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Applied theatre as transdisciplinary research: *JustUs* and the quest for second-order change

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ABSTRACT

This article advances transdisciplinarity as a potentially useful applied theatre theory and method. It maps the ways transdisciplinary research principles informed and framed an applied theatre project and suggests that making applied theatre explicit rather than implicit as a transdisciplinary research process may help practitioners conceptualise and manage projects. In our case, it also increased our ability to contribute to second-order (systemic) change. I argue that applied theatre was always-already transdisciplinary research but articulating this alignment may be helpful to both practice and analysis. The project presented here implemented applied theatre in a university-community partnership addressing youth justice.

KEYWORDS

Applied theatre;
transdisciplinarity;
transdisciplinary research;
youth justice; social change

Introduction

Focusing on New Zealand's justice system was an interesting learning process in itself, because I hadn't paid it a whole lot of thought before this semester. (Personal communication, Expressive Arts student, November 15, 2016)

In 2009, Thompson urged applied theatre to 'make alliances with other forms of practice, draw inspiration from different cultural forms and learn from disciplines both within and beyond the field of performance studies' (2009, 6). His words were echoed in 2011 when Kershaw et al. (66) argued that theatre and performance 'are a part of yet apart from the disciplines that constitute them, therefore they are trans-disciplinary, always operating in yet-to-be defined intersections between disciplinary fields'. A sense of applied theatre as transdisciplinary is intuitively appealing – transdisciplinarity is a 'buzzword' – but how can a goal to bridge disciplinary boundaries while preserving applied theatre's uniqueness, work in practice?

This article explores a project called *JustUs* that occurred in a university Expressive Arts capstone course in Aotearoa New Zealand. The project explored how applied theatre could advance the aims of JustSpeak, a non-governmental 'youth-powered movement for transformative change of criminal justice towards a fair, just and flourishing Aotearoa'

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(JustSpeak 2022). JustSpeak is an advocacy organisation that contributes regularly to national public discourse on justice, holds events, emphasises the importance of evidence and lived experience in media coverage, and develops information resources. It particularly aims to engage young people in public discourse about justice, by making information more accessible and relevant.

Our goal was to collaborate creatively with JustSpeak to productively intersect multiple, contested spaces and identities. These included the corrections system, which contains many Indigenous Māori staff and inmates but is deeply, trenchantly colonial; our class identities (myself as the teacher being a Pākehā or migrant-coloniser white woman working in the privileged world of academia along with a mixed class of white students and students of colour, including Māori and Pasifika students); the mainstream media – again, a colonised space most interested in ‘bad news’ or deficit stories about Māori (Tilley 2005); policy-makers and government power-brokers (another space of privilege typically operating at a remove from lived experiences of the justice system); and JustSpeak itself as a bicultural advocacy organisation already working to span most of these disparate worlds. From this intersection we hoped to creatively communicate in ways that shifted established forms of thinking about justice.

This work was always going to be challenging for Expressive Arts students who were not directly studying justice or law. However, adopting principles derived from transdisciplinary research methods (TRM) helped our class keep focussed and remain open to the work as a learning opportunity. Additionally, I found that explicating applied theatre as transdisciplinary research had the subsequent bonus of helping make its rigour and value more comprehensible to those who are unfamiliar with applied theatre’s processes and aims yet may hold power to determine its future by the labels they place on it (for instance, those in higher education institutions responsible for judging research quality across multiple disciplines). Transdisciplinary research gave us a new vocabulary for communicating the validity and importance of what we had achieved to decisionmakers within the contested spaces of academic research and funding regimes.

The issue

The challenge that JustSpeak presented us with was complex and confronting. Aotearoa New Zealand is a postcolonial society, meaning one still dealing with ongoing issues of colonisation. We have a treaty, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and are often considered an exemplar because of it (Orange 2017). The treaty has certainly created, after much struggle to get it upheld, positive outcomes, but it is not a cure-all and there is much decolonising work yet to do (Love and Tilley 2013).

For example, as JustSpeak staff outlined to our class, Aotearoa’s justice system encodes racial disparity at every stage. If a group of Māori youth linger on the street, other members of the community are statistically more likely to ring the police than if young white people congregate on the street. Thus, ‘The police are more likely to pick up young Māori people than young European New Zealanders for the same minor crimes, like vandalism’ (JustSpeak 2020). If detained, Māori youth are more likely to be charged: ‘Police are almost twice as likely to send a first-time Māori offender to court than they are a Pākehā offender’ (Johnsen 2020). On reaching court, the likelihood of conviction is higher: ‘While more European New Zealanders are charged with violent crimes,

dishonesty, property and traffic crimes, more Māori people are convicted of these crimes' (JustSpeak 2020). Once convicted, sentencing is also racist: for almost every category of crime, Māori are sent to prison more often than non-Māori for the same crime and, overall, 'Eighteen per cent of Māori convicted of a crime receive a prison sentence, compared with 11 per cent of non-Māori' (Fyers 2017). The cumulative result of these statistical differences at each step is that Māori comprise 53 per cent of Aotearoa's prison population, despite only accounting for 16 per cent of the population (Ara Poutama Aotearoa - Corrections New Zealand 2021).

