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Juntos Podemos: Devising Theater as Community-Based Pedagogy

Roxanne Schroeder-Arce

In this Workshop Reflection, Roxanne Schroeder-Arce reflects upon a devising workshop that she and two UTPA professors facilitated with 15 students from UTPA and UT Austin during the conference. During the workshop, the students and faculty devised a performance called Juntos Podemos. Schroeder-Arce chronicles the background and goals of workshop, the devising process and how the workshop reflected the themes of the conference. Then, she paints a picture of the final performance. Finally, she includes her own reflections as well as those of the student participants from both UTPA and UT Austin.

At the NACCS Tejas 2013 Conference, Chican@ Studies ¡Ahora!, I facilitated an interactive devising workshop with two colleagues from the University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA): Eric Wiley, Department of Communication, and Edna Ochoa, Department of Modern Languages and Literature. Aiming to engage theatre as a tool to explore issues of Latino identity on college campuses, the workshop was titled *Juntos Podemos: Devising Theater as Community-Based Pedagogy*. The Spanish part of the workshop title translates to “Together We Can” and the idea was that bringing a diverse group of students and faculty from two distinct universities together to devise a piece of theatre would encourage reflection and action around Latino Theatre and representation on both campuses. In 2011, 38.1% of the population of Texas identified as Hispanic or Latino in origin. However, the theatre produced in educational institutions throughout the state, including secondary and post-secondary school theatre programs and regional theatres representing Latino stories and characters is staggeringly disproportionate to the number of Latinos living here. Through this workshop, my colleagues and I hoped to foster dialogue and relationships among the students and ourselves with a larger goal of building a collective voice dedicated to ensuring more Latino stories on Texas university stages.

A total of 15 undergraduate and graduate students from UTPA and the University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin) participated over the three-day workshop. Of the 15, eleven identified as Latino, three as White, and one as Black American. The UTPA group included ten

students studying theatre or Latino/a Literature and the UT Austin group was comprised of five theatre students. In a total of six hours, we collectively devised a piece of theatre entitled *Juntos Podemos*, loosely based on the conference theme: community based pedagogies, scholarship, and activism.

Background: Why We Chose this Project

In the summer of 2011, I met a few UTPA faculty members at two separate conferences. I felt an immediate shared passion and desire to develop professional relationships with them with a goal of increasing the representation of Latina/o stories in Texas theatre. I already have some ties to the Rio Grande Valley, where I supervise student teachers and conduct research about culturally responsive theatre education. My interest in the Valley led me to respond to a request for proposals offered by Marci McMahan for a session about performance in the Valley, to be presented at the American Theatre in Higher Education Conference. McMahan and I presented with others committed to Latina/o theater about some of the exciting theatre being cultivated in the Valley and I learned about Eric Wiley at UTPA. Then, I saw a performance of *Crawling with Monsters*, created and directed by Wiley at the American Alliance for Theatre and Education conference in Chicago. The play is a multimedia performance ethnography piece based on interviews exploring issues of violence in Reynosa, México. Wiley shared with me that he had begun a Latino Theatre Initiative at UTPA, a goal I have for UT Austin. Wiley, McMahan and I met, along with Brant Pope, Chair of the Department of Theatre and Dance at UT Austin, and we began to make plans for action. McMahan invited Edna Ochoa on board and we began to brainstorm our first collaboration to be implemented at the NACCS conference.

We decided that given our ultimate objective of nurturing more Latino theatre in the state of Texas and our experience in Latino theatre and theatre-making, devising a piece of

theatre together with students from both institutions would be an excellent starting point. We also agreed that the piece we would develop would reflect the theme of the NACCS conference and we could begin our work there. Fliers were made and students from both institutions were asked to email the facilitators to express their interest. Wiley, Ochoa, and I communicated via email to make a plan for the six-hour devising process.

The Workshop: Our Process

The three facilitators were in agreement that the first hour of the workshop needed to focus on community building and creating a shared vocabulary. When I refer to vocabulary, I do not necessarily mean oral language, rather I mean ways of communicating: with our bodies, through music, through feeling one another's presence. We consciously fostered a space where neither Spanish nor English was privileged over the other. We briefly offered that participants were encouraged to speak in whichever language they felt most comfortable, that we must all lean in to try to understand both the words and perspectives of everyone and that we should collectively agree to ask when we needed help understanding.

