REPORT ON THEATRE AS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN KADOMA

A PROJECT CARRIED OUT BY THE THEATRE ARTS DEPT WITH SEARCWL MARCH 2015

Introductory background

The Theatre Arts department partnered with the Women Law Centre in a Safe Cities project, which is an initiative by the Women Law Centre. The partnership entailed a two day theatre sensitization class with the SEARCWL MA class; leading to a field work project between the MA students and the Theatre arts honours class in Kadoma.

1. **Conceptualizing the use of theatre and drama in development communication**

The first classes entailed a conceptual grounding in theories and concepts that underline and inform critical theatre methodologies, with particular emphasis on the use of feminist approaches. This included critical pedagogy principles such as Voice, Power, Agency, Hegemony, Participation, etcetera, just to mention a few. The following classes involved detailed analysis of the different modes of communication, ie mainstream versus alternative. Theatre as an alternative form of media has been used throughout the world for transferring all kinds of information and knowledge. It is regarded as a useful instrument both for instruction and entertainment. As entertainment, theatre has the ability to draw people's attention, particularly with marginalized groups. As an 'oral medium' in the local language, it appeals to and involves those audiences which either through problems of illiteracy or through a lack of knowledge of the national language are kept out of development activities. At the same time it is a means of cultural expression which everyone within the community knows and controls. It was noted how several researches have observed how women and youth find formal spaces (eg, council meetings) as hostile and unfriendly to them, since there are considered as masculine spaces. However with informal spaces such as theatre, these groups have an opportunity to access important information.

2. **Kadoma field trip**

Research

Since the field trip was primarily a research process, the theatre arts honours students engaged in the process as research assistants and translators in some cases. The same research process was used by our students as an ethnographic method to gather community voices and lived experiences. Such voices and experiences were key as they fed into our play creation and informed the performance as an authentic representation of the Kadoma community. Since all six of the students were working with different thematic groups, each student was tasked to gather stories which they considered significant. Having shared the stories that they gathered from the community, an analysis was made on how almost every right had an impact or effect on the other right, eg, education and economic disempowerment had a repercussion on housing and tenure and also affected the quality of decisions that women made with regards to health and choice of livelihoods. Since our performance was to present findings of an

elaborate research process, each unique story was depicted through the cause and effect trend of one right impacting the other.

3. The performance

The performance became an all stakeholders approach aimed at engaging stakeholders in policy advocacy. The chosen target community for our theatre for development process were the researchers themselves (as people positioned within the legal fraternity) and the cohort of invited people who consisted of various ministry representatives, the major, teachers and officials involved in public policy in one way or the other. The purpose was to present the research findings in one single story and thereby, reconnect people with the stark reality of community people's lived experiences. This is in line with the observation of the gap between the people's actual experiences and policies and legal frameworks set in place. Hence the objective of our community engagement process was to use theatre to present those challenges and bridge the knowledge gap.

4. Our observations:

1. Research Objectives and Research Assumptions- We noted that most students were keen to maintain their research assumptions even though data was challenging their assumptions. We believe that such a scenario was as a result of the conflation of research objectives and research assumptions. Most students did not consistently refer to the research objective which was: finding legal literacy gaps in the community.

2. Grounded Theory and Feminist methodologies- we were quite impressed by the practical use of grounded theory in engaging in data in the field. We learnt a lot in the usefulness of the theory in gathering data in the field and it connected well with feminist methodologies which are responsive to the lived experiences of communities and in our case women. However, students were not quite conversant of the grounded approach which would have empowered them to further interrogate issues on the ground. Students encountered 'unforeseen' issues which they failed to reconnect with their research agenda.

3. Concept-Driven research methods- As students were empowered by feminist methodologies and approaches to research, we felt that there was so much silence in elucidating concepts guiding field work and data gathering techniques. Issues or concepts such as voice, visibility, consciousness and power were not thoroughly used as guiding principles in the data gathering process, an element which has a likelihood of affecting and infecting the data analysis process and discussions. Field work should be a conceptual process rather than a logistical process, especially if guided by feminist methodologies.

4. Performing Data

We are very grateful for the opportunity to work with your students in gathering data and using that data to inform our practice. The data gathered was very intersectional and it empowered our presentation. From the experience in Kadoma, we have actually coined a new theatre practice: Theatre for Legal Literacy (TLT) which we hope to continue working on.

5. All stakeholders approach- A performance to the various stakeholders was a critical platform which gave visibility to community voices. A visual presentation gave them a picture of the reality in

communities; at the same time, stakeholder engagement was a critical step in lobbying for policy reform in ordinary people's voices.

6. Creative practice as research- As we engaged in the research process, we began to appreciate how engaging in creative processes can also be used to gather data, especially where qualitative research is concerned.