Of course, this is a deficit-based way of outlining the problem – Māori are powerful leaders and changemakers in Aotearoa who run a flourishing Indigenous economy and make immense and distinctive contributions to environmental, cultural, economic, and other successes (Tilley and Love 2005). However, the dominant, colonially imposed criminal justice system is racist – understanding 'that racism as an ideology and practice was invented and refined in colonisation' (Jackson 2020) – and that can only really be explained in negative terms.

Levels of change

Given the size of the problem and its deep roots, our class wondered was this realistically something that applied theatre, by a group of students, could impact? It is hard to measure the effect of creative interventions for smaller issues, let alone complex problems caused by socially embedded, intergenerational, colonial dispossession. Crossick and Kaszynska (2016, 59) note that:

arts and culture work at many levels, which can complicate empirical analysis: they can convey political ideas and arguments and create spaces where these ideas can be challenged, but it is rarely a question of their effecting direct changes, so much as creating conditions for change through spillover effects.

Or, as Neufeld (2015, 115) says, 'If we take the standard for revolution at all seriously – that is, if we take it that revolution replaces a normative order with another one – then it is rarely the case that the aims of artists really are revolutionary'.

Our class discussed these two levels of change: first-order change could mean we inspired critical awareness among participants and audiences. People might change their own assumptions and be motivated to sign a petition, donate to JustSpeak, or write to politicians demanding justice system overhaul. First-order change seemed well encapsulated by the oft-quoted words of filmmaker Toni Cade Bambara (2012, 38) that her job was to 'make the revolution irresistible' or perhaps by Adrienne Rich's (1987, 136) observation that 'Poetry isn't revolution / but a way of knowing why it must come'.

Art is sometimes critiqued for only achieving first-order change, and indeed if 'aestheticization of information transforms facts into form: something to be appreciated and admired, displayed and contemplated ... but not necessarily acted upon' (Duncombe and Lambert 2019, 122) it may be difficult to achieve even first-order change through theatrical representation. However, most theatre projects I have participated in, including four rounds of Climate Change Theatre Action,¹ and a performative storytelling project on homelessness,² have achieved measurable first-order attitudinal change when assessed

by participant and audience surveys (Tilley et al. 2017; Tilley 2021a, 2021b). Nonetheless, the 'holy grail' is second-order change, in which the system that causes the problem is shifted. Biesta (2015, 107) suggests this is educators' true responsibility: to not only to bring into the world critically aware 'newcomers' but to exercise 'a responsibility for the world. It is a responsibility to create and keep in existence a "worldly space" through which new beginnings can come into presence'.

That is what happened in our project, albeit in a very small way. We contributed to systemic change – a change to the world, not just to our audience. While there were many applied theatre methodologies that influenced our approach, our main guiding framework was much broader – transdisciplinary research methods (TRM) – and this article outlines how its steps helped facilitate opportunities for second-order impact. Both achieving change and bridging paradigms are deeply complex goals, but the field of TRM offered key parameters that helped us foreshadow and navigate known difficulties with transdisciplinary work and make links and alliances beyond the classroom that led to the work pushing against the normative order, not only against our audiences' individual consciences.

Review of TRM literature

The transdisciplinary research typology applied in this article is synthesised from a comprehensive review of TRM literature including: Thompson Klein et al. (2001), Carayannis, and D, and Campbell (2012), Gibbons et al. (1994), Carew and Wickson (2010), Nicolescu (2008, 2014b, 2014a), Somerville and Rapport (2003), Carr and McCallum (2009), and Wickson, Carew, and Russell (2006), among others. Particularly useful has been the work of Montuori (e.g. 1996, 2003, 2008, 2012a, 2013; Montuori and Donnelly 2017).

From these writers comes an understanding of TRM as: problem-based (starting from a broad encounter with real-world issues rather than from a particular disciplinary perspective); inclusive (of diverse communities, citizen researchers, non-scientists, and partners with different skills and backgrounds, as well as of professional, experiential, oral and Indigenous knowledges without hierarchisation of knowledge types); broadening both access to knowledge and knowledge itself rather than working within siloes; and accepting of limits to what we can know, such as culturally specific knowledges, embodied knowledges, or new ontological outcomes that are (often deliberately) disruptive of traditional efforts towards definition or quantification (Arnold 2013; Carr and McCallum 2009; Gibbons 2013; Lawrence and Després 2004).

Like applied theatre, TRM has mostly been applied to humanitarian and environmental issues, and numerous commentators describe it as inherently progressive: 'Transdisciplinarity is not neutral: it involves an ethical dimension' (Nicolescu 2012, viii). Augsburg insists that 'Transdisciplinarity presupposes an individual ethics, a desire to improve society and to contribute to the advancement of the common good' (2014, 233). Arnold (2013, 1820) sees TRM as more 'responsive and relevant' than traditional research approaches and suggests it should be 'life-problem oriented' that is, practical needs should drive the approaches selected. He argues that, because the purpose of any research will influence its outcome, for TRM to successfully integrate different paradigms 'you must first decide which societal goals should be met' (2013, 1821).

