"Is that what you really want?: a case study of intracultural ensemble-building within the paradoxes of 'urbanicity'"

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Ensemble-building is a practice within drama education that is understood to be a powerful metaphor for democratic living. However, this ongoing work in classrooms also demands that teachers understand and enact a broad, interrelated range of knowledge, skills, and values that support participants' encounters with conflict and representations of change. In this sense, ensemble-building is not simply about getting along, but embodies an intracultural practice of 'living together' while learning and using creative strategies for 'fighting together'. In this qualitative case study of ensemble-building as an intracultural practice we present the key forms of knowledge, skills and values that two teachers enacted to create conditions for trust and knowledge production with a group of African American students at a racially segregated urban secondary school and a collaboration between this group and multi-ethnic and multi-racial university students in a theatre arts programme. Their work, and the work of ensemble, we argue, is shaped by and within the intersections of 'urbanicity' where urban life is recognisable and lived beyond the boundaries of urban centres through the paradoxical conditions of rigidity and creativity, stability and mobility, and anonymity and visibility.

In response to a series of improvised scenes about domestic violence, Steven, a 16-year-old African American member of a school-university partnership in theatre and community arts, wondered out loud if the key to changing the power dynamics in the couple's relationship was to ask a 'tough' question, one that would provoke a new way of thinking about their conflict. He suggested that the woman needed to surprise her partner by saying, 'Is that what you really want?' Such a question would slow things down, lessen the divisive language and the expectation of violence. Steven raised this possibility after his group's many attempts to imagine and enact freedom from oppression in the
situation. Indeed, reframing the question, and pointing out paradoxes has long been a compelling intervention in apparently intransigent cycles of extremist claims, dehumanisation and exclusion (Juergensmeyer 2002; Lakoff 2004).

Without the benefit of reframing, US urban school districts are characterised in the media by the extremes of any number of social and economic conditions: hyper-managed and unaccountable, under-funded and over-funded, innovative and rigid, pluralistic and segregated. Rather than view such valences as located geographically or only in schools, Gordon argues that these should be seen as some of the many paradoxes of ‘urbanicity’ that include increasing population diversity, cultural richness, mobility, anonymity, conflicting values, and ‘a coexistence of fluidity and rigidity in institutional and personal behavior’ (2003, 190). Gordon’s point is not only to describe the conditions of urban life with greater nuance and sense of potential, but to reframe the location of ‘the urban’ so that it extends to and interconnects with the conceptual and lived experiences of all people whether or not they live in urban centres. Despite the pervasive experience of the conditions of urbanicity, researchers and policymakers have been intent on ‘fixing the urban’ only in the setting of urban schools. In doing so, they ‘conflate urban education with the problems of low-status ethnic and socio-economic groups’ (Gordon 2003, 189). School reforms become a ‘forced victory’ (Juergensmeyer 2002, 3) or a single-voiced, authoritative reaction to ‘damage’ that will only be rectified through external forces such as increased testing, rationalised categories of ability, and threats of school closure; all of which overrides students’ and community members’ situated histories and specific concerns about equity and education.

Gordon and others (Delgado Bernal and Solorzano 2001; Ennis and McCauley 2002; Kinloch 2009) argue, however, that by recognising urbanicity as a complex of histories and experiences that shape everyone’s lives, the focus of research can include multiple stakeholders’ perspectives, who can question and reframe the meaning of school reform. In alignment with Gordon’s call for researchers’ productive engagement with urbanicity’s paradoxes and conflicts, we seek spaces where teachers and students can form expanded definitions of community and represent themselves and others as interdependent agents in social change; even when the conditions of urban schooling reduce student agency to ‘meeting standards’. Such spaces for improvisation and problem-solving, as described by Gallagher (2007) in her ethnography of drama classrooms in urban schools in Canada and the USA, are usually located just beyond the reach of
neoliberal policies, thus making it possible for students and teachers to participate in pedagogies and improvisations on life that unsettle authoritative knowledge and inequitable relations. Within these spaces, a theatre or drama teacher is responsible for developing and maintaining the trust and participation of students so they can, indeed, become vocal, active interpreters and producers of knowledge.

