The Gardener, The Actor, and The Educator: Six Lessons Towards Creating and Cultivating Spaces of Vulnerability Between Theatre for Young Audiences and Education

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the intersection of, or space between, theatre and education, as observed through the co-creation, rehearsal, and performance of an original play: The Edge Project. The project brings together artists from a professional theatre company and students/teachers from four secondary school drama classes. Conversations with TEACHER, ARTIST, and CREATURE lead me to consider topics including: individual and collective roles in meaning-making, process and product-based theatre creation/education, and to unpack concepts such as: trust, empathy, and vulnerability. I invite the reader to follow me, and the participants, down a garden path where we search for ways to cultivate and nurture authentic and mutualistic relationships on the stage and in the classroom. In tribute to Boleslavsky’s work on actor training, I imagine what “The First Six Lessons” of The Edge Project might be, and hope to inform further research into the gifts of Theatre for Young Audiences and theatre education.

Keywords: Theatre Education; TYA; vulnerability; empathy; co-creation
To Matteiflex.

To the students, the teachers, and the artists, who helped me to see in myself all three.

To the artist-gardener in all of us, who dreams of, and works towards, creating a better world.
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A.
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Prologue: From Gardening to Green Thumb

*The White Rabbit put on his spectacles.*

“Where shall I begin, please your Majesty?” he asked.

“Begin at the beginning,” the King said gravely, “and go on till you come to the end: then stop.”


Despite the King’s best advice, in this case we will start somewhere in the middle of the story and try to leave off long before we get to the end. The middle place for our beginning is an ordinary day in the English countryside, where a young student and a gardener find themselves on the grounds of a 15\textsuperscript{th} century castle, tending to the roses.

This was the day my friend Matty handed me his copy of *Acting: The First Six Lessons* by Boleslavsky. He said: “This is my favourite book. I want you to have it. It’s important.” Important indeed, although at that moment I could not have imagined how right he would be. Matty was a gardener at the castle where I was attending my first year of university and, over the course of many afternoons lounging in a wheelbarrow, he became one of my dearest friends and a source of so much truth and inspiration. An amateur photographer, a husband, a young father, and a garden labourer, I doubt Matty would consider himself an artist. But from my vantage point in the wheelbarrow I knew that I was in the company of the very thing. Together we talked about films, theatre, art, nature, and science finding equal delight in a conversation about the universe or in building a giant bonfire. I always appreciated his presence. He took in whatever information and inspiration he could from the world around him and, through the garden, through his photos, through his children, he gave beauty back to the world. This is what made him an artist. Above all, he seemed to live truthfully. He was his genuine self: the kind of character that you hope to meet in life, and on the stage.
The garden and the artist-gardener are fitting starting points for a story that is really about seeds planted: about nurture and growth. In the pages of Boleslavsky’s book, acting and the theatre stopped being simply something that I loved to do, and experience, and became something with new value: Theatre was important. Acting was important. Theatre was worth dedicating my life to. Before I started university I knew that I wanted to be an actor and that I wanted to study theatre but that moment in the garden is when the young seedling broke through the soil and I could see that my passion was a living thing. I needed to know more, experience more, feed the plant so that I could watch it grow and, hopefully one day, eat its fruit. The account you are reading is a project that is, at this stage, most interested in the roots. It is about the vast systems hidden below the ground that feed and support the growth on the surface.

Boleslavsky was a director, actor and acting teacher. He moved from Poland to New York in the 1920s, bringing with him his experiences in the Moscow Art Theatre and Stanislavski’s “method”. He opened the American Laboratory Theatre and trained some of the actors who would go on to create The Group Theatre, which means that we can trace much of modern American actor-training back to Boleslavsky. I didn’t know any of this when I picked up his book. I consumed the book as if it was written for me alone. Acting: The First Six Lessons was published in 1933 and it reads as a play, a manual, and a manifesto for the actor.

Acting: The First Six Lessons opens with the first meeting between the teacher and “The Creature” (a young woman of eighteen, the very age of the girl in the rose garden)

THE CREATURE: I...I...I hear that you teach dramatic art.

I: No! I am sorry. Art cannot be taught. To possess an art means to possess talent. That is something one has or has not. You can develop it by hard
work, but to create a talent is impossible. What I do is help those who have decided to work on the stage, to develop, and to educate themselves for honest and conscientious work in the theatre.

THE CREATURE: Yes, of course. Please help me. I simply love the theatre.