Augsburg (2014, 233) maps these values onto what she sees as the characteristics of the transdisciplinary researcher:

an appreciation of an array of skills, characteristics, and personality traits aligned with a transdisciplinary attitude; acceptance of the idea that transdisciplinary individuals are intellectual risk takers and institutional transgressors; insights into the nuances of transdisciplinary practice and attendant virtues; a respect for the role of creative inquiry, cultural diversity, and cultural relativism.

These characteristics align closely with values that also underpin applied theatre – a social justice orientation (Busby 2021), comfort with messiness and intent to deconstruct assumptions and naturalised divisions (McNamara, Kidd, and Hughes 2011), and willingness to accept limits on what we can know while validating creative and intuitive knowledges (Kershaw et al. 2011). Multiple writers on transdisciplinary research have also argued for TRM as intrinsically creative. This includes bringing creative practitioners into traditional research teams (Gibbons 2013), but also understanding creativity as a process for seeing from new perspectives and imagining new futures for humanity and the planet (Nicolescu 2012). Montuori stresses this as an urgent dimension of transdisciplinary research: ‘Creativity and imagination will be essential to envisioning and developing alternatives to the systems, structures, and processes that are presently failing us’ (Montuori 2012a, 64). However, other than the two agenda-setting mentions by Thompson (2009), and Kershaw et al. (2011), which signalled TRM’s potential for applied theatre, I can find no subsequent research that explicitly brings applied theatre and TRM into deeper conversation.

In summary: TRM starts by defining a problem it wants to solve, brings in diverse knowledges and viewpoints, values all perspectives equally, including knowledges that are usually marginalised in the research process such as creative, personal, insider, and Indigenous knowledges, and is itself inherently creative. It uses the creative intermingling of unexpected viewpoints to perceive problems differently and thereby imagine novel solutions. Transdisciplinary research can deepen the ethics of research processes (Fine 2017), enhance the credibility and legitimacy of findings (Christens and Perkins 2008), and augment innovation (Arnold 2013). Culturally responsive transdisciplinary research can combat marginalisation of Indigenous knowledges and create safe research conditions for diverse participants (Carr and McCallum 2009).

As noted above, the work of Montuori, as a prolific writer on transdisciplinarity, creativity, and their interconnectedness, proved especially germane to our project, and many of his publications provided conceptual scaffolding for the case study offered here. A particularly clear focus came from his article ‘Five Dimensions of Applied Transdisciplinarity’, in which he encapsulates TRM as:

- (1) inquiry-based rather than discipline-driven
- (2) trans-paradigmatic rather than intra-paradigmatic
- (3) complex thinking rather than reductive-disjunctive thinking
- (4) integration of the inquirer rather than ‘objective’ elimination of the inquirer
- (5) creative inquiry rather than reproductive inquiry. (Montuori 2012b, 1–2)

We adopted these steps to guide our class project with JustSpeak and they opened and directed our thinking in ways that enabled us to ultimately help achieve that elusive goal of second-order change. Below, I elaborate and apply these five dimensions to organise and explicate applied theatre as transdisciplinary research in our project and identify limitations. Then, I synthesise ways that the five dimensions might guide and validate applied theatre practice more broadly.

Case study: *JustUs*

Inquiry-based rather than discipline-driven

Montuori's first step is to inquire with open curiosity, trusting in process rather than fixity. When our class first engaged with JustSpeak, neither party had any idea what might be possible. An inquiry brief enabled comfort with that. The aim of our course was broad – simply to find ways to use students' creativity to serve a community partner. To 'discover' rather than 'assume' where this could lead, we deliberately set no agendas for our initial meetings with JustSpeak. We got to know each other and explored what each group had in its inventory of values, knowledge, perspectives, and skills. We did not assume that we would produce a piece of theatre nor arrive with creative visions. We allowed that to emerge out of the collaboration. To scaffold this lengthy inquiry phase, my students practised improvisation exercises before each meeting. Our preparation seemed like fun theatre games but was developing active listening, offer-accepting, divergent thinking, risk taking, relationship-building, and collaboration competencies.

As we talked with JustSpeak over several weeks, one matter repeatedly snagged the students' attention: the age limit between youth court and adult court. At the time of our project, this change occurred on a person's seventeenth birthday. Sixteen-year-olds went through Youth Court and could access restorative justice, social support, diversion, and options other than prison time. Seventeen-year-olds were placed in remand, with the general adult prison population, while their case was scheduled for hearing, and had few of the diversion or restorative justice options available to sixteen-year-olds. Media reports (e.g. Shadwell 2015) suggested remand was violent, dangerous, and a recruiting ground for gangs. An Ombudsman's report indicated some young people were held in solitary confinement for up to 23 hours a day, to 'protect' them from the adult prison population, with severe mental health impacts (Clendon 2015).