The aim of our research is to understand drama educators’ processes and decisions when pressing for participants’ group commitment, their sense of power to name and represent new perspectives and knowledge, and capacity to explore conflict and injustice across divergent life experiences and perspectives. While all of these dimensions of drama education are relevant for developing a full portrait of drama teachers’ expertise, we focus on the overarching challenge of ensemble-building. In relation with urbanicity, we see ensemble-building as both a metaphor and practice for participation in defining and engaging with the risks and possibilities of changing inequitable social conditions.

According to Neelands (2009), ensemble-based rehearsal processes involve direct participation in and collaboration toward a shared goal that requires ongoing negotiation and re-negotiation of participants’ willingness to act and work together. Such negotiations are dependent on ‘uncrowning’ teachers’ authority (Neelands 2009) so that habits of rationalising and reducing topics for learning are replaced by practices of inquiry, uncertainty, and attentiveness to social and emotional nuances in one another’s talk and representations. Similarly, urban education reform requires far more equitable engagement with people around negotiated goals.

Given more equitable power relations, Neelands argues, drama education can be a model for democratic living where struggles over meaning are difficult, yet oriented toward inclusive participation in a more just society. Ensemble-building, then, is not merely aimed at ‘getting along’ or learning to tolerate one another’s histories and viewpoints. Rather, as Indian scholar and theatre practitioner Rustom Bharucha (2000) argues, change does not follow from nationalist (or institutional) policies that declare a ‘united in diversity’ standpoint, especially given the slogan’s association with the assimilationist tendencies in multiculturalism. Like Neelands and Gallagher, Bharucha believes that the theatre-production processes capable of inspiring new insights into cultural continuities and discontinuities are those that are intracultural; that is, practices in communities whereby the dynamics of living together can be complemented by the creative strategies of fighting together’ (2000, 10). As metaphor and practice, intracultural ensemble-
building helps us identify what drama teachers do and what they value when they invite both collaboration and conflict into the classroom.

Unlike most school spaces where conflict is continually monitored, quickly resolved, or punished, drama classes offer what Gallagher calls 'a pedagogy of conflict' (2007, 142). The secondary students in her study described drama class as a time and space to hear divergent perspectives and experience internal and external conflict around differing views; as they also discovered ways to 'channel [conflict] in the direction of the creative work' (Gallagher 2007, 145). While we would agree that students have impressive agency around the processes they need for engaging in and interpreting conflict, we are also aware of the remarkable orchestration of values, observations, and interactions enacted by drama educators as they work with young people to imagine and represent how they 'live together'.

Research overview
Our research group developed a qualitative case study of ensemble-building as an intracultural practice in urban education by documenting and analysing a classroom teacher and theatre educator's year-long collaboration in the dramatic arts. Danielle Berring and Robin Post, who are both educators and co-authors, developed an ensemble with secondary students from Central High School, some of whom eventually worked with university students to represent and perform experiences of identity oppression and freedom from those oppressions. In the following sections, we present the research methods and data analysis that enabled us to describe the interrelated forms of knowledge, skill, and values Robin and Danielle enacted with students in a non-drama classroom (Danielle's government class) and in a theatre arts and community service partnership led by Robin. We illustrate the teachers' and students' interactions during ensemble-building with field notes and interview data from the first months of school when an ensemble was slowly taking form in Danielle's classroom. Finally, we describe the relationship between ensemble-building and dramatic, artistic exploration of ideas and representations among students in the school-university partnership.

