

Research for Impact: Audience, Method, and Dissemination

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To discern “what areas of spectatorship most pressingly need to be studied in our contemporary context,” we must first consider our broader goals and purposes as scholars interested in audience studies. Prior to determining *what* topics we study, we must consider *why* and relatedly *how* we study them. Herein, I discuss my considerations of the how, why, and what of spectator research. I write from my position as a scholar primarily interested in Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) and educational theatre, though others in theatre and performance studies generally may find these thoughts relevant.

My primary motive for undertaking research is my desire to impact my field tangibly—to contribute to change—to make a difference. Specifically, I conduct studies with the potential to (1) affect praxis in TYA and educational drama, (2), increase young people’s access to theatre and drama experiences, and/or (3) influence public perceptions of the value of TYA and educational drama for young people. As a pragmatist, I “value what works in the context of a particular research question” (Leavy 2017, 13–14). Increasingly, “what works” for my studies are valid and reliable mixed methods approaches drawing on empirical data from the quantitative and qualitative traditions. These methods enable rigorous exploration of research questions concerning the value of TYA and educational drama, including how theatre and drama may (or may not) positively affect spectators/participants.¹

My goal, even in this short piece, is to affect research praxis by arguing that in many contexts, scholars may benefit from considerations of whether dominant research practices in theatre and performance studies are best suited to help us achieve our goals (such as the three I detail above). Specifically, I hope to persuade readers who share my interest in impactful research that we should develop fluency in multimodal approaches to research (including mixed methods), and that we ought to share our work in ways both accessible to and appropriate for the specific audiences we hope to influence. This includes employing research methods our audiences are comfortable with, as well as writing and speaking in vernacular they understand. I also advocate that scholars concerned with impact consider the most effective ways to disseminate our findings (which may not always be in traditional peer-reviewed academic journals) to increase the likelihood that our intended audiences will actually read (or otherwise experience) our outputs.

The Limitations of Theory and Academic Publishing

Given my goals of impacting praxis, increasing access, and influencing public opinion, it would be ineffective for me to publish my work solely in scholarly articles replete with academic jargon accessible almost exclusively to other scholars. Even in the “publish or perish” context of contemporary academia, we must question whether choosing to publish exclusively in traditional venues is worthwhile if doing so fails to help us achieve goals including impact, access, and influence.

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Many journals in our field seek submissions firmly grounded in critical theory. Jeanne Klein (2016) makes the case that such work is prone to flaws if “scholars conceptualize critical theories *as* methodologies” (117, emphasis in original). She notes that the empirical research process begins with “a *literature review* constructed and cited from the existing *evidence* of past studies” (117, emphasis in original). She continues, “This crucial step of a literature review of past evidence is what I find missing from all too many past and present drama/theatre studies” (117). Klein notes that significant problems arise when scholars treat critical theories as methodologies, “thereby engaging in circular reasoning from within pre-selected cultural ideologies” (117). Non-evidence-based circular reasoning is unlikely to result in impact.

To be clear, critical theory plays important roles in scholarship. Theorists employ critical perspectives to (among other things) reveal, challenge, and strive to rectify inequitable power structures. That said, it might be more appropriate to conceptualize critical theories as lenses or modes of analysis than methods or methodologies. David Krasner and David Z. Saltz note, “Many theorists who have addressed the phenomenon of theater and performance have applied theories developed by other disciplines, for example literary theory and cultural studies” (2006, 7). They note the “insightful and valuable contributions” of feminist, sociological, and poststructuralist theories, but raise an important concern:

The validity of performance theories ultimately rises or falls on arguments proffered by the theorists upon which the theory draws, rather than on the theorist’s own argument. The shape of this type of argument is conditional, *if* we accept the arguments of Butler, Irigaray, Baudrillard or Bourdieu, *then* certain ideas about theater or performance follow accordingly. (Krasner and Saltz 2006, 8, emphasis in original)

Klein, responding to the above, asserts, “this conflation of theory and method results in a body of research that compares its self-interpreted evidence against its own theoretical frameworks, rather than against the past foundational evidence of former researchers’ works. This circular process of *a priori* reasoning . . . inhibits future-oriented advancements in our disciplinary knowledge” (2016, 117). Again, this approach does not seem promising for scholars interested in tangible impacts.²

Furthermore, the paywalls many publishers establish limit the potential readership of their journals’ scholarship primarily to those with access to academic libraries.³ The discipline-specific parlance scholars employ (which efficiently communicates complex ideas to similarly trained scholars) can seem inaccessible and opaque to those outside the field. In fact, such language may signify to practitioners or those outside the field that “this article is not for you.” This implication is directly contrary to my goal to impact the field beyond the realm of academia. In sum, many peer-reviewed academic publications have relatively little potential to affect praxis, access, or public opinion.