When JustSpeak representatives described that situation to our class, they encountered strong affective responses – shock and confusion. Why would a seventeen-year-old be placed with adult prisoners? Our class found it difficult to comprehend the arbitrariness of that demarcating line: that a person could behave a particular way one day and receive one response from the justice system, but do the same thing a day later, and the response (and likely consequences for their wellbeing and future) would be entirely different. Being not far past their seventeenth birthday themselves, many students felt strongly that this aspect of the law was ludicrous. Their incredulity was helpful not only to sparking creative work, but also to JustSpeak in isolating one issue, from the many they deal with, that had powerful salience with young people.

This discovery process matches Montuori's instruction to, first, 'be able to give an extensive description of the issue you want to explore. This should preferably happen

through a narrative, a story, an incident, anything that connects the issue to the “real world” (Montuori 2012b, 2). Through the extended inquiry phase, without jumping too quickly to planning or solutions, we had met Arnold’s (2013) suggestion for transdisciplinary research to first clarify the key societal question to be engaged with. As semester progressed, the students also felt a mounting sense of opportunity in connection with this issue, when JustSpeak revealed that Cabinet (the New Zealand Government’s senior ministers and the Prime Minister) had recently received an expert report on the Youth Court age range and had announced an intention to vote on the issue. The impending vote provided a sense of a possible opening for impacting second-order change and deepened the students’ passion for the work.

Trans-paradigmatic rather than intra-paradigmatic

Our second step, again from Montuori’s five, was to view our project as transparadigmatic (creating an interlinked network of different but equal intellectual frameworks) rather than intradisciplinary (sitting within a single discipline). This allowed the students to critically unpick the assumptions of applied theatre (it was not the ruling paradigm which all other activities would serve, but one tool among many), encouraged wider data gathering, focussed students on problem-solving, and developed respect for ‘other’ knowledges – including the community partner coming to understand the value that applied theatre might bring to the work they do (they had never, in their words, ‘done anything theatrical’ before). We had all shifted to seeing applied theatre as a way of knowing that could, like the other knowledge resources available to us, be viewed critically, taken in parts rather than as a whole, and complement not overwrite other ways of seeing the issue.

JustSpeak was co-led by a sociologist and a lawyer, who could supply data from law, criminology, health, psychology, sociology, community justice, and more. None of my students had any background in law or justice. If they had seen the class as purely ‘a theatre class’, my experience is that limits what they expect to encounter and can engender reluctance to engage with scholarship outside the theatre discipline. However, framing the work as transdisciplinary problem-solving changed the students’ mindset: they eagerly read a wide range of research materials that had nothing to do with theatre. As the work progressed, they digested complex legal decisions and policy documents with care and interest alongside complex critical race theory as well as reading plays about justice. By mid-semester, students were independently bringing articles from developmental psychology to class, discussing government bills, and increasingly engaging in sophisticated levels of critical media analysis. Their conceptual engagement with the issue across transdisciplinary creative, legal-scientific, and social justice angles had encouraged them to seek out any methods, information genres, forms, and techniques they needed to combine with theatre skills and interests, to advance their creative solution.

Complex thinking rather than reductive-disjunctive thinking

Montuori’s third step is to embrace complex thinking rather than boil things down to singular answers. Theatre is already inherently productive of complexity and paradox, being able to hold different ideas in creative tension, and certainly our eventual

theatre work did that – but this embrace of complexity was also important for the *how* of the work, the process.

We created a discussion forum between the class and JustSpeak to exchange information. Halfway through the course, the students began (of their own volition) posting media items about youth justice, unpacking the discourse, asking whose voices were missing, and questioning the implications for those involved and for society. These kinds of critical posts showed clear evidence of students' thinking complexifying. They increasingly challenged how various perspectives, particularly dominant or governmental voices in the media, were constructed and, as Montuori (2012b) urges, looked for fundamental assumptions and historical background to how the issues had been framed over time.

For example, during the course, the media reported that four non-Indigenous boys from privileged socio-economic backgrounds who had been charged with multiple burglaries of luxury homes totalling \$80,000, had received home detention and reparation orders ('Burglaries Done for Thrill of it' 2016). A student noticed the discrepancy with multiple other news stories listing jail terms for Māori involved in less costly burglaries (such as a man jailed for stealing a hammer and gumboots) and posted several contrasting media articles on our discussion forum. JustSpeak staff added police arrest data showing that the odds of prosecution after arrest for Māori youth were 36 per cent, compared with 22 per cent for non-Māori (JustSpeak 2015). A vigorous discussion ensued, with students finding other materials to contribute and unpacking the systemic racial and colonial underpinnings of the problem. This wasn't a 'critical thinking exercise' imposed on the students but something they had brought into the class themselves then autonomously applied critical thinking to.