I: Loving the theatre is not enough. Who does not love it? To consecrate oneself to the theatre, to devote one’s entire life to it, give it all one’s thought, all one’s emotions! For the sake of the theatre to give up everything, to suffer everything! And more important than all, to be ready to give the theatre everything—your entire being—expecting the theatre to give you nothing in return, not the least grain of what seemed to you so beautiful in it and so alluring.

THE CREATURE: I know. I played a great deal at school. I understand that the theatre brings suffering. I am not afraid of it. I am ready for anything if I can only play, play, play.

(Boleslavsky, 1991, 17-18)

From the very first pages, I saw traces of myself in the Creature and I trusted the Master because his answers were always delivered with such certainty, which was what I (and the Creature) was looking for. The format of a Socratic debate between teacher and student, written as the dialogue of a play, drew me into the story, and the characters, and allowed me to observe the building of a craft through a long and challenging process. Boleslavsky prepared me for the hard work that lay ahead and his firm hand reminded me to carry on, even when the joy was sometimes buried under frustration or textbooks.

At the time I tried to refuse his gift saying that I would borrow the book and read it, but return it as soon as I was done. I have carried Matty’s copy of that book with me
everywhere since. In every city I have lived, Acting: The First Six Lessons has sat on my bedside table or been tucked carefully into the top drawer.

Years later I was living in New York, having spent the last of my money on a summer acting intensive and found myself disappointed and disengaged. My love for the theatre was still there and my desire to focus all my energy on training as an actor had carried my feet to the institution doors without ever touching the ground. Inside the walls, I found questions that eventually led me on an excursion away from acting and towards the study before us.

I had an old ripped copy of The Fervent Years by Harold Clurman and I carried it with me to and from class everyday. Looking back, I think that I was likely hoping that, in some way, I could lean on the idealism and urgency of the members of The Group Theatre to feed my own hunger to find a place. Boleslavsky had told me that acting was important but now I longed to feel its importance. This is how I imagined it must have felt to be in The Group.

Clurman was one of the founders of The Group Theatre in the 1930’s, which was a collection of theatre artists who wanted to develop an alternative model to New York’s commercial theatres. The Fervent Years (1945) is his full account of the short, but eventful, ten-year life of The Group Theatre. It places the movement within its social context and gives rich commentary on the personalities, the plays, the struggles and the triumphs. The Group came together: actors, writers, and directors, with a desire to change the face of American theatre by removing themselves from the “star” system and the money-making purposes of Broadway. They wanted to create a permanent company that was interested in the development and the lives of its members, which would in turn better serve the play

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1 The Fervent Years, by Harold Clurman, was written in 1945. The paperback version I carried around was a 1983 De Capo Press. reprint of the 1975 edition, originally published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
in communicating ideas and expressing shared beliefs (Clurman, 1983, 35).

Clurman explains the sentiment that in part gave birth to the movement:

We were not satisfied with most of even the best previous productions,
which seemed to us to show more competent stagecraft than humanity or
authenticity of feeling (1983, 43)

With words like *authenticity* and *humanity* framing their undertaking, The Group set
out with the grand intention of making art that *mattered* to its audience. Clurman
could see the direct connection between creating theatre and strengthening
community: there was belonging, collaboration, and social aims stitched into the
very fabric of the company he was helping to build. I longed to be out of the
classroom and in this vital and lively environment. In speaking about his own
training in New York, Clurman says:

The technique we were learning was, of course, that of the Moscow Art
Theatre, the so-called Stanislavsky “system”. But, besides a fascination with
the technique of acting, a more fundamental feeling was growing in me, a
feeling related to but not born of the theatre. It was a sense of the theatre in
relation to society. (1983, 17)

As I sat in my acting classes, a similar feeling occupied my imagination. It was
sometimes hard to see how repetition exercises were going to help me to “make the
world a better place,” which I was very certain was the purpose of theatre and my
best reason for dedicating myself to its pursuit. This outlook simultaneously served
my idealism and my desire to passionately defend my choice to follow a path into
the arts (something an artist keeps in their arsenal for occasions like family
Thanksgiving). It also kept me dancing between the “big picture” and the lived
moments of my experience. Knowing what I meant by a “better” place was
something I was still formulating and discovering, so, while I had the compass at the
ready, I was orienteering towards a non-fixed point.
My school, like so many in New York, was firmly a “Meisner” school. Which basically means that its teachers taught acting using techniques developed by Sanford Meisner. Meisner was one of the young actors that Harold Clurman recruited as original members of The Group Theatre. My teacher studied with Meisner (or maybe his teacher’s teacher did, I lost track of the lineage). Meisner studied alongside Strasberg who studied with Boleslavsky who studied with Stanislavsky. Since Stanislavsky’s seminal work An Actor Prepares (1936), Boleslavsky, Strasberg, Meisner and countless others have tried to make sense of acting and have written books, developed techniques and exercises, and started schools to instruct others in their methods.

