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Diversity learning through story and connection: ZHE: [noun] undefined

Lizette Nolte and Kofi Kramo

This paper reports on a diversity theatre workshop at University of Hertfordshire Doctorate in Clinical Psychology Programme as an example of enabling, rigorous and adventurous diversity learning.

Diversity learning, that is, developing the self-awareness and reflexivity, the knowledges and the skills to engage meaningfully, confidently and effectively with sameness and difference in our clinical practice, can be argued to be central to our profession and our development as clinical psychologists (Shah, Wood, Nolte & Goodbody, 2012; Turpin & Coleman, 2010). Furthermore, competencies in working with diversity are requirements of both the Health and Care Professional Council and the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2014; HCPC, 2012). However, too often this learning can be fraught with difficulties and challenges, with defensiveness, feelings of being unsafe, shame, denial, ignorance, conflict, boredom and other experiences presenting obstacles to creative learning. As trainers and learners we need to constantly ask ourselves what would enable a more adventurous relationship (Nolte & Nel, 2012) with diversity learning. This paper reports on a training day at the University of Hertfordshire Doctorate in Clinical Psychology Programme that

transcended the above-mentioned obstacles and allowed for rich, meaningful and lasting learning.

The story of Zhe: [noun] undefined (Mike, Kemi Coker & Munyebvu, 2013)

Zhe: [noun] undefined is an auto-biographical play developed by the two actors, Antonia Kemi Coker and Tonderai Munyebvu, together with director Chuck Mike (Mike, et al., 2013), that has had a successful run in theatres in London, other UK venues, Zimbabwe and USA and Australian university campuses. The title Zhe, referring to a genderless self-identification, also here refers to the “blurring of many identity markers” and the fluidity of gender and identity (Mike, et al., 2013, p. 11). The play tells the life stories of the two actors, touching on many aspects of social difference that Burnham and colleagues have called the Social GRRACCESS (Burnham, Alvis Palma & Whitehouse, 2008), including gender, gender identity, class, culture, ‘race’, migration and sexuality. Starting in childhood, the challenges of being gay and from minority ethnic backgrounds growing up in Britain are explored, at times in harrowing detail, but often also through humour.

The training workshop started with a performance of the play. As the play unfolded, we found ourselves transported, in Narrative therapy terms having a sense of being elsewhere in life, entering new identity spaces, taking up new viewpoints, exploring new knowleges and territories, on account of our participation (White, 1997), not just through the unfolding narrative, but also personally and professionally. Following the performance of the play, dialogical spaces were created for consolidation of learning, including self-reflection, making theory-practice links and considering clinical

implications. This was seen as an essential and significant part of the day, moving from experience to meaning-making. It enabled learning to move from an embodied experience to integration with both personal and professional identities and existing beliefs, values, knowledges and practices. This is a process that continued and is continuing over time.

Rich written and verbal feedback on the day was overwhelmingly positive with the only negative comments relating to a wish for more time to continue discussions. Where the audience consisted of trainees and staff who encompassed a wide spectrum of positions in relation to the Social Graces, most audience members reported being taken outside of what was familiar to them, challenging them on both a personal and professional level. Feedback included comments such as these (self descriptions of trainees as written on feedback forms):

“It really made me think how difficult it must be to have to hide your self, to fight against it almost. I have never struggled with my gender or sexuality, but now whilst I can never fully understand, I can think about such issues with a much greater awareness.” [White heterosexual female trainee]

“It is important to listen to people’s stories and acceptance is such an important thing... I felt comfort in hearing your stories” [BME gay female trainee]

“Be more open and accepting of myself, which may open the door for others to do the same.” [White heterosexual male trainee]

“I will endeavour to remain mindful of a person’s whole experience, regardless of the label I am invited into privileging” [White, heterosexual, female trainee]

“I felt awakened by the stories that were shared and expressed, and I was struck by the courage and vulnerability taken... the day was energizing and uplifting, learning about others and myself” [BME, heterosexual, female trainee].

Considering the feedback, maybe there was an overall sense of trainees who had not been faced with these issues in their own lives finding the day more challenging, taking them into newer experiences, while trainees who had been faced with such challenges in their own lives found the day more affirming and validating. However, there were many overlapping themes relating to openness, vulnerability, courage and relational risk-taking.

Zhe: [noun] undefined as an opportunity for adventurous diversity learning

The experience of the Zhe training day will now be used as a lens for considering possible building blocks towards rich and meaningful diversity learning.

Entering through story

Approaching diversity learning from a theoretical position can often result in the obstacles and challenges outlined earlier. In contrast, entering diversity learning experientially through story, as in the case of Zhe: [noun] undefined, provides a safety – a mediated proximity – that sidesteps our need for defensiveness and distancing. We do not remain ‘objective’ observers. Rather, through the at times playful, at times provocative story telling, learners are drawn into a personal connection with the issues at hand, walking alongside the ‘other’.

Furthermore, through telling their stories, the actors connect us with the rich and detailed contexts and textures of their lives, moving away from flat or ‘single stories’ and towards richly described ‘thick’ accounts (White & Epston, 1995). This means that when we arrive at the incidents on the journey that might be harder to hear, understand or relate to, superficial interpretations that could allow for ‘othering’ (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996), stereotyping, judging, blaming or pathologising are no longer available. Instead, a personal relationship has been created, inviting seeing experiences in context, and therefore allowing for complexity, contradiction and mutuality (Nolte, 2007).