Methods, relationships and locations for drama in education
Our research is situated, like Gallagher's (2007), within the day-to-day process of documenting students' and teachers' hard-won claims to
meaning, voice, and art. Furthermore, as a collective, we viewed our research and drama teaching as working within a 'fracture' or a place of possibility in an otherwise closed system (Weis and Fine 2004, xii). To document struggle and conflict within a fragile space requires a sense of trust and commitment among all participants. Indeed, our histories with theatre and education belied considerable differences in our assumptions about how and why drama belongs in schools and what 'works' when developing an ensemble. Brian, Camille, and Patricia had studied and developed expertise in process drama and dramatic inquiry that rely on an extended framed relationship among students, the teacher and the focus of inquiry. Robin's experience as an actor and teaching artist was informed by rehearsal-room improvisation, ensemble-building activities, and Boal's forum theatre methods. Together, we regularly relied on the multiple methods and conventions of dramatising ideas outlined in numerous drama strategies handbooks. Danielle had learned about rehearsal-room and related ensemble-building experiences through a two-week immersion in a teacher development programme that all of us had participated in, organised through Ohio State University and the Royal Shakespeare Company's education team. During weekly meetings, we often had to define and negotiate our divergent views on the purpose of drama in education, thus making our assumptions visible and available to one another's interrogation. Danielle, a high school government teacher, and Robin, a university-based director of a theatre and community-outreach programme, shared a concern for students' disengagement in learning and decided to begin teaching together at Central High School (CHS) on the first day of the new school year. Robin's role would be to guide and demonstrate ways of forming a collaborative, purposeful ensemble of students who would address the curriculum through enactments and explorations of issues that mattered to them.

During the first three months of the 2009 2010 academic year, Robin taught or co-taught the students in Danielle's government class one to three times each week. Robin recognised her positionality as a middle-class white woman whose personal history with poverty and segregation were familiar but not as pervasive as the experiences lived by African American students at CHS. Like Danielle, racism and exclusion were central to Robin's analysis of and commitments to social equity. Danielle, an African American woman who had taught in high poverty settings and knew the daily corrosive effects of racism, understood the complexities of her African American young adult students' lives, and wanted to impress upon them that school could be
relevant, creative, and rigorous. As a second-year teacher who wanted to share her drama experiences with students, she sought Robin’s support for planning, evaluating her expectations, and responding to students’ (likely) resistance to working together as an ensemble.

Their work began in Central High School, an early 1900s’ building, where curriculum reform and re-investment in urban schooling were evident in the large banners announcing change and excellence throughout the school. In an all too common irony, Danielle and her students experienced a starkly inadequate space in a de facto racially segregated school environment with a 98% African American, high-poverty student population, where school management could be predictably rigid and unpredictably chaotic.

In December 2009, despite months of working with Robin to create a productive, trusting classroom environment, it became clear that Danielle’s class would be reorganised and effectively disbanded to accommodate school-wide population changes. With this decision, the contradictions and conflicts of urbanicity were painfully apparent in the students’ deep sense that anonymity and presumed mobility were the norm for their schooling. Even so, despite the profound disruption in their educations, the students were not entirely left behind. Given Danielle and Robin’s connections with the teacher education project, and the school’s close proximity to a large university, it was possible to circumvent the school district’s economy and structural constraints and turn toward abundant nearby resources. Through Robin’s affiliation as a university lecturer, some members of the class voluntarily regrouped as a new ensemble that would participate in a university course on ‘theatre arts in the community’. From February through March 2010, eight African American CHS students from Danielle’s class travelled, twice a week, to the university campus where they worked with 11 White, African American, Latina, and Asian American undergraduate students who lived less than two miles from the high school and attended classes with a predominately white student population.

**Documentation**

Based on a continual self-reflexive stance and desire for catalytic validity (Lather 1986), our data collection and analysis were framed to enable us to consider ‘the degree to which the research process orients, focuses and energises participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it’ (1986, 272). Danielle and Robin wanted to understand the processes and time involved in creating an ensemble
with students who are not enrolled in a drama course; thus, they video recorded classroom events and wrote journal entries that described their responses to changes in the school, community, and students’ interactions. In addition, as Camille Cushman led the data collection in the school–university partnership, she was sensitive to the two groups’ emerging understanding of drama as an art form; thus, she did not record their statements as ‘truths’ but as possibilities within a playful, socio-historical construction of ideas and ways of working together (Vygotsky 1978). Overall, our qualitative data collection (i.e. field notes, video recording, reflective interviews, triangulating participants’ perspectives) and analyses were conducted with attention to the ways research could contribute to everyone’s capacity to play with and transform – or at least destabilise – otherwise static views of how different groups of people can work together to define and change relationships of knowledge, representation, and power.