Another question that students raised without prompting was representation on stage: the class included Pasifika, Māori, Asian, and Pākehā students, but was about 75% Pākehā. As conversations about systemic bias emerged, I introduced Jane Elliott's work, and we watched *Real Life: Anatomy of Prejudice*, a documentary available through E-TV about her 'Blue Eyes' anti-racism workshops (Russell 2009). As white students began to acknowledge their privilege, the whole class began to grapple with the creative implications. How could they represent something not their collective story? They also began to reflect on why they assumed it wouldn't or couldn't be their story. Complexifying thinking did not just apply to the students: as the educator, I also had to be open to an inquiry-based approach to my own role, and engage in responsive, active learning to each challenge the course threw up, rather than assume that as the 'teacher' I was an expert. I researched and consumed my own reading list about anti-racist pedagogies throughout semester, to guide creation of brave spaces and caring processes for the students to discuss race (e.g. Milner 2003; Biermann 2011).³

The students were now hungry to understand both the justice system and their own assumptions about colonisation: and once the desire for new knowledge had come from the students themselves, the inclusive, transdisciplinary approach encouraged them to read anything relevant to solving the problem, not just theatre resources. They read and watched material on intersectionality (e.g. Crenshaw 2016; Ahmed 2000), everyday racism (e.g. Essed 1991), white privilege (e.g. Frankenberg 1993, 2001; McIntosh 1990) in combination with theatre-specific material on representation (we found an excellent range of essays on anti-racist theatre on Howlround.com). Usage statistics on the class

intranet showed a spike in downloads every time new resources were shared (by students, JustSpeak, or me), evidencing an acquisitive rather than instrumental approach to knowledge: as one student commented later, 'this is the first course where I cared more about the work than the grade' (Personal Communication, November 2016). One student presented their own summary of Ahmed's ideas about preserving difference and finding solidarity in cross-cultural activist encounters to the class, and this proved particularly useful to provoking a creative solution: what if the protagonists in this story were represented not as 'strangers' but as 'us'? That discussion prompted students' choice of title for their collaboratively devised play: *JustUs*. It also led to a casting response to the representation challenges: to avoid reproducing stereotypes, criminals would be played by white students, and authority figures such as police and prison officers, by students of colour. Social actions were also identified: the students wanted their performance to raise funds for Wesley Community Action, and they wanted the script gifted to JustSpeak at the final performance so that ownership of the story would sit with the community partner, not with the university.

The next creative research question was also identified: what happens to the meaning if we imagine this story *is* about white protagonists? How does that change the way it is read by an audience? Does this undercut or appropriate the story or foreground the issue of age? If we deconstruct and confront stereotyped assumptions that a story about childhood poverty and crime will often represent non-white subjects, how can we critically and creatively intervene in that assumption?

The students were clearly traversing and combining complex paradigms of decolonial and postcolonial thinking, critical whiteness studies, representation, ethics, law, sociology, criminology, health, media studies and more, to produce new knowledge. They were actively implementing Montuori's definition of transdisciplinary research as not 'either a research method or simply a way of doing research that utilizes a number of different disciplines' but as 'an altogether different way of thinking' that provides 'opportunity for inquiry into our own fundamental assumptions about knowledge, knowledge production, and inquiry' (2012b, 3). At the same time, they were also insistently pursuing the creative dimensions of their research inquiry by workshopping how all this material could coalesce into applied theatre.

Integration of the inquirer rather than 'objective' elimination of inquirer

Montuori's fourth step is to identify missing voices and have transdisciplinary researchers critically reflect on their own biases. Part of the creative breakthrough of how to tell a specific, personal story about the injustice of the justice system came when JustSpeak noted that it is the people who experience the justice system whose voices are least heard in the debate and offered to connect us with another organisation, Wesley Community Action (WCA), that was working directly with young people who had lived experience. We received a class visit from two WCA workers and two young men, one of whom had experienced youth court, while the other had experienced adult court. Reflecting on the visit afterwards, particularly the young men's feelings of unfamiliarity on entering the deeply institutional space of a university campus, in future we would meet in a space of our participants' choosing. Nonetheless, both the young men and the WCA workers were candid about their experiences and gave us informed

consent to use their anonymised testimony. The class was left stunned by what they related, particularly the brutality of the adult remand system and the inadequacy of a seventeen-year-old's physical and psychological resources to cope with it. Class members experienced further recognition of the gaps in their own knowledge, but also a sense of solidarity and connection, or what DeFrantz (2017, 15) calls 'recognition across difference'.

The class now was able to clarify content and direction for the creative work. Creating specific and individual characters (who were not the young men but were inspired by their stories) would allow insight into some of the human dimensions of the justice system that had been related to us, without suggesting these characters were representative. The class collectively devised character outlines and listed key dramatic points. A student with dramaturgical strengths took the lead in imagining these points as potential scenes. Scene titles were placed into scriptwriting software, each scene allocated to a subgroup within the class, and students populated their scene with dialogue and action from the verbatim testimony. I worked alongside the student dramaturge on narrative shape, continuity, and consistency between the scenes, but students led the creative material generation. One of the WCA workers checked a draft script and gave detailed feedback that further shaped the work.