Hero-worship was an important part of the lessons. The exercises were directly from Meisner himself. Adapting them would be sacrilege. (Which is ironic because Meisner, Strasberg, Adler, and the rest, developed their techniques by adapting and changing older techniques, each other’s, and their own.) Each day, I witnessed my fellow students struggling to make sense of the process. When questions were raised, the answers often came back with a general “because that’s the way it is”: A blanket response that the Meisner Technique will work if you give yourself over to it. In that hot summer classroom, this framing was problematic for me. I agreed with the belief-system behind the technique, and could even see the value of many of the exercises, but I was still not convinced that blind acceptance was the path to “living truthfully” as an artist.

Was it just my own lack of trust that held me back or was there something else that was keeping me from “buying in”? With hindsight it seems easy to diagnose my discomforts. It wasn’t necessarily ‘what’ was being taught but ‘how’ it was being taught that left me uneasy. This is not for a lack of belief and commitment on the part of my instructors and classmates, or even myself. And I make no claim that the questions raised are particular or exclusive to either the school or the Meisner technique. I am simply interested in sketching a line through some of the experiences that have informed my view on theatre and education.
Meisner’s technique is entirely based on an effort to train actors to “live truthfully under imaginary circumstances,” (Silverberg, 1994, 9) which is a description of acting that resonated with me at the time, and still does. It seems to me to be both a valiant ideal and common sense. In the vacuum of acting school, the technique is broken down into cold exercises to “teach” you to live truthfully\(^2\). With repetition you attempt to eliminate manipulated responses and become skilled at developing the action of the play through “true” connection to the characters and the movements as they happen. The more I worked at living truthfully on stage, the more I thought about living truthfully in real situations. For me, the technique needed to break out of the acting studio and be a real-world skill.

The summer in New York was formative because of its strange balance between discovery and disillusionment. It seemed that the red-carpeted stairs of the acting school were always home to at least one person weeping. The tears came from lots of different places: tears of frustration, disappointment, anxiety, and exhaustion. I started to worry that all the people around me were on the brink of emotional collapse. Maybe I was a “bad” actor because I wasn’t being pushed to tears at every turn.

One day, towards the end of the term when I was trying decide whether to apply for the two year program, I picked up a copy of *True and False* by David Mamet (1997) and read it aloud to myself in the park. David Mamet is a contemporary American playwright. He studied at the Neighbourhood Playhouse in New York (training under Sanford Meisner himself) but traded acting for writing and directing where he has found success and critical acclaim. With a Pulitzer Prize and both Tony and Oscar nominations to his name, he is also known as a writer about theatre itself and the professions therein. He founded the Atlantic Theatre Company in New York and

\(^2\) As I borrow living “truthfully” from Meisner and actor-training traditions, I also see that it is a complex concept, one I hope to consider more thoughtfully later in this thesis.
has taught at several post-secondary institutions, so, like Boleslavsky and Meisner he is both artist and teacher.

Mamet was just what I needed: straight-forward, to the point, and decisive (with a side of grand prose and bold ideals). He gave voice to my disenchantment, reinforced my changing attitudes, and at the same time managed to give me hope. True and False gave me permission to question what I was being taught. It even provided me with a rallying cry:

“ Invent nothing, deny nothing, speak up, stand up, stay out of school”

(Mamet, 1997, 24)

And for that moment at least, David Mamet was right. I quit school and moved into my car. With Mamet’s pragmatism, Clurman’s conscience, Boleslavky’s passion, and long stretches of road to ponder on…I boiled it down to one simple gut feeling: Acting is about being human. And, as such, maybe we can train for both at the same time without the vacuum, the infallible theatre gods, or the emotional trauma.

Since then I have spent a lot of time trying to find my place in theatre, reflecting on my path so far, and questioning how I can best serve and be served by the art at the centre of my journey. I became deeply interested in actor-training: the form, the function and the implications. In thinking about how theatre is taught I wondered more and more about what theatre teaches us. So, ignoring Mamet’s instructions, I went back to school, looking for a new approach to my curiosities.

Somehow I found myself in the Education Department and it was in this setting that I started to think more about the formative moments that led me to the theatre in the first place and how my whole educational story informed the adult I had become and my particular way of engaging with the world. From my own experience I could sense the value and importance of the arts in education but I was at a loss for how to best to talk about it, or better yet, prove it.
The questions that had started to emerge in New York were taking new shape in the context of education and pedagogy. I found myself looking back to the “training” that occurred long before the day on the castle grounds, and looking ahead to where these lessons were carrying me. Professional actor training programs have a clear purpose: to train actors; to provide its students with a set of skills to use in their work as actors. What is the purpose of a secondary school drama class? What kind of training is taking place? What skills are the students acquiring? How will these skills be used? I set down my acting books and looked for new companions to carry for a while.