**Analysis**

In the initial review of data, Camille identified episodes and statements that captured the range of Robin’s and Danielle’s actions, responses, values, philosophies, and perceived responsibilities. Using Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) constant comparative methods for developing a grounded theory, we reviewed transcribed notes, dialogue, and interviews to ascertain the repetitions and patterns of navigating ensemble-building and engagement with conflict. We also looked for themes associated with ‘living together and fighting together’, i.e. perceptions of race and racism, anonymity versus visibility, differences in cultural values, and experiences of rigid versus fluid behaviours and institutional norms. From the sorted categories and emerging claims we created visual maps (Erickson 1986) that enabled us to draw linkages between assertions and sub-assertions in the data. Visual representations also made evident the organic, responsive nature of forming an ensemble as well as the inevitable contingent and reductive nature of a category scheme.

**Interpreting and visualising teachers’ interactions, knowledge, and values for intracultural ensemble-building**

Figure 1 presents a summary of the interrelated forms of knowledge, interaction and values of teaching and learning through drama that informed Robin’s and Danielle’s collaboration. This chart serves, not as
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Redistributes and circulates power and authority</th>
<th>Facilitates connections and mutual respect</th>
<th>Connects participants and context to their social, political, and emotional lives</th>
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<tr>
<td>Values and the emotional dimensions of learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Accepts and acknowledges vulnerability and includes in decision-making and participation in learning</td>
<td>• Values and the emotional dimensions of learning</td>
<td>• Values and the emotional dimensions of learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Represents and celebrates the value of mistakes in teaching and learning</td>
<td>• Emphasises the value of playfulness, laughter, and shared participation in learning</td>
<td>• Values and the emotional dimensions of learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Plans for and constructs a safe space for emotions such as negative feelings, anger, fear, and confusion</td>
<td>• Poses questions to identify authentic interest and inquiry</td>
<td>• Values and the emotional dimensions of learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Creates time for self-reflection and critical reflection on own biases and emotional triggers</td>
<td>• Asks open-ended questions to develop tentative expression of ideas and encourage inclusion of less powerful voices</td>
<td>• Values and the emotional dimensions of learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Models and expects compassionate listening</td>
<td>• Knows and uses multiple modes of compassionate mediation to reduce differences and become personalised</td>
<td>• Values and the emotional dimensions of learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Accepts and creatively uses the tension of irreconcilable differences</td>
<td>• Values and the emotional dimensions of learning</td>
<td>• Values and the emotional dimensions of learning</td>
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<td>• Values and the emotional dimensions of learning</td>
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Figure 1. Teachers' interrelated values, knowledge, and interactions associated with drama processes, conflict for learning, and ensemble building.

a finalised list, but as a heuristic that teachers and researchers might reference to name the complex range of insights and practices that contribute to intracultural ensemble-building and dramatic art.

Intracultural ensemble-building was characterised by two key shifts in the teachers' distribution of power and knowledge: (1) teachers redistributed power across teachers and students so that issues of equity, trust, and emotional dimensions of learning were visible and relevant to ongoing negotiations, and (2) teachers connected the ensemble's production of knowledge to students' and teachers' social, emotional, and political lives, while maintaining a stance toward knowledge as uncertain and provisional. Although the figure's arrangement of columns and rows suggests a linear progression, the
chart is intended to facilitate a reading of 'clusters' of interdependent values and interactions. For example, when Robin first met with the university students in preparation for their partnership with Danielle's students, she introduced games so they could relax and become familiar with one another. While playing the games, however, Robin also showed students how to hoot and applaud when someone made a mistake. One of the university students questioned the whole idea of announcing a mistake, suggesting it would make a shy person feel singled out and more inhibited. Robin responded by describing a responsive process for reframing social judgements:

We try to make it a normal practice, to celebrate not passing judgement on anyone else, especially ourselves... People's feelings are sometimes going to get hurt. We want to try to make it as safe for exploring as best we can... by building step by step... and checking out how people are at each step. We are also trying to celebrate the playfulness of exploring and not knowing, and just trying it out. (14 January 2010)

Here, Robin expresses the interrelated constructs and conditions of practising uncertainty, emotional safety, risk-taking, vulnerability, and playfulness that marked her teaching with both groups. In the next section, we illustrate the values and interactions Robin and Danielle enacted with students who were, initially, very reluctant to shift from asymmetrical power relations to ownership of their ideas and investment in their ensemble.

Beginning drama, conflict, resistance and ensemble-building in Danielle’s classroom

On the first day of school, sitting in a hot and humid, non-air-conditioned, third-floor classroom, Robin and Danielle asked 20 already school-weary students what they might do and what rules they would implement to be 'a group of people who have a job to do', 'who can depend on one another.' The idea of shifting the hierarchy of school relationships so that the 'teacher is uncrowned' (Neelands 2009) was puzzling for the students and full of uncertainties for Danielle. As Gallagher (2007) makes evident across her descriptions of drama classrooms, this collective approach to learning is precisely the opposite of the expectations and assumptions that direct most classrooms, where individualism, isolation, and conformity are expected to regulate and sustain a predictable learning environment.
In the face of students’ scepticism, Robin brought invaluable expertise in working with people who were usually unclear or apprehensive about drama processes. She waited patiently for students’ answers, indicating that their knowledge was valuable and that a change to more equitable forms of power relations and knowledge production would take time. As students watched her and waited to see if Danielle really meant that they could make the rules, Robin invited the students to begin playing games that would make them more visible and vulnerable to themselves and one another. For example, they played a simple ‘pass the gesture’ theatre game called ‘Zip! Zap! Zop!’

Although many students were eager to participate in rehearsal-room activities, others were disinterested or tired on any given day. Still others attended class infrequently. Robin’s goal in these situations was to invite students into the play of ideas and action without positioning them as defiant or disobedient. Danielle continued this approach by offering reluctant students a chance to use the video camera to record classroom interactions; she also invited students to make suggestions or add voices from alongside their peers’ active participation.

As we reviewed these events in our research meetings, we noticed Robin’s non-judgemental approach to students’ tentative responses. If someone said something under their breath about their concerns related to school, she would take note and often follow up by saying, ‘I really want to know what you mean’. Initially, some students just stared ahead or commented that this was a strange way for a teacher to act. And yet, Robin and Danielle persisted, believing that eventually students would value their participation in ensemble-based learning. In particular, they sought visibility for the students, within their classroom and in the larger school contexts. They viewed the students as intelligent people who cared deeply for their families and friends but knew that the students perceived their experience in school as one of anonymity or derision. Thus, as shown in Figure 1, much of the initial work of ensemble-building was in the domain of ‘facilitating connections and mutual respect’.

In addition, as outlined in columns 1 and 4 of Figure 1, Robin recognised that students and teachers experience different levels of discomfort or ease with topics and drama processes. By slowing down the image-making work and game experiences, checking in with people about their concerns or enthusiasm, acknowledging discomfort, and providing some choices for participation, Robin demonstrated respect and concern for individuals’ and the ensemble’s well-being. Such
attention to students’ views can also be understood in terms of culturally responsive pedagogy and critical education paradigms. Research based on an expanded definition of ‘the urban’, points to adults’ responsibility in forming responsive working relationships with youth as they also name and challenge micro and macro aggressions in their schools and communities. For example, scholars have documented students’ political insights (Ladson-Billings 1992; Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2008) as a primary source for connecting teachers’ and students’ academic goals with their community’s interests (Morrell 2004; Kinloch 2009). In alignment with critical research and education, Danielle and Robin elicited students’ experiences and dramatised representations of democracy and injustice in their school and community.