The Potential of Mixed Methods Research

Mixed Methods and Funding

Many research grant programs, such as the *Research: Art Works* program funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in the United States, explicitly call for empirical evidence. The NEA gives “priority” to proposals “that present theory-driven and evidence-based research questions and methodologies” (2019, para. 2). Grants greater than USD 30,000 exclusively fund

quantitative studies employing experimental or quasi-experimental designs (para. 4). Private foundations sometimes fund efforts to increase young people's access to the arts; these foundations may have little interest in proposals comprising jargonistic theorizing, and may rather seek empirical evidence of impact.

For example, my university produces TYA productions biennially. To ensure young people from underfunded and arts-poor schools in our region are able to attend what may be their only opportunity to experience live theatre, I seek funding to cover the costs of transportation from students' schools to our theatre, and of educational materials such as teacher resource guides. The funding proposals I write to support these efforts offer simple but clear examples of how scholars can pair specific research methods with accessible language to create impact.

When writing proposals to foundations likely to fund arts experiences for children, I do not employ terms from critical theory. I do not discuss how performances might help children question problematic dominant metanarratives. Instead, I present empirical data from surveys educators completed after attending previous TYA productions. These brief surveys—mixed methods data collection instruments—provide compelling evidence for proposals. Given the brevity many funders request, I tend to emphasize quantitative data (e.g., “100% of the educators who attended our last TYA production agreed that the performance was a worthwhile experience for their students”). I include brief excerpts of qualitative data that harmonize with the quantitative findings (e.g., “One teacher wrote: “This was one of, if not *the*, best play I have attended. All my students were highly engaged and talked about it for days afterwards.””).

I write such proposals in clear, concise prose that presents evidence succinctly and directly requests funding to continue providing young people access to live productions. To date, I have received the full amount requested for each production. This suggests that the methods selected (mixed methods with a quantitative emphasis) and the language employed (clear, jargon-free prose) are effective choices when writing for this audience.

While some might argue brief post-show educator surveys do not constitute “research,” I argue not only that they do, but also that they can be far more impactful than some published, peer-reviewed studies. The educator response research I cite in funding applications has enabled thousands of children to attend live theatre. Comparatively, I published a peer-reviewed article (2009) theorizing that a social contractarian perspective illuminates relationships between TYA companies and their constituents. This work, unquestionably “research,” has been cited only ten times over the last decade. I suspect that the impact of the post-show educator survey research (which I will never publish) is exponentially greater than that of my peer-reviewed article, though it is likely my university considers the latter a greater accomplishment than the former. I do not believe that impact-driven scholars should cease publishing peer-reviewed scholarship; rather, we should actively engage in multiple modes of inquiry.

As scholars have argued for decades (see Davis 1961 and Saldaña 1988), researchers should develop proficiency with multiple methodologies, especially methodologies with which our graduate training did not thoroughly familiarize us. Just as all theatre and performance scholars should be able to discuss how performances can challenge (or reify) hegemonic discourse, we should also understand what a *p* value is, why researchers typically consider *p* values < .05 “significant,” and that while designating .05 as a critical *p* value is a time-honoured practice, it is also a relatively arbitrary act. We

should be able to articulate how and why (in real-world contexts) “statistically significant” results can be trivial while “statistically insignificant” results can have profoundly consequential implications.

Mixed Methods and Education

My position as a TYA scholar inextricably links my work to education (see Bedard 2003 and Omasta 2009). Children rarely exercise agency over the theatrical productions they attend; rather, “gatekeepers” (including teachers, administrators, and parents/guardians) usually decide what theatre (if any) children will experience. Empirical data that clearly demonstrates the value of TYA, such as evidence indicating that students who attend live theatrical events exhibit greater tolerance and skill in reading others’ emotions (see, for example, Greene et al. 2015), is more likely to influence these gatekeepers than scholarship stemming from the critical paradigm (see Leavy 2017, 13).

Discussing school leaders, Richard Courtney posits, “mechanically minded administrators assume that only quantitative methods provide ‘truth’” (as cited in Klein 2016, 115). While school leaders’ reliance on quantitative data exclusively is problematic, we are unlikely to influence such administrators by publishing in academic journals they will probably never read. Rather, as a pragmatist, I believe I am most likely to tangibly impact students’ access to theatre programming by communicating with administrators using the “language of power” (in this case, quantitative research).⁴ This should not diminish scholars’ broader efforts to radically reform, democratize, and promote equity in public education. It *does* imply that we should pursue short-term impacts (immediate access to theatre for young people) and long-term efforts (substantive educational reform) using different methods, simultaneously.

