iverson, 2013). As poignantly said by Wesley (2007), “art, and its celebration of what is different, opens us to the possibility of imagining difference as something to be embraced rather than pushed away” (p. 15). A CSB participant noted:

At the beginning, I was kind of lost because I am used to the formal/traditional way to conduct workshops in which someone speaks and shows slides or videos. However, this technique allowed me to put myself in someone's shoes, projecting their thoughts, frustrations, and expectations.

In this workshop, I intentionally incorporated a variety of learning activities to address the learning objectives. Importantly, RBT alone does not necessarily have an impact on transformational learning in the affective domain—it is important for the learner to also engage in self-reflection and dialogue (Muzyk et al., 2017). One participant noted that a highlight of CSB was “the space that was provided for reflection and connection.” Pairing RBT and other active learning techniques invites participants to reflect on their own experiences of belonging, to consider how Disabled peoples’ experiences are unique, and to ponder how these experiences intersect and how they might make shifts in their own practice. For example, a participant said, “I really enjoyed the reading of the play. It was interesting to hear many different perspectives and I definitely learned about some of the challenges that disabled people face.” Some active learning strategies engage the cognitive domain through dialogue and discussion, whereas RBT communicates through embodied, felt experience, and enhances understanding and empathy (Weems, 2003). A CSB participant learned “there is no one definition or identity of disability. I knew that intellectually, but the session (it) hit home.”

RBT also serves as a catalyst for further dialogue and “deeper learning” (Iverson, 2013; Wesley, 2007, p. 17). One participant said, “I greatly appreciated the Theatre that was performed as this helps me to digest information and lessons in a different and more profound way than some other forms of learning.” Another commented that she became more aware of the nuances of Disabled peoples’ experiences and was able to discuss this during the scenario activity. This combination of active learning strategies and RBT addresses the cognitive and affective components of stereotyping and prejudice (Chan et al., 2009). Addressing these components may disrupt the stigmatization process whereby prejudice and stereotyping based on a negative stigma become enacted through discrimination against Disabled people (Chan et al., 2009; Fiske & Tablante, 2015).

How Was This RBT Developed?

The RBT used in CSB—“I Know I Belong When . . . Stories of Authenticity, Performance, and Burdens”—is based on conversations with 35 blind and partially blind people from across Turtle Island: 28 focus-group participants, six storytellers, six cocreators, and the first author. Refer to Bulk (2020) for detail regarding how the data forming the RBT were collected.

RBT Cocreation Sessions

I invited members of the blind community to cocreate an RBT centered on ideas and stories from the research data and our experiences. We had two sessions, with a total of six cocreators besides me. Prior to the sessions, cocreators received a summary of the research. During the sessions, we participated in activities and conversation to develop ideas for a theatrical re-presentation of the stories shared in the research. In the first session we generated ideas, shared stories, and engaged as a community. Ironically, while creating a play about belonging, we developed a sense of belonging with one another.

After the first session, I worked with theatre artist Tetsuro Shigematsu to develop an initial draft. I invited feedback on the draft from the six cocreators and all 34 research participants. At the second session, I read aloud part of the script and we engaged in activities to share stories to build upon and diverge from the script. We generated ideas and discussed possible theatrical elements to enhance sharing our stories.

Following the second session, I used the ideas generated to write a second draft. I invited feedback on this second version from the six cocreators and, after integrating their feedback, from all 34 research participants. At this stage, six responded with messages of enthusiasm for the creative way of sharing stories. One participant made a suggestion to improve the interactive portion of the RBT. A first reading took place at an RBT symposium; one part read by me, and the other by a cocreator. We made small adjustments to the script and theatrical components based on this reading.

Ethics

Vulnerability

Participating in focus groups, storytelling, and RBT sessions, involves vulnerability as we reveal aspects of our identities and experiences that may open us up to ridicule or other negative outcomes. Vulnerability is, however, an essential *part* of cocreating the outcomes of research, and, in the end, enriches the experience for those involved (Defrancisco et al., 2007; Young & McKibban, 2017). Defrancisco et al. (2007) state, “based on our experiences, we believe other qualitative researchers would benefit from acknowledging their own stories more fully before asking others to be vulnerable and share the stories of their lives, whatever the topic of study” (p. 241). By sharing some of my story and identity with participants, I made myself vulnerable before asking them to do the same.