After nearly three weeks of debating, dramatising possibilities, and refining classroom rules with her students, Danielle suggested that she should enforce a ‘check in’ and limit on bathroom hall passes; implying that it would be difficult to trust students beyond the classroom door. Her idea was met by a student’s pointed question: ‘Have we ever given you a reason to not trust us?’ In a reflective interview, several months later, Danielle acknowledged the significance of this interaction and how it helped her re-evaluate her assumption about power and visibility in her classroom:

We were giving the students a hand in developing the classroom environment. It was something that I have never even thought of doing or imagined myself doing because as a teacher I am always by the book, by the rules, and there are no deviations from that. And ... being open to having the kids come up with the classroom rules ... I think gave me an opportunity and my students an opportunity to see that we are both here for the same things and that we are both human and that we have to understand each other.

As evidenced by the ongoing negotiation of rules, the group’s sense of mutual respect grew from Robin and Danielle’s conscious decision to redistribute power and decision-making authority to define behaviour and the meaning of trust. Their trust and respect were also tied to Robin and Danielle’s belief that they were knowledgeable participants in a school and community where segregation by ability and race were concrete and ever present, and yet, as teachers, they did not have the first-hand experiences felt daily by students. Therefore, their knowledge was mediated as they questioned their assumptions and acknowledged the overwhelming conflicts and paradoxes of working within an urban school setting.
During weekly research meetings, Robin pointed to her own vulnerability and privilege as a university-affiliated white woman. As she became more aware of students’ exclusion in school she and Danielle were infuriated by the dehumanisation and low expectations the students experienced. Many students complained that schoolwork was insulting or meaningless or they got little feedback on it. It was emotionally draining for Robin to return to the classroom two or three times a week, but each session with students fuelled her commitment to create a learning space based on interest and trust; in which she could introduce and press for the meaning of conflict and contradiction in their lives.

Along row 3 of Figure 1, the overarching ensemble-building practices of sharing power and connecting knowledge to students’ lives are further delineated as specific skills that involve simultaneously balancing participants’ emotional reactions, tentative explorations of meaning, the impact of immediate concerns, and expectations of time. These are exemplified by Danielle’s work with her students during a study of a state bill.

By mid-October, most of the students had agreed to ‘stand up’ to play a game, or represent an idea and different perspectives through still images, imagined dialogues, portraits, and changing sequences of events. One afternoon, the group focused on the differing viewpoints that arose when a controversial state bill was placed on a statewide ballot for ratification. The bill would make same gender partnerships, and indeed all unmarried partnerships, unrecognised and unsanctioned in Ohio public institutions. Danielle asked students to imagine what it might be like to be the target of such a law by placing herself at the centre of an anti-gay group who would speak and enact their thoughts as they moved in a circle around her. A few minutes after this improvisation had begun, two students sat down and did not participate. Rather than assume that these students were disengaged or disrespectful, Danielle asked them why they ‘opted out’. Derrick (male, African American, 12th grade) did not feel it was right to treat people so negatively. The second student, Niecy (female, African American), explained, through tears, that she had recently come out as a lesbian to her mom; and now, she would make no apologies for her desire for or love of women.

Reflecting on this moment, Danielle remembered her students’ increasing respect for their own and others’ differences, and her uncertainty about how to respond: ‘It was like... I made this girl cry. But the entire room went silent and we all focused on her and there
was genuine concern with how she felt and everyone was listening to her' (informal conversation, 24 October 2009). Robin explained, in her analysis of this event, that vulnerability includes the unanticipated stories and knowledge we encounter through drama: 'You have to trust the ensemble process to head at times into unknown places' (2 November 2010).

Students learned four weeks later that they would no longer meet together as a class. The change was announced, and all students reported to different classrooms at the beginning of December. Danielle and Robin proposed, however, that everyone could voluntarily join a theatre programme at Ohio State University where they would continue to learn together as an ensemble and join another group of university students to explore the meaning of freedom and oppression in their lives.