Dissemination Matters

While scholars hoping to impact praxis, increase access, and influence public opinion must employ research methods that our audiences consider valid, we must also ensure that those audiences can actually access our work. As discussed earlier, it is unlikely that most individuals outside the academy will ever read what we publish in academic journals; as such, we must turn to other venues. The options are countless, from traditional venues such as newspapers and magazines (print and digital) to podcasts and blogs. Social media offers effective tools; we can share links on Facebook to studies elsewhere online, or even purchase advertisements specifically targeted to appear to the audiences we want to see our research. The idea that theatre scholars can share their work in the popular press is not chimeric; indeed, some scholars are particularly adept at maintaining such a presence.⁵

I share here two examples of studies that employed alternative (and high impact) dissemination methods. The first case is my (2012) study that surveyed high school theatre teachers and administrators about myriad issues related to theatre education. I published the results of the study in the non-peer-reviewed trade journal *Teaching Theatre*, distributed to thousands of theatre teachers. Scholars, practitioners, and the media have cited this article greater than triple the number of times they have cited my single-authored, peer-review articles in academic journals (on average). Citations appear in scholarly journals and books, theses and dissertations from around the world, government reports, blogs, and the popular press.

Additionally, the *Playbill* for over a dozen Broadway productions printed data from my study highlighting the value of theatre education. I cannot precisely measure this study’s impact. It seems likely, however, that the article I wrote for theatre teachers (in a trade journal dedicated to theatre

teaching), combined with the brief facts about theatre education distributed to innumerable Broadway theatre-goers in *Playbill* influenced public opinion regarding TYA and educational drama to a greater degree than any other study I have completed (peer-reviewed or otherwise).

The second example draws on the research of Brian Kisida, Jay Greene, and Daniel Bowen, who measure the impact of arts experiences on young people through large-scale randomized experiments. For one particular study, they measured the impact of field trips to art museums on high school students. In addition to publishing a peer-reviewed article about the work (Greene, Kisida, and Bowen 2014), they also shared their work in a *New York Times* op-ed with the attention-grabbing title: “Art Makes You Smart” (Kisida, Greene, and Bowen 2013). In the year the op-ed was published, some 1,856,318 individuals and organizations subscribed to the *Times* (Haughney 2013, para. 4); even if only 10 percent of subscribers read the op-ed, 185,632 members of the public may have been influenced by the data it shared about the efficacy of the arts.

Moving Forward

In sum, no matter our topic—theatre spectatorship, arts education, or critical interrogation of the performative aspects of whiffle ball—we must make our scholarship accessible and understandable to the general population.⁶ We should expand our repertoires of research methods, collaborate with scholars in other disciplines who are familiar with methodological tools we are not, and conduct replication and follow-up studies,⁷ as scholars in other disciplines have already begun in earnest.

There is a pressing need to study many areas of spectatorship. As we initiate projects to explore them, we should take care to deliberately select the most appropriate method(s) for our questions and our intended audience(s). We should also ensure those audiences will be able to access our work both physically (we must share our work where our audiences can actually access it) and linguistically, using terminology likely to engage and inform our audiences.

Notes

1. I firmly believe that arts advocates should draw upon sound research. We must distinguish, however, between research and advocacy. It is unethical (and ultimately unhelpful) to begin a study with predetermined positive outcomes. As Madeleine L’Engle (1984) observed, “We find what we are looking for,” so it is essential that when we conduct studies, we are open to all possible results, and that we commit to sharing what we find, whether we like it or not.
2. This does not mean that those of us interested in affecting praxis, increasing access, and influencing public opinion should entirely disregard academic publishing in general or critical theorizing specifically. Academic publishing has much to offer: the peer-review and editorial processes can offer valuable feedback and insights, our field needs venues in which to debate complex ideas, and those interested in impact likely include other scholars among the audiences they hope to influence. In addition, frankly, such writing is requisite for many university-based scholars.
3. Scholarly books may be no more accessible. The average retail price on amazon.com for the five best-selling books in the category Performing Arts: Theatre: History and Criticism was, as of this writing, \$76.81(US).
4. For example, a principal unfamiliar with theatre who must, due to budget cuts, eliminate some school programming may be less likely to eliminate theatre if she learns that 99% of her colleagues throughout the US believe theatre plays a somewhat or very important role in strengthening students’ collaboration skills. That 98% believe theatre plays a somewhat or very important role in strengthening students’ self-confidence,

self-discipline, and creativity, and that 87% believe theatre strengthens less obvious qualities such as students' management and administrative skills (Omasta 2012, 15) may further inform her choice.

5. For example, Harvey Young, a theatre and performance scholar and Dean of the College of Fine Arts at Boston University has published (or been interviewed/covered) in the *New York Times*, *People*, the *Washington Post*, the *Boston Globe*, *US News & World Report*, *Backstage*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *CNN*, *20/20*, *Good Morning America*, and the *Chicago Sun-Times*, among others, in the past two years alone.

6. We must bear in mind that as of 2017 only 33.4% of Americans held bachelor's degrees (Wilson 2017, para. 2), suggesting the majority of the population would find the dense writing of many critical theorists impenetrable.

7. Replication studies attempt to recreate the conditions of previous research to help confirm or disconfirm findings (see Yong 2012). Qualitative follow-up studies use inductive approaches to "explore the sources of [results from previous studies] and generate hypotheses that go beyond what you measured in the original study [and can] examine aspects of the participants' *subjective* interpretations" (Morgan 2014, 154, emphasis in original).

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