Working directly with these participant stories also spurred the students to further evaluate the influence of their own identity as participants in the research process. In a series of reflection exercises on the shared forum, we worked through the questions Montuori proposes (2012b, 4): 'What has shaped our understanding of the world? Who are we, and how do we engage with and approach knowledge and knowing?' During this activity, one of the students posted 'Feeling lucky I'm a white dude'. It was not a flippant comment but signalled, as Biermann (2011, 394) describes, 'a reflective peeling back of various layers of privilege and the ignorance that comes with it' that can initiate personal decolonisation. This student's candid revelation of emerging awareness of his white masculine privilege was the beginning of a journey of self-inquiry as to how he could actively redistribute his privilege and it prompted others to do likewise.

Creative inquiry rather than reproductive inquiry

Montuori uses 'reproductive inquiry' for knowledge that, although new, simply aggregates more data that reinforces existing ways of viewing the world. He argues that creative education rewards people who take risks to create new knowledge while reproductive education rewards those who repeat old knowledge – good test-takers who will reproduce the world as it is, not imagine how it could be different. Creative inquiry challenges the very terms of existing knowledge, is comfortable with destabilising certainties and, as Kershaw et al. (2011, 65) describe in relation to applied theatre, is 'positively productive of conundrums and paradoxes'.

Ultimately, in partnership with JustSpeak, our class created new knowledge in the form of a 35-minute play (Williams et al. 2016). It was shown to audiences over three nights, including a special showing for policy makers that included an 'expert panel' at the end and attracted national media attention. The performance began with a multimedia piece made by the film students in the class, which used interviews with children (with informed consent from parent or guardian) to raise questions about what it means to

be a 'child'. This contextualised the human dimensions of the legal designation of the sixteen-year-old protagonist as a 'child' and the seventeen-year-old as an 'adult'. The dramatic action then tracked two young men's divergent paths through the justice system. Our informants' real experiences shaped the narrative and dialogue (one going to a restorative justice conference and the other to adult prison) but in crafting the story the students decided to fictionalise the relationship between the characters by making them brothers who shared a single, invented crime. That way, individual family background was not a variable and age difference could be the dramatic focus. The performance explored possible reasons for the crime, including poverty, both by giving the characters a dramatised backstory and by displaying statistics about contextual issues such as brain psychology at different ages, poverty, and neglect, between each scene. Thus, a range of disciplinary understandings was included, but the glue that held them together was the emotionally driven human story.

Outcomes

I walked away from this project with a sense of pride, knowing that the hard work and thought put into creating this piece of theatre served a greater purpose than entertainment: we contributed to an argument about something that's affecting the lives of people in our community. (Personal communication, student, November 15, 2016)

Students in the course experienced first-order change by beginning to think critically about the justice system. There was wider first-order awareness-building and attitude influence, too, with the three performances attracting audiences of around two hundred people. Howells (2022) provides a useful list of ways in which theatre can and has shifted its audiences' understandings of justice, including drawing attention to the adverse effects of incarceration on mental health and recidivism. More importantly in terms of second-order change, JustSpeak utilised their networks to ensure that the audience included opinion leaders, media outlets, and decision makers who would either vote on the change in coming weeks or were key advisors to those who would vote, thereby providing potential for systemic impact.

The Chief Youth Court Justice attended and publicly praised *JustUs* as 'a genuine and committed attempt to depict in a pretty authentic way what goes on. It was really good in showing the different tracks and the advantages of the youth court system versus the adult court system' (The Hon. Justice Becroft, in Pennington 2016). The play was featured on national television news (Irwin 2016) to an estimated one million viewers, radio (e.g. Pennington 2016; 'Age of adult criminal responsibility' 2016) to an estimated further half-a-million listeners, and newspaper and magazine stories (e.g. Manch 2016; Bruce 2017; and others). While there is not space to address media effects and agenda setting theories here, that body of scholarship indicates this level of media visibility would have influenced political perceptions of the issue's public salience, and thereby likely did have a second-order effect, troubling dominant discourses and foregrounding uncomfortable questions ahead of the vote.

A surreal moment evidencing production of such 'conundrums and paradoxes' occurred in the national televised news: a video excerpt of our play aired, showing the student of colour who played our police officer reading out the charges against the young white man who played our criminal. The news programme cut in file footage

from a real prison – predictably it showed a person of colour as the prisoner and a white guard – but the contrast with our students’ deliberate spectacle of a non-white officer and white criminal broke something in the discursive chain and made race in both representations visible and open to critique. This was Brecht’s alienation effect in action (Brecht 1964), making the familiar unfamiliar, and questioning the assumptions underlining our lives through the creative artifice of making something that has become too familiar, different. Other paradoxes and conundrums abounded: in particular the paradox of the (predominantly but not exclusively) white university students addressing an issue that disproportionately affects Indigenous young people, statistically fewer of whom will have the opportunity to go to university. Perhaps, as Fine (2017, 103) argues of social justice research and pedagogy, ‘the point is not to “get it right” but to open the conversation’: if so, *JustUs* opened a provocative conversation that extended beyond the confines of the theatre.