In the next section, we describe students' and teachers' interpretations of being visible and working as equal participants in learning and meaning-making while creating dramatic art in the new setting of a university-based theatre programme. Danielle's students and the university students entered into a space that depends on the mobility, resources, and creativity of shared urbanicity. And yet the expectation of 'being together' to create a performance was obviously not sufficient for intracultural ensemble-building; the practices of 'living together and fighting together' had to be taught and developed for this space to become engaging and worthwhile. In this section, the practices described in columns 3 and 4 in Figure 1 are especially important for understanding how participants' ideas, interpretations and confusion can be guided by the teacher's attention to both the aesthetic potential of the work and the importance of sustaining trust in the ensemble.

**Forming a new ensemble in a new space with new conflicts**

In February 2010, four young men and four young women from Danielle's class regularly attended the university school partnership workshops; and 11 university students, four men and seven women, enrolled in Robin's course. In a university theatre department rehearsal room, the groups met to address the questions, 'What is freedom?' and 'What is freedom from oppression?' From the beginning, the new space for their partnership seemed to give Danielle's students a renewed chance to breathe and enjoy learning together again. She shared with Camille that on bus rides back to the school, her students expressed their sense of freedom from judgement they often felt at school.
In the third week of the course, CHS and university students met to begin planning and improvising scenes that might be performed for a ‘Festival of Freedom’ in the university’s black box stage. Robin first mediated a process, based on Boal’s (1995) forum theatre, of self-identifying with social groups that could be subject to stereotypes, dehumanisation, and discrimination. Once they gathered in the social category groups they had created (Women, Black, Athlete, Atheist), Robin asked everyone to generate attitudes, feelings, and slogans that are typically used to target that group; and then further isolate ‘triggers’ or moments of personal reaction as they imagined a scene. Based on their brainstorming, each group improvised three scenarios showing characters in conflict and presented these to the whole group for evaluation and analysis. This cycle of improvisation, reflection, and revision was repeated across the next six sessions until rehearsals began for the final performance.

Bryan, an African American university student, explained his portrayal of a high school student, who is presumed, by White students, to be an athlete:

...I played football in high school and then when you come here (to the university) people ask you like, ‘Okay. Do you play sports?’ instead of academics or anything like that...And it’s like, ‘No. I’m just here for the school...I hate getting asked that’.

Several male CHS students agreed with Bryan that this is typical, and you have to act as though racialised and gendered positionings via sports are alright, ‘...so I just...take the punches, you know’. Robin urged Bryan and his group members (along with the other groups) to consider what they might do in their improvisations besides ignore these micro aggressions (Sue et al. 2009). She explained that she wanted them to notice when they got stuck and to ask themselves what mattered most in their scenes:

Where are you stuck? And...try to get to another extra layer of that image and story. What is the story you are telling? And what kind of effect does that have on people? And what does that [stereotypic attitudes] do to that group of people?

Together, they had to find the specificity in conflicts that would help them portray spoken and unspoken oppressions. Importantly, for the work of a creative ensemble, Robin refers to their work as representational not autobiographical, even though Bryan had just identified the parallels between his own experiences and the character he portrayed.
She also reminded them that they are representing a story that is imagined; that is intended to disrupt their own and the audience’s usual experience of ‘being stuck’. Thus, they were encouraged to escalate, reverse, change roles, or in some other way introduce new angles on conflict so they could see where and how an embodied shift in power might occur. As practices for intracultural ensemble-building, all of these suggestions and redirections can usefully invite and develop new insights among people who have rarely invested in changing images and narratives about social conflict. As a metaphor for democratic living within an increasingly shared urban landscape, such practices suggest a portrait of dynamic experimentation with assumptions so they can become loosened, ‘unstuck’, and reformed for a contemporary, intracultural vision of society.