Each of the facilitators led activities to build ensemble. The entire time, we were consciously creating the piece of theatre we would present, though we did not know what parts the ensemble would want to share. The entire time, we also kept the conference theme at the forefront, and the ideas of activism became central to the work we were devising. The work was organic yet at the same time carefully structured and guided. I led several name exercises and activities that helped us to make connections with others in the room, naming where we are from, things we like, our families and other lived experience. Ochoa offered a prompt for the group which started with breathing. We all breathed together and then individually wrote about some of our experiences given our own identity. Then, in groups we shared the work. The breathing proved to enable us to find stories deep in our bodies to recall, scribe and then

share. Wiley led an activity where participants chase butterflies. While an individual acting exercise, the act of collectively chasing butterflies helped to build community and ultimately served as a metaphor for border crossing. The ensemble congealed quickly and we found ourselves readily sharing, in English and in Spanish, some of our deepest thoughts and feelings about ourselves and our unique individual – and in some cases collective – identities.

In the third and final workshop meeting, we devised a little more individual work and then began relating the written pieces to one another. In some segments of the theatre performance we were creating, we decided that one participant would say one line of his or her writing, followed by another. Movement was added, by those who wanted to layer in frozen or moving physical images representing or inspired by what the spoken words were saying. Then, music organically came into the performance. Though we were conscious of the expectation of a performance to an audience, we remained process centered and continued to explore through the entire workshop. During the process of the devising, we explored the conference theme in many ways and on many levels. The three facilitators modeled community based pedagogies as we listened to the individual participants from two institutions as we all came together to explore shared questions and ideas. We listened to what the collective community wanted to say and then offered methods of sharing the ideas, to amplify and in some cases clarify the voices in the room, though always seeking to honor the participants and what they wanted to share.

The “Performance” or “Sharing”: Our Product

The sharing took place in the Studio theatre at UTPA. We worked under simple lights, in the clothes we wore that day, and with only a few props and a guitar. We hoped for our performance to be a sharing of the themes we had explored together, aiming to inspire thought and dialogue among the audience members, to include the audience in the thought and dialogue

we had over our six hours together. The workshop leaders performed with the rest of the group. This was another way that we modeled community based pedagogy; the community was all of us and we all presented ourselves together.

Eighteen bodies enter the space from either side of the proscenium stage, searching for unseen butterflies. The bodies land in a frozen image and collectively orate the word, “identidad.” The bodies disperse as they continue their search for butterflies. Then, seven bodies lay on the floor. Each body rises and shares a line in response to, *Quien soy Yo?* One performer states, “Yo soy una joven decendiente de sangre azteca y Española.” Another offers, “Sometimes I hear people talk about me and I wonder if that is who I am or who I was.” As those performers move out of the performance area, five others get into a frozen image, or tableau, of how each individual feels about their own identity, and one performer begins a monologue, “Yo soy una mujer que se siente identificada con los Mexicanos, con sus necesidades, sus problemas, y sus luchas.” As the performer continues, another stands above her and moves into four distinct individual tableaux, one of her idea of ethnic pride, of need, of problems, and finally of the fight. Two pairs on either side move and enact these ideas more fluidly, at moments supporting and at other moments resisting one another. There is a give and take between the speaker and the pairs, reflecting the speaker’s and their own struggles with similar experiences.

Next, the group sings a song in Spanish collectively as three monologues are woven together and spoken, one line from each speaker, as a sort of braid of voices. One monologue about a young Mexican American boy being shamed by a candy store employee for not speaking Spanish is spoken in tandem with another monologue about being too brown for the black people and too black for the brown people in the performer’s community, and yet another monologue, in Spanish, of a mother living on the border who works so hard she barely has time

to see her children. The performance runs about 25 minutes and ends with another full group tableau of strength and unity, a symbol of the group's activism in presenting this piece as a community to the community.