When Cabinet made its ruling two months later, the youth court age was increased by a year, to eighteen. It certainly wasn’t a revolution, but it was a small, system-level change. JustSpeak director, sociologist Dr Katie Bruce (personal communication, November 1, 2016), wrote to the class:

Never could we have imagined the quality and the impact of the work produced by your students. ... The final product was insightful, moving and professional. It featured on national television, at a public forum and in a few news articles and was described by the Principal Youth Court Judge as “authentic”. As an organisation, we have been able to use this play as an integral part of a campaign to raise the age of youth justice in New Zealand.

JustUs certainly cannot lay sole claim to having made that law change happen. JustSpeak had already been campaigning for three years before we joined the campaign in its final six months, and their work built on ‘the evidence and experience ... work and tears of many’ (JustSpeak 2016). However, through adding our work into the mix of a genuine, transdisciplinary partnership, in which we waited to see how the different paradigms of sociology, law, and applied theatre might best be drawn together creatively around the problem, we may have contributed something unique to the final stages. The five TRM steps we took kept us focussed on reflexive, trans-paradigmatic problem solving, and it was this multipronged approach which facilitated a collaborative affective impact. JustSpeak knew the statistics, legalities, and political environment, and had connections which ensured our audience could include key decisionmakers and the media. Our class identified an emotive way to leverage those resources through performing a human story that helped change feel irresistible to those with the power to make it.

Limitations

The Aotearoa New Zealand justice system is intact. It shifted a millimetre, nothing more. Even while celebrating the age change as a win for youth justice, JustSpeak then-Chair Julia Whaipooti said there were still a billion other aspects of the system that need to change. Nonetheless, she noted, it was now possible to ‘focus on a billion things less one’ (JustSpeak 2016). Then there is the risk, as Martin-Baro (1994) argues, that we may have reinforced dominant structures by opposing them with personal stories that were still set within the worldview of the existing system. For example, Indigenous knowledges or laws were not mentioned in our play. Māori have their own long-standing systems of

law and justice that were trampled by the colonisers and while there was certainly a first-order change in that the students learned for the first time about Indigenous justice approaches that are incompatible with Western ways (which is perhaps in the nature of the 'small miracles' championed by Balfour 2009 as a *raison d'être* for applied theatre), we were not able to explore that aspect more widely in the public performances.

There were other limitations, especially time. TRM advocates 'going slow' to discover, not force, solutions, but we had a fixed semester timeframe. Despite the success of the flipped classroom in motivating many students to read and discover materials outside class, not all students had time for 'homework', being from lower socio-economic backgrounds and working multiple jobs.⁴ There were also aesthetic limitations. We had no budget, only a few weeks to rehearse, and the students were not acting majors, but communication students taking Expressive Arts as a minor or elective. I nudged both writing and production towards the abstract, but the students resisted, and the course is intended to be student-led, so both storytelling and performances remained quite naturalistic. We also did our best with the cross-racial representation issues, but we turned a story from non-white people into a story about white people. That was to avoid reinforcing stereotypes, but was it right? How could we have told the story better?

All these things trouble me. But ultimately, the system underwent a structural shift. It wasn't a complete overhaul, but there was a change such that, from 1 July 2019, almost no seventeen-year-olds go to remand. From then to the end of 2021, records indicate that more than one 1000 seventeen-year-olds have had access to Youth Court because of the change (Te Tāhū o te Ture 2021). And perhaps, to go back to Bambara (2012) and Rich (1987), while we didn't start a revolution, we contributed drops to a cultural pool which eventually may spill over to make a much bigger change also irresistible. For now, through our application of transdisciplinary processes, it is possible we contributed to changing, so far, more than 1000 young people's lives.

Conclusions

In working creatively with JustSpeak on the issue of youth justice, my students discovered the capacity of transdisciplinary creative inquiry to complexly hold difference and contradictions in ways that produced new knowledge. The process they followed suggests a blueprint for applied theatre as TRM: start by identifying the problem (from an open and curious encounter with real-world issues); be consciously searching for and inclusive of all available strengths and knowledges (in the class, of creative and non-creative resources and participants, of the community, across diverse values, disciplines, and points of view) without hierarchisation; offer theory as response rather than theory as prescription by collaboratively building course content 'in the moment' so that it can illuminate and solve problems responsively; broaden access to knowledge by sharing everything, such as back with community partners through our shared forum and the gifting of the script; don't be limited by disciplinary paradigms or status (knowledge from personal experiences, psychology, law or anything else may prove as important as knowledge of theatre); orient consistently towards attaining social impact – especially if the work is stuck, wondering what questions it should ask of dominant practices and processes is productive, plus, focussing on a quest for social impact leverages students' intrinsic motivation (Solomon 2009), such that they are invested in the work for its own sake,

not only for grades; and finally, accept limits on 'knowability' – in transdisciplinary research, identifying areas of uncertainty is as productive if not more than assuming one has arrived at all the answers.