Accessibility

A vital ethical consideration for this project is that of accessibility. I tried throughout the process to be attuned to access needs. For example, consent forms are traditionally provided in print format. I provided consent forms electronically to participants (all of whom have access to technology that allows them to read electronically). At the time of the focus group, conversation, or workshop, I offered to read the consent form aloud and recorded participants' consent to participate based upon the electronically received consent form. Another example of accessibility comes in the way we interacted. We engaged together using simple "gestures of belonging" that, although unusual in non-blind contexts, are expected in the context of the blind community. For example, we announced ourselves when we entered or left a space, or came up alongside someone, and I provided snacks at the workshops, and ensured that all participants knew what was available and where it was. Additionally, I provided funding for cabs to/from the workshop.

Trustworthiness

Some of the techniques we used to promote trustworthiness in the work include member reflections, crystallization, reflexivity, praxis, and voice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Ellingson, 2009; Lincoln et al., 2011; Richardson, 2000). I invited community members to participate in all stages of the research process. This was important, as the knowledge was built together. Participants ultimately chose the level of involvement that worked for them. I acknowledge that these "choices" were shaped by the personal constraints in their lives. I used member reflections to promote representation of all our voices in the construction of knowledge. Member reflections were an opportunity for us to collaborate and elaborate on findings, as opposed to ensuring that we *got it right* (Tracy, 2010). Praxis involves connecting knowledge with action. According to Lincoln et al. (2011), research can be judged, in part, on its ability to stimulate change and decrease ignorance by elucidating previously stifled stories. Thus, I examine the research regarding its ability to expose experiences of reality previously misunderstood or under-represented.

Crystallization, gathering data from various sources, enhanced the outcomes of this research (Ellingson, 2009; Richardson, 2000). Crystallization contrasts with triangulation in that the aim is not to improve accuracy or get a true picture of a particular reality, but rather, to increase the amount of data and gain multiple perspectives such that it is possible to construct a thicker description of the phenomenon being explored. This is based on the idea that realities are not more or less true, rather they are more or less *informed* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Finally, throughout the process I had reflexive conversations and kept reflexive notes containing observations, critical reflections, and feelings, regarding the process and data (Yang, 2015). Because readers/audiences are also co-constructors of knowledge, integrating insights from the aforementioned notes in my writing and the RBT may allow readers to have a greater understanding of the values that may have shaped how I re-present stories (Vandenberg & Hall, 2011).

“I Know I Belong When . . . Stories of Authenticity, Performance, and Burdens”

This section describes, “I Know I Belong When . . . Stories of Authenticity, Performance, and Burdens,” the RBT used in the CSB workshop. The play unfolds through five scenes: 1) I know I belong when; 2) feeling like a burden vs. contributor; 3) performance vs. authenticity; 4) questioning belonging; and allies, attitudes, and 5) actions, attitudes, and allies. The opening scene introduces the topic of belonging, from perspectives of both Disabled and nondisabled people, and invites participants to engage in considering their own sense of belonging. The second and third scenes share major themes from the research and invite participants to consider how the experiences of Disabled people regarding belonging might differ from or reflect their own. The fourth scene highlights a question discussed by participants: do we want to belong to an ableist system anyway? The final scene invites participants into actions that might contribute to more welcoming spaces.

The play employs various flexible theatrical elements, which may be used in different combinations, and alternatives were developed to adapt the play for in-person and virtual workshops, and an audio version was created and can be accessed at this [link](#). Whatever variations are used, the RBT incorporates participant involvement and critical thinking. The overall aim of the play is to promote empathy, shift negative attitudes, and encourage action toward creating spaces that foster belonging.

Acknowledgments

Some 35 individuals contributed their stories to the research that forms a foundation for play. Additionally, audiences/participants who engaged with early iterations of the script contributed their feedback, leading to the further growth of the piece. The script was developed by Laura Yvonne Bulk, with support from Tetsuro Shigematsu and the [Research-Based Theatre Cluster](#) at the University of British Columbia. The audio version was created in collaboration with Amy Amantea (who reads Ava) and Edward Norman (who gave great assistance with editing the audio files), as well as numerous volunteers who read short lines for the introduction.