Tiffany Ana López, Professor of Theatre from the University of California, Riverside, joined us after the sharing, and facilitated dialogue about our process and final product. Brant Pope, Chair of the Department of Theatre and Dance at UT Austin, and Marci McMahon also joined the panel to respond as well. The audience seemed to appreciate the applied work, and the performers spoke of the impact of devising this piece together. We publicly shared plans for continued collaboration. We hope for more dialogue and collective theatre making, leading to action around US Latino/a identity and representation. Collectively exploring and sharing through an applied theatre practice led to affirmation of collective feelings about a lack of Latino/a representation on stage as well as a shared acknowledgement about the importance of every individual's and the group's collective stories being told and heard. Hearing the shared concerns of students and faculty members from both UTPA and UT Austin – and in turn UC Riverside – greatly affirmed the need for more dialogue about representation of language, identity and culture on university stages.

Reflections and Conclusion

Through our own reflections and through reading those of the participants, we concluded that we made significant steps toward reaching our goals. While the greater goal of increasing representation of Latino/a bodies and stories on university stages in Texas will take more time and action, we were able to take smaller steps and reach some of our goals which move us toward our greater goal. One smaller step we took was calling attention to the missed opportunities of including Latino/a voices on stage. Another was our progress toward building groups on several campuses to work toward the larger goal. Finally, we began to cultivate a

collective to support one another in this activism. The students have indeed become a support network of sorts. They have become friends on Facebook and have been in contact over email.

One UT Austin student reflected on her blog shortly after the workshop:

I feel so empowered. Years and generations of oppression try to bring you down and to fill you with doubt. This is why we write. To tell. To document. My line in the performance was 'I am the piece of the puzzle that didn't fit. La Negra que tiene tumbao.' This is who I am. I assert my presence. That was what I was expecting to do . . . Assert. It didn't end up being like that. I learned so much about standing in solidarity. It's not about asserting your own identity in the space but more so about finding common ground. There is always common ground.

We indeed found a common ground and collectively felt the power in our alliance. This solidarity appeared to be felt by all involved. A UTPA student similarly reflected:

En mi experiencia personal, el taller multidisciplinario de teatro, fue una experiencia muy grata. Por principio, nos reunimos personas, tanto de distinta edad, como de distinto género. Pero lo más divertido, fue el hecho de que había participantes que hablaban español o inglés solamente. Trabajamos intensivamente, durante horas, para poder tener un producto final. Partimos de ejercicios de improvisación en los que el lenguaje y el contenido eran básicos. Algunos utilizaban ambos lenguajes, otros no tenían lenguaje alguno. Creo que para mí la experiencia fue muy grata, pues nos encontramos siendo un grupo de gente que ama el teatro y que eso fue lo que nos unió, muy lejos de la habilidad o el idioma. Al final descubrimos que la pasión debe ser lo más importante.

TRANSLATION: *In my personal experience, the multidisciplinary theater workshop was a very pleasant experience. First, we met persons both of different ages, and of different disciplines. But the most interesting thing was the fact that there were participants who only spoke Spanish or English (but we worked bilingually). We worked intensively, for hours, to be able to have a final product. We departed from exercises of improvisation in which the language and the content were basic. Some of them were using both languages, others did not have any language. I believe that for me the experience was very pleasant, since we are a group of a person who love the theater and that is what joined us, much more so than our skills or language. In the end we discovered that our passion is the most important thing.*

The deep connections developed over the time we worked together were critical. However, sharing the performance with others at the conference proved to offer a deeper connection as we supported one another in sharing our stories and as we participated collectively in a display of activism. A UT Austin participant wrote about the importance of such a performance:

At the conference, we, along with UT Pan Am students created a Theatre piece that combined music, movement and elements of our lives into an impactful performance. It reminded me of why I came to the Theatre Department in 2009.

I didn't just want to entertain folk. I wanted to make a difference.

Ultimately, we learned a lot from the work, and made some strong connections in the process leading to more collective goals for the future. We confirmed how eager the students from both universities were to talk about their identities and share their stories. We also learned how rich the stories of these youthful participants are. We have set our next meeting for March 2014, when we hope UTPA students will come to UT Austin to continue and deepen the dialogue.

We walked away with a strong feeling of unity and agency and the sentiment that, yes, it is true: juntos podemos!