The pedagogical process itself is important for students: a just process can nurture voice and identity that empower an enduring commitment to social justice (Beyerbach and Ramalho 2011; Schmidt 2022; Thomas and Mulvey 2008). Gómez-Peña (2005, 96) writes of enabling students to 'push the boundaries of their fields and identities, take necessary risks, talk back, and be heard'. Likewise, Thompson (2015, 430) points to the necessity of processes engendering 'affective solidarity and mutual regard that, in turn, could be powerful counterweights to the exclusions and disregard in a careless society'. TRM's steps enabled these kinds of solidarity and listening processes. Additionally, the project achieved several of the outcomes that Duncombe (2016, 121–122) attributes to successful activist art: it fostered dialogue, built community, contributed to an imminent cultural shift, revealed a reality, and altered both participants' and policy-makers' perceptions of that reality, by revealing a human dimension behind the statistics. No, it did not bring 'an end to the prison-industrial complex' (124) as Duncombe suggests activist art might ultimately aspire, but it at least created awareness of the *existence* of the prison-industrial complex for young people, some of whom, before this class, had no idea.

Finally, as a kind of bonus, I found that what we had done in following the TRM process in the project also helped subsequently with another problem: explaining applied theatre as a form of research that produces critical and valid new knowledge, to fit into research infrastructure regimes. Gibson (2010, 6) is just one of many who have referred to challenges in describing creative research to 'government actuaries and multi-disciplinary committees'. His experiences led him to argue that 'Accounting for the dynamics – informal as well as formal or policy-governed – of these powerful rule-making bodies, I think it is currently imprudent to ignore the prevailing *realpolitik*' (Gibson 2010, 6). He wished such bodies could 'sense and accept an artwork to be speaking directly and unambiguously to them in that particular artwork's own argot', but regretted that 'now is not that time' (2010, 7). Therefore, Gibson affirmed, we must find a vocabulary that rulemaking bodies will recognise, to explain what we do, even if it is not our vocabulary. Butler describes something similar in her chapter 'Ordinary, Incredulous', when she finds herself 'quite incredulous' at projects to define the value of the humanities 'because I mistakenly thought the public value of these activities is so obvious that they hardly needed to be defended' (Butler 2014, 16). We must overcome this incredulity, she says, because proving the value of the humanities is 'an ethical task that is indissociable from forms of critical judgment and what might aptly be called the struggle against oblivion' (15).

Like many, I have experienced challenges securing applied theatre's position as critically informed research. The writing-up of this case study was prompted by an incident in which my programme was described (mockingly, by someone from a different discipline) as 'that interpretive dance stuff' in a committee meeting. However, my university has embraced transdisciplinarity, including it in official research strategy documents from 2017. Other universities are also embracing TRM, for example University of Technology Sydney from 2022 delivers compulsory transdisciplinary courses to its entire student body.⁵ More broadly, in 2020, the OECD described TRM as not only helpful but '*required* to

help address complex societal challenges' (OECD 2020, 4, added emphasis). Biting Butler's 'language of value' bullet, I have found TRM offers terminology for funding applications and research evidence portfolios that can quickly and unambiguously narrate applied theatre as rigorous research for audiences from different disciplines.

Thus, while I believe it will be clear to those who practice applied theatre that it has always been a form of transdisciplinary research, I hope my efforts in this article to explicitly map an applied theatre case study against the terms of that field may prove useful to those who, even today after all the advances we have made in understanding creative practice as research, face a lack of understanding as to the legitimacy and worth of diverse forms of collaborative, creative knowledge creation. The terms of transdisciplinary research are flexible enough to accommodate the ephemerality and intricacy of applied theatre, without erasing the very indefinability and disruption that make it powerful. The terms of transdisciplinary research are distinct enough to provide a roadmap for practice and for documenting results, without over-disciplining applied theatre's inherent freedom of movement into deadening, too-limited forms. The terms of transdisciplinary research are scholarly enough to provide evidence of the conceptual rigour that has always been at the heart of applied theatre and thus help us define it without reifying it.

Notes

1. <https://www.climatechangetheatreaction.com/>.
2. <https://www.facebook.com/tehatangata>.
3. This is something we need to make more space for in the neoliberal academic environment: teaching preparation workload metrics allow minimal time for preparing the 'what' of teaching content ahead of time, let alone allowing for rigorous synchronous focus on the 'how' as teaching unfolds. Yet time for informed, in-the-moment, responsive reflection is crucial to the effectiveness of social justice teaching.
4. First-generation student rates are not collected for New Zealand overall (personal communication, Amy Jennings, Senior Analyst, Tertiary Sector Performance Analysis, April 19, 2017). However, in unpublished data collected by Susan Fredricks and Elspeth Tilley in 2010, 51% of this programme's first-year intake were first-generation students.
5. <https://www.uts.edu.au/about/td-school>.

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