Cast, Setting, Props

There are three roles in this play: Kendra, Ava, and workshop participants. Wherever possible, performers are people from the Disability community and are compensated. Props for the virtual performances include a hat, a jar, and coins. The in-person performance is set in a neutral space with two chairs, a blazer, a dumbbell, a bag, and a table. The participants are in a circle with a large gap as the stage.

Theatrical Elements

Various theatrical elements are incorporated in the RBT to complement the rest of CSB and promote active engagement in learning throughout the performance. For example, CSB participants are invited to think about their own experiences of belonging. Prior to or at the beginning of the workshop, participants are asked to write a statement that completes the sentence, *I know I belong when*. The play begins with

actors or participants reading aloud statements to complete that sentence, followed by examples of *I know I belong when* statements from the research. A unique theatrical element in the virtual performance is the use of a blurred camera view of one of the actors, simulating the way the actor sees the world. This element has been described by participants as unique, surprising, and engendering empathy. Sound is another element used to engage multiple senses in learning. For example, when discussing the *minority tax* paid by Disabled people in higher education, the actor adds more coins to a can and loudly shakes it after each line. Breaking the third wall—speaking directly with the audience during a play—is used to keep participants engaged and ask them to consider their own role in creating spaces of belonging. Humour is not only useful for entertainment, but when used with intention to increase understanding and clarity humour can also be an effective teaching device, particularly for affective learning. “Humour enables us to view ourselves with great objectivity and to think about things from other people’s perspectives” (Morain, 2001, p. 118). Finally, repetition is another effective device used for both storytelling and teaching (Norman, 2003; Saville, 2011). For example, the phrase, “I know I belong when . . .” is used repeatedly in the play with various conclusions. The conclusion “. . . my belonging was never in question to begin with” is repeated at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the play to emphasize the point and invite learners into the conversation regarding whose belonging is questioned and to reflect on whose belonging they may have questioned.

The Insider Performance

These RBT stories are our stories, and they are my story. While I tried to ensure the stories were grounded within the diverse perspectives of participants and cocreators, as the main author of the RBT my perspective certainly influences the stories told. I identify with all the themes expounded upon in the RBT, but perhaps not all the perspectives or dimensions of the experience of being blind and belonging in academia. I performed versions or portions of the RBT in various settings and for/with various people throughout the development process, in workshops, an RBT symposium, and in defense of my dissertation. As an *insider*, a blind scholar and teacher, there was some blurring, to use a pun, of the lines between who I am as the CSB facilitator and a character I played. I do not explicitly differentiate for audiences which of the stories I identify with, and which I perhaps do not. Another interesting avenue for exploration is how engaging in this kind of insider performance and education might affect the performer/teacher, and how having an insider perform the RBT/facilitate discussion might affect the engagement of learners. For example, although I employ strategies to mitigate this impact, such as opportunities to submit anonymous questions and small group discussions, participants might feel less free to ask honest questions that might offend me, a Disabled person.

Concluding Thoughts

This article demonstrates and invites readers to reflect on the value of RBT, in combination with other interactive and intentional teaching tools, for supporting affective learning and creating change. Although *change* happens at different levels and, as several Disabled participants said, “awareness education” has been going on for decades and still there remain barriers. While it is not claimed that RBT or this workshop will solve all the barriers, some change has occurred as a result of this particular innovative arts-based approach to teaching. For example, based on the impact of CSB, one individual advocated for change within their organization’s 15,000 student event registrations to add to the registration a place for people to share their access needs. Several participants reported that they incorporated a practice of requesting a round of names to ensure everyone knows who is in the room at a meeting. Based on feedback received, it appears participants took what they learned and applied it to other settings as well—spreading those small gestures of belonging and perhaps some larger changes too.

To build on this work, future studies could examine the longer-term impact of RBT-enhanced learning on actions, attitudes, and knowledge. It would also be beneficial to explore the potential impact of the workshop and RBT on shifts in workplace cultures. It should be noted that while this workshop and strategies therein were effective for many, not all learners will connect with these in the same way. Future work could also explore how the approach might be modified to meet a variety of needs.

This article demonstrates how innovative, evidence-informed, RBT-enhanced teaching promotes affective learning. The article describes evidence for RBT’s effectiveness based on literature and the impact of the described RBT-enhanced workshop. The hope is that this growing evidence will inspire more educators and scholars to employ creative approaches, such as RBT, to engage their learners in simultaneous cognitive and affective learning processes.

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