Working with the group representing women’s freedom from oppression, Robin focused on a vignette that showed a man standing over a seated, cowering woman as he berates her for ‘not even matching the brown shoes with his brown belt’. She asked the group to locate power and consider how the relationship could be less oppressive. Derrick, as a member of the audience, suggested ‘she is a young lady’ who is not getting the respect she deserves so she should ‘yell back at him and put her hands on him’. Robin heard this possibility but explained that to enact it would involve a series of staging exercises so they could represent this and not hurt one another. In a reflective discussion following the class, Robin questioned her decision and raised the possibility that her own bias and psychological ‘triggers’ associated with domestic violence prohibited her from moving forward and experimenting with their idea.

Posing another possibility, Derrick suggested that the woman could gain power by crying. Several women in the group, including Robin, responded with incredulity. ‘Cry? Did you just say cry?’ However Derrick persists: ‘He might get emotional too’.

Recognising the performers’ hesitancy in approaching this variation on the scene, Robin reminded them that they are pretending: ‘Just give it a try… I know you’re going to fake it’. The performers took up their roles, and represented a consistent portrayal of a man who belittles his partner’s emotions and accuses her of being weak.

John: You’re worthless. When I get home from work the dinner’s never done and the house is all a mess. (Woman begins to cry…)
John: What are you doing? Crying … Oh perfect. That’s all you do. Cry, cry, cry…
Robin: Okay. Did that work?
Shanelle: Not at all! (More laughter)

Aesthetic distancing and a disposition of experimentation invited both the ensemble to take risks and the stubborn power of verbal abuse to be exposed. Before Robin ended the day’s session, Steven posed the problem of unresolvability to the whole group: ‘Is there ever a time when things don’t change?’ Many students followed his question with explanations for and problems associated with change in all of the oppressions they had identified. But when Steven tried to suggest that a ‘mysterious question’ could make a difference, Robin reflected later that no one understood what he meant. However, she returned to his comment and asked him to elaborate, which led to Steven rephrasing and proposing the intervention of a provocative, ‘tough’ question that could initiate a more equitable approach to a conflicted, dehumanising relationship. Hearing the potential in his idea, in relation to all they had performed and evaluated that day, Robin elevated their efforts as an ensemble:

What we are talking about right now; these are the kinds of conversations that the whole world could have…. You guys are getting kind of raw with what you are doing. It’s not … even as funny as it is, it’s still to the core – and you’re laughing but you’re also saying to yourself, ‘Oh god, it’s awful that is happening!’ (video transcript, 18 February 2010)

**Conclusion**

Teachers working through drama, conflict, and ensemble enact a remarkable range of aesthetic, social, emotional, narrative, and relational judgements that have the potential to create intracultural dialogues with students’ and our own histories and experiences of urbanicity. Such spaces offer students ‘the ongoing, participatory experience, of being together in drama’; in ways that ideally ‘contribute to change’ (Neelands 2009, 181). With Robin’s support, Danielle committed to an ensemble approach to learning and witnessed profound changes in her students’ investment in equitable power relations and knowledge production; even as institutional policies assumed the students’ indifference and anonymity. The class’s slow progression from isolation to attentive respect for one another’s perspectives required patience and expert direction that may elude teachers who have every intention to develop ensembles, but find it difficult to reflect on or identify the teaching decisions that may be
eroding a group's commitment to change. Our case-study methods enabled us to document, analyse, and eventually propose clusters of interrelated values and actions that guided two ensembles dedicated to interpreting and performing conflict and oppression. This work represents our efforts to 'know in order to transform' (Lather 1986) and 'give back' a way of naming the labour and insights that accompany ensemble-building in drama education. The 'knowing' presented here is bounded and situated by the concepts of urbanicity and intracultural ensemble-building, which we believe can initiate tough questions about how we 'really want' to live together.

**Keywords:** ensemble; urban education; drama educator; anti-oppressive

**Notes**

1. Danielle was one of 20 teachers selected to participate in this programme that focused primarily on the active interpretation of Shakespeare's plays with primary through secondary students. Danielle was not an English teacher and was new to the idea and practice of drama in education. She focused, therefore, on the experience of working together as an ensemble, which is a foundation for drama work, but not the central goal for the Royal Shakespeare Company/Ohio State University partnership.

2. All student names are pseudonyms.

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