Finally, early in the play a comment is referred to as “bypass(ing) the heart” (Mike, et al., 2014, p. 17). Traditional diversity teaching can have a tendency to do that, to bypass the heart. Entering learning through story invites a more embodied experience – a visceral learning – that stays with the learner long after the experience, and enters into and becomes integrated into personhood.

Relationship and connection

Within Zhe: [noun] undefined relationship is always foregrounded. The relationship between Antonia Kemi Coker and Tonderai Munyebvu is the pivotal energy around which the play unfolds. Beyond that the structure of the play, the direct addressing of the audience, the conversational style and the generosity and warmth from both actors, powerfully establish a relationship with the audience in a very direct and personal way. As the play ended it was as if each audience member had entered into a

personal relationship with the two actors, felt not only that they knew these two people, but in an inexplicable way also felt known by them. It was as if Zhe had held up a mirror to each person, letting them see themselves and connect with their own values, beliefs and experiences.

Within diversity learning, this deep focus on relationship breaks down any sense of 'us' and 'them', and instead connects us with our shared humanity, where we all meet beyond our apparent differences and sameness. Within the context of connection and relationship, of knowing the 'other' (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996) and being known, we see the layers of sameness where we felt different and the diversity where we saw sameness.

Furthermore, within this context of relationship and connection, a space is created for the working out that is often needed to make sense of sameness and difference. Difficult questions can be asked and answered, awkwardness can be overcome and generosity and kindness can be offered, even when we 'mess up', get it wrong or hurt or offend the other.

Finally, the relationship between Antonia Kemi Coker and Tonderai Munyebvu and Chuck Mike as director ran like a thread through the play. Something of the trust that comes with sharing one's story deeply and fully with another and that story being witnessed and understood, accepted and valued, translated also into the relationship between these actors and the audience members, allowing for a trust and openness to develop through the day. Such trust, or what hooks (1994) calls sense of community, is an essential ingredient of rich diversity learning.

Seeing our selves

Zhe: [noun] undefined modeled for our students a way of being seen, being known, beyond the selected selves normally brought into social contexts, but rather in our full human complexity, with its darkness and light, its contradictions and its messiness. This was a powerful invitation into personal and relational courage and relational risk-taking (Mason & Sawyerr, 2002), core ingredients we would argue for transformative diversity learning. It created a context fertile for rich mutual learning on the day, but there were also reports of how this informed personal choices made by many following their experience of Zhe far beyond the day itself.

However, seeing our selves in this way can also be challenging. Here we want to apply the concept of “double consciousness” (Du Bois, 2011/1903, p. 2) to aid our understanding – Du Bois talked of the duality, the “two-ness” (p. 2) often experienced by those who experience themselves as other, where they are defined as a problem and where aspects of themselves remain invisible in contexts where they interact. Those who are marginalized and discriminated against in their lives need to develop ways to manage this double consciousness. However, we argue that the other side of this is that those of us who are not faced with these experiences regularly within society (white, middleclass, heterosexual, etc.) often do not know this sense of double consciousness. Diversity learning can powerfully, and often anew, confront us with this duality between how we have come to see our selves and the selves reflected back to us within the context of being confronted with the ‘other’. This can often be the stage where diversity learning derails and conversations close down. Despite such

painful experiences being very much part of this training day, the modeling of an open and non-judging reflection on such experiences and the always available option of redemptive action implicit in the play moved us through and around these challenging moments, while enabling us to remain engaged.

An invitation to action

Finally, diversity learning needs to move beyond the theoretical and our ‘good intentions’, towards action (Reynolds, 2010, 2011). The Just Therapy group in New Zealand (Waldegrave, Tamasese, Tuhaka & Campbell, 2003) talk about the responsibility that comes with the privilege of hearing another’s story. Once a story is witnessed there is a need to act. With the experience of Zhe: [noun] undefined came a responsibility. The story of Zhe: [noun] undefined powerfully challenged us with the real daily implications for those who are “living between and outside accepted identities” (Mike et al., 2013, p. 11). Moving beyond romantic notions of exotic otherness or idealistic or ‘colourblind’ senses of equality, we are confronted with the very real suffering endured when one lives outside normative positions. It highlights how, far too often, difference is still pathologized, used as a justification for ‘othering’ (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996) and marginalization. This embodied confrontation with people’s lived experiences problematizes any passive response to diversity learning.

Rather, as witnesses to Zhe: [noun] undefined, we are called to continue and renew our efforts to redress divisive discourses and inequalities. It aligns as with positions of social justice and implores as to take personal responsibility and act. However, it does

not allow this to be an idealistic or perfectionistic endeavour – rather it makes tangible what Reynolds (2010) calls “imperfect all(y)” positions (p. 15), challenging us to step up to the challenge, but always allowing for ‘getting it wrong’ and for redemptive action.

Conclusion

In this paper we reflected on a meaningful and challenging diversity learning experience through a theatre workshop built around the play Zhe: [noun] undefined (Mike, et al., 2013). We highlighted how, in our experience, a more embodied learning experience, breaking down constructs of sameness and difference, allowing for complexity and mutuality and inviting action, could be a powerful way to break through some of the barriers to creative and adventurous diversity learning on clinical psychology training programmes.

Authors

Lizette Nolte, Clinical Lecturer, Doctorate in Clinical Psychology Course, University of Hertfordshire, College Lane, Hatfield, AL10 9AB, l.nolte@herts.ac.uk, @LizetteNolte

Kofi Kramo, Psychologist, North Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust, Kofi.Kramo1@nepft.nhs.uk.

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