I was introduced to some of the theoretical underpinnings of drama in education and slowly some voices emerged to whom I could relate: Bolton, Greene, and Neelands, to name a few. They talked about the arts with an equal measure of passion as Boleslavsky, and they were approaching their work as educators and theorists with a radical combination of idealism, conviction and curiosity that reminded me of Clurman and his Group Theatre.

“Drama in Education” ³ had its own set of heroes to reckon with, who had also been advocating for the value of their life’s work and devising practices and methods to lead others on the path they were carving out—in this case, a path to effective learning through drama in the classroom.

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³ Drama in Education (D.i.E) is an area of scholarship championed by a group of English drama teachers who reopened the conversation about the purpose of drama/theatre in the classroom in the late 1970’s. Pioneers of the movement include Dorothy Heathcote, Brian Way, and Gavin Bolton. See Bolton (1979), Dillon and Way (1981), and Wagner (1976). Drama in Education distinguishes itself by being interested in Process Drama (most often in a classroom setting) as opposed to Theatre in Education (T.i.E) which concerns itself with an end product before an audience. The two realms of scholarship are often overlapping and are in some cases considered a spectrum. While I lean heavily on the works of practitioners and theorists in D.i.E, if such a spectrum exists, I am entering this work from closer to the T.i.E. end.
Drama is] a social, interactive art process, and it also creates experiences which enable the development of cognitive, emotional, social and creative understanding and skills. (Bolton, 1979, 21)

In a class with Lynn Fels, we engage in role dramas and performative inquiries and consider her questions about how performance and drama can be used to create learning across the curriculum and how the arts can insight social change. In Fels’ class, I was asked to think about the potential of drama in the classroom:

Performative spaces are action sites of learning where children and adults bring into being new understandings, new recognitions, and new possibilities (Fels, 1998, 29)

Fels recognizes, witnesses, and looks to harness the power of performance to actively engage students and teachers in learning. In my desire to understand more about what I have learned (and continue to learn) from theatre, I could see that I needed to listen to conversations about the act of learning itself. Surrounding myself with educators was probably a good start.

However it still felt like a club to which I didn’t belong. Despite having worked with children and youth for much of my life, I have never identified as a “teacher” and I felt like an outsider in the education building: full of “curriculum”, “planned learning outcomes”, and “pedagogy.” I was still looking for a meeting place for my old artist friends and the new educators in my life, one where I could really zero in on that ever elusive fixed point.

At the intersection of arts and education I found Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA): a world full of passionate artists who seemed to exist in a space-between theatre and education—rarely gaining full membership or acceptance in either camp. It gave me a landing place for my questions about the relationship between theatre, education, and society. And, of course, new questions came up. What is the...
role of professional theatre in education? What do we hope students will get out of an interaction with theatre?

With only my own elementary and secondary school experience to draw on, and the lessons that I had learned in my pursuit of theatre training at various post-secondary institutions, I felt somehow ill-equipped to talk about educational theory or practice. But, with little more than a gut feeling about what acting should be, a love for the stage, and an eye for the authentic, I was in no way an expert on theatre either. Here I found myself, in that very uncomfortable “space between.” And this is exactly where I stumbled upon Green Thumb Theatre, a professional theatre company for young audiences based in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Patrick McDonald, the Artistic Director of Green Thumb, is a born storyteller who has made his life and career in the theatre, as an actor, director, and dramaturge, delivering stories to audiences, with honesty and integrity. Sitting in his office, listening to the tales that come from years of hard-earned experience in Canadian theatre, having conversations about truth and authenticity, witnessing the creative process, I knew that I had arrived in the place where I could start to unpack.

In the office, the rehearsal hall, the school gym, and the theatre, I got to see a company always seeking to better know its audience: to engage them, challenge them, and inspire them. Developing a relationship with one’s audience is an integral part of any theatre company, but in this case, the audience happens to be the young, and they come with a set of responsibilities and expectations (whether real or imagined) that pushes these particular artists into territory held by educators.

McDonald stubbornly resists choices that would make this cross-border marriage too easy. He doesn’t fall into the trap of catering to curriculum or inviting didactic messages into the work. Not because he doesn’t see the educational potential, but because he firmly believes that young people deserve high quality professional theatre. He knows that this can only be achieved by keeping the art at the centre of
his work: demanding the highest standards from his writers, actors, designers, and technicians; trusting that the audience will meet them there; and allowing “education” to be a happy accident of this encounter.

Good theatre is good theatre and there shouldn’t be separate standards just because it is for young audiences. In fact, if anything, the standards should be higher. We are all really good at saying that we want the “best” for our children, shouldn’t that include demanding nothing less from the theatre that is created for them? Underestimating your audience and talking down to them is a giant mistake—I don’t care how old they are—you will lose them, and losing your audience is just plain bad theatre. (McDonald, in conversation)

Despite focusing first on the artistic goals of the company, McDonald and Green Thumb never lose sight of their responsibility to an audience who is deep in the process of learning: an audience of formative minds.4

People who work for Green Thumb love theatre, but they also look past the technical aspects and think about the social implications: the value of the connections they are building; the special access they have to the hearts and minds of young people; the power they have to create change. In the company of these artists and administrators, I found that the discomfort of the “space-between” started to feel a lot like home.

I took a job as the Education Liaison for Green Thumb. I am still not entirely sure what my duties were, but according to Moses Goldberg, the pedagogue (as he calls

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4 I borrow “formative minds” from the following quote by Morris Panych, renowned Canadian Playwright: “Green Thumb stands at the forefront. No one even approaches their social or political mandate for change. What the company offers—and this may sound odd—is they have a very adult approach to young people’s theatre. They don’t see themselves as children’s theatre so much as a theatre for formative minds.” Morris Panych; quoted in the Vancouver Courier, 2007 by Heather Currie in her article, Green Thumb Plays the World (Winter, 2007) in Canadian Teacher.
it) “has primarily three functions: to advise the artistic staff, to conduct research, and to coordinate activities with the community’s young people” (1974, 86).

Artistic. Research. Community. Young People. Sounds like a pretty perfect fit. Green Thumb was created with the intention of growing and nurturing the minds of young people through theatre, and, while there is no 15th century castle in sight, sometimes, when I sit at my desk, the work doesn’t feel so far off from tending to the roses all those years ago.
CHAPTER ONE:
The Stage, The Players, and The Project

(In Patrick's office)

Patrick: What are you going to write this thing about?

I: I think I want to talk about theatre and empathy, because I'm pretty sure that is at the root of everything we are doing here, or trying to do.

Patrick: I have been saying that for years.

I: I didn’t say it was original…I just think I need to write about it.

Patrick: What are you going to say about it?

I: I don’t know. I guess that is something I should figure out.

Patrick: It will come.

Embarking on the actual writing of a document that I hope will encompass and speak to many of the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of the participants is a daunting task. It is an overwhelming sense of responsibility to have their words and their stories in my hands, to wish to honour their unique voices and simultaneously seek out shared truths. I feel humbled and vulnerable at the foot of this undertaking. Which is perhaps the best place to start. So, with Boleslavsky and his Creature, Mamet, Clurman, Meisner and countless others in tow, I am setting off on the next part of my journey into my arts education...

The place of my inquiry is Green Thumb Theatre’s “The Edge Project”, an annual collaborative theatre project between the professional theatre company and secondary school students. I chose the Edge Project because it exists squarely in this “space-between” theatre and education that I am so interested in exploring. The project has clear artistic aims but also places itself inside the classroom and the educational life of the students and the teachers involved. Adding an important third dimension is the Edge Project’s design as a “community-building” endeavour,
which makes the project fertile ground for discovering the social implications of theatre and how they play out in education.

In investing my time, energy, heart, and mind into this study I am hoping to create a document that honours both an individual event of collaborative theatre-making and some of the broader lessons and possible implications that surface there-in. I want to contribute to a conversation that raises new questions about how theatre and education interact and what their functions are, and can be, in a social context. I want to tell the story of navigating “the space between”: not only that complex space between theatre and education but also the smaller spaces that turn up between people, between groups, between intentions and outcome, between theory and practice, between real and imagined truths, between all the moments that make up the wild journey we embarked on both knowingly and unknowingly at the outset of this project. I am especially interested in the bridges that were constructed across these spaces and what they might tell us about the nature of connection, in some of its forms, and the necessary tools and conditions for creating valuable connections on stage, in the classroom, and in the community.

The voices that inform my thesis come from my own experiences of theatre/drama education, from the old and tattered masters that I have carried with me, from educators and artists hard at work in their fields, from scholarship generously laid down before me, from conversations with friends, mentors, peers and colleagues. But perhaps most important, and surely urgent, are the voices of the students, teachers and artists involved in the Edge Project: sharing their direct experience in creating art that matters to them. I will introduce you to the participants soon but first let us set the stage with an in-depth portrait of the context and framework surrounding this study.
Setting the Stage

This study is interested in the intersection between theatre and education so it concerns itself both with the culture of the professional theatres creating work for young audiences, and the exploration happening in the drama classroom. With little scholarship bridging the two, in the writing of this thesis I will build a framework of context and conversation within which I will weave the relevant literature that informs my learning as we move through the process. In this design, I hope to give a general overview of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) in Canada: touching on the history, the current landscape, and some of the contemporary views on the topic. To illustrate the connection between professional theatre and education I will provide examples of companies at work in the field and provide an in-depth portrait of Green Thumb Theatre, and the Edge Project, the company and the project at the centre of my research.

Research into TYA is part of the wider context of Drama and Education, which I will explore in order to further situate this study. I will focus particularly on research interested in creation and collaboration in the drama classroom and queries into the benefits and challenges of this form of experiential learning. I will also examine some of the perceived “purposes” or “intended outcomes” of arts education/aesthetic education within the framework of education theory and pedagogy.

While this study, overall, concerns itself with the creation and performance of theatre by young people, the program observed stands broadly with one foot in the classroom and one foot on the stage: a sometimes awkward and problematic position. In order to understand this “space between” I will try to find pathways to move smoothly between the two, allowing the lens of my observations to be informed by the questions and voices that emerge along the way. As such, I hope

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5 As an exception, please see Lois Adamson’s (2011) look at the relationship between professional theatre and schools, focusing on teacher’s reasons for bring students to the theatre at Young People’s Theatre in Toronto.
that this study contributes both to new conversations in pedagogical approaches to drama in education, and to the (still forming) reputation of contemporary theatre for young audiences as art of the highest quality.

**Green Thumb Theatre and TYA**

As a germination place for the project that my research is focused on, Green Thumb Theatre requires further introduction. Green Thumb was the brainchild of a group of graduates from the University of British Columbia. The theatre was founded in 1975 with the mandate to “produce plays for the local community with a focus on entertaining children” (Green Thumb Theatre website, www.greenthumb.bc.ca/history.html). With popular plays about myths and folk stories in their early repertoire, the Green Thumb Players (the original operating name of the company) established themselves in the local school market and soon changed their mandate to accommodate touring across British Columbia and beyond.

In the 1970s, Theatre for Young Audiences in Canada was barely two decades old and so it was due for a “coming-of-age”. It was in this period that Joyce Doolittle and Zina Barnieh published the first ever book to deal solely with the subject of professional theatre for young audiences in Canada. *A Mirror of Our Dreams* (1979) is a sort of State of the Union address, including an overview of the successes and challenges to date and advocating for continued development of the form.

It is worth remembering that Theatre for Young Audiences in Canada is still a relatively new pursuit: its birth took place about 50 years later than that of its older cousins in Britain and the United States. The turn of the 20th century is when British and American theatres first began producing programming specifically for children. According to Lowell Swortzell’s *International Guide to Children’s Theatre and

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Educational Theatre (1990), a 1904 production of Peter Pan, by J.M. Barrie, marks the first performance geared to young audiences in Britain (Swortzell, 114), and the 1903 production of The Tempest, by Children’s Educational Theatre in New York, established TYA in the United States (Swortzell, 333). Canada came late to the party, arriving on the scene when Holiday Theatre was formed in Vancouver in 1951 (Doolittle & Barnieh, 1979, 56).

The origins of TYA as a form separate from its “adult” counterpart are closely tied to changing views of childhood at the end of the 19th century and the new form was almost immediately harnessed for its potential to develop and educate children. While it can be argued that theatre, and art in general, often reflect the philosophy, ideas and aesthetics of a culture, TYA, in its earliest days, was designed specifically to be a “tool of enculturation”, with the aim of persuading young people to accept the “dominant hegemonic institutions” and “produce future generations of like-minded citizens” (Lorenz, 2002, 96). The result of moving the didactic or “integration propaganda” (Lorenz, 2002, 96) functions of theatre from the edges to occupy a position of a central goal is that a divide was created between TYA and “adult” theatre. TYA has always been tangled with education and the tensions that exist in this entanglement are central to the form, as well as to the debates, criticisms and research that cyclone around it.

The other, and more obvious, central driver behind TYA is entertainment. However, the conception of childhood as something that needed to be protected and nurtured which influenced the early didactic functions, also pervaded the development of an aesthetic, one that is steeped in “appropriate-ness” (van de Water 2012, 12). TYA has long suffered from simplified stories, one-dimensional characters, and low production values. These factors have increased the divide between “adult” and
“children’s” theatre, which is lamented about by Doolittle, Lorenz, Goldberg, and other academics and practitioners (past and present) advocating for the form.\footnote{The divide itself is a point of debate. As Pogonat (1978) suggests: “Theatre as an art is indivisible, and the dichotomy between theatre for children and theatre for adults is usually to the discredit of children’s theatre” (37 as quoted by Schomann, 2007, 16).}

It was also in the 1970s that the TYA form began to evolve from the didactic to the dialectical (Lorenz, 2002, 96). As one of the new companies moving onto the scene in this decade of growth, Green Thumb soon started to set itself apart by producing new Canadian plays with topics and themes pulled directly from the daily lives of their young audience members. In 1979, Green Thumb produced \textit{Hilary's Birthday}, a play about a young girl coping with her parent’s divorce. This marked the first time that a play about a topic with a perceived taboo like divorce appeared in Canadian schools and, while some educators were not ready for the shift, Green Thumb rocketed into the 1980s with a reputation, and a taste for, pushing the boundaries of TYA.

Green Thumb developed a strong commitment to what are referred to as “text-based issue plays” and in the 1980s expanded its market to include secondary school audiences, attracting new writers and more complex issues for them to explore. In 1980, Green Thumb developed the program \textit{“Feeling Yes, Feeling No”} a workshop series and play for children about sexual abuse. The program was turned into a set of interactive videos by the National Film Board of Canada in 1985 and translated into French for use in elementary schools across the country.

Doolittle & Barnieh (1979) mark the end of the 1970s as a “crossroads” in TYA and they call for

\begin{quote}
More permanent buildings, bigger budgets, some knowledgeable critics, mature directors and designers and more talented actors committed for a greater portion of their careers (56).
\end{quote}
in order to support the growth of the form. And, while much TYA has continued to evolve and change, many of the challenges that Doolittle and Barnieh highlighted in 1979 are still present in the field. The lack of critical attention, permanent buildings, quality of work produced, and funding are all still central in discussions about contemporary TYA.\textsuperscript{8} They go on to say: “possibly the most crucial are playwrights” (56). Green Thumb, as one of the leaders in the field, shares this view, and puts it into practice, by nurturing new playwrights, commissioning pieces for young audiences by veteran playwrights, and focusing their mandate on the creation and development of new Canadian plays. This commitment is one of the reasons that Morris Panych once described Green Thumb as a company with “an adult approach to young people’s theatre.” Green Thumb’s approach meets Lorenz’s (2002) criteria for the “best of contemporary theatre for the young” because it:

[...]reflects the lives, concerns, issues, and feelings of the young with respect for their youth, intelligence, and sensitivity. It shows rather than teaches. It raises questions but doesn’t always answer them. It is realistic and even uncompromising in its depiction of the world, but it is also hopeful. It is conscious of the fact that it is first and foremost, theatre and, therefore, its primary purposes are to entertain and to present truth. Thus, it seeks to do what adult theatre does: to present life honestly from multiple points of view. (108)

While TYA companies like Green Thumb, striving for artistic excellence and committed to “presenting truth” in a dialectical manner, have left the didactic approach behind, they are still in the position of having to negotiate a relationship with “education”. One of the places where this tension is often most evident is in the quest to secure funding.

\footnote{8 Please read Schonmann (2007) and van de Water (2012).}
Funding

TYA is in a position where its audience is not its financial patron. The productions are created for young people but "bought" by adults on their behalf. This creates a strange economic relationship and can push TYA into a position of catering to what adults think is “good for” children or simply what adults think children will like. This is particularly evident in the school touring market where TYA companies are in the position of having to please teachers and administrators in order to get initial bookings and repeat business, the students (the actual audience for the play) are almost entirely left out of the equation (although positive feedback from students may influence teachers or administrators in their review). The “educational value” of the experience therefore gets a disproportionate role in the selection of arts programming and TYA companies are gently pushed towards developing productions and supplementary materials to meet educational rather than artistic goals.

With limited funds to spend on the arts in an annual school budget, is quality sacrificed for quantity? Schools, naturally, want the most value for their dollar so they are prone to seeking out artistic experiences that can serve the most number of students at once, for the least amount of money. Ideally, especially at the elementary level, the whole school can be invited to a single performance. This poses a particular challenge for theatre companies creating work for these audiences. The sense of humour and level of understanding between a kindergarten and a grade seven is immensely different, and somehow their play is expected to appeal to both.

A limited amount of funding on the provincial, district and school level, for arts performances in the schools means that TYA companies also have to subsidize their work to make it affordable to schools, putting pressure on fundraising and other financial sources. For many funding bodies, who often operate on a single project basis, the educational impact of the program in question is one of the measured
values in the decision to grant funds. In fact, TYA companies that have educational programs in place can apply to organizations that are arts-focused as well as organizations that are education or “youth” focused. Funding, in some ways, traps TYA in this place between education and art, making it difficult to narrow the gap with “adult theatre.”

If following the money is a hint towards what we value, the poor funding⁹ for TYA is a strong indication of its undervalued position in Canadian arts and society in general. Because after all, as Clurman pointed out in the Fervent Years, the end goal is not about the money, but rather the support of an important and worthwhile endeavour:

We did not want backing for our shows. We wanted our theatre to be supported. We did not propose to put on a series of single productions, but to build a theatre: develop actors, playwrights, scene designers and directors. We were seeking a conscious audience to follow the program of a theatre that would grow with the years and make a permanent contribution to our social-cultural life. (Clurman, 1983, 63)

**Green Thumb Theatre Today**

*Mission Statement:*

Green Thumb Theatre creates and produces plays that explore social issues relevant to the lives of children, youth and young adults. We provide theatre that celebrates the language and stories of today’s generation and culture to stimulate empathy, debate and critical thinking.

In a typical season at Green Thumb Theatre, two touring productions are mounted for secondary school audiences and three touring productions for elementary school audiences. The tours range from local to provincial to national, and visit a combination of schools and venues. U.S. and international touring offer a diverse

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⁹ Swortzell (1990), among others, acknowledges that TYA “is consistently underfunded” (36).
income stream, gives B.C. and Canadian artists the opportunity to have their work seen more broadly, and contributes to cultural and industry exchange within the TYA community. Green Thumb also produces “mainstage” productions intended for a youth-young audience, filling a gap between a healthy mainstage Children’s Theatre output and “adult” theatre.

**Education Model**

As primarily a touring company, with the majority of its performances taking place in school gyms and auditoriums, Green Thumb is incredibly familiar with the dynamic between art and education that exists in the field of TYA. The symbiosis between the world of theatre and the education system are integral to Green Thumb’s operations. A quick survey of the TYA caucus (2012) of the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres (PACT) supports Doolittle and Barnieh’s (1979) assertion that supplementary programming is a defining characteristic of TYA in Canada. Of the twenty TYA companies who are members of PACT, 100 percent of them offer some form of educational programming to support their productions. These range from study guides and post-show talk back sessions to in-house workshops, classroom workshops and professional development opportunities for teachers and artists.

Green Thumb’s educational model currently relies on study guides and post-show talk-backs with the artists. The study guides are developed in consultation with educators, community groups, and experts on the themes handled in any particular production. They are designed to provide teachers with a resource to support in-depth student interaction with the material presented in the play in order to extend the learning beyond the moment of performance. The study guides are written with the British Columbia curriculum in mind and provide teachers with direct curricular

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10 In Vancouver, theatre companies such as Carousel Theatre offer mainstage productions, but are focused on primary and elementary school audiences, thus leaving room for mainstage work directed at teenagers and youth.
connections in a variety of subject areas. The talk-back sessions give students the chance to ask questions about the play itself, the themes or issues raised, the performers, or anything else that triggered curiosity. This model is the most appropriate for the format through which Green Thumb presents its productions. The performance and talk-back sessions are timed to fit into a standard class block to minimize disruption of the school schedule.

The particular challenges of touring a vast country such as Canada are plentiful but, since Holiday Theatre’s 1953 season, it has been a definitive characteristic of TYA in Canada. The combination of factors such as: touring into rural and remote areas becoming more expensive, restrictions on working hours and fees maintained by the Canadian Actor’s Equity Association (CAEA), a decrease in provincial funding, and nominal financial resources reserved for arts programming in the school system, make it difficult to maintain a sustainable touring model. Green Thumb’s program requires two performances per day and high levels of subsidization in order to make their relationship with school audiences work. Green Thumb, like other not-for-profit arts organizations across the country, supplements its income with government, corporate, foundation and individual funding.

As a primarily touring company, Green Thumb lacks a permanent space to run in-house workshops or theatre-school activities. Goldberg (1974) and Schonmann (2007), among others, have advocated for the importance of a theatre-space to the viability of TYA operations, however, Green Thumb has proven that long-term staying-power is achievable with careful fiscal management and a high-quality product.

In the past, Green Thumb has offered full workshops (eg. Feeling Yes, Feeling No) or paired their performances with a speaker with some form of expertise in the

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11 At the time of writing.
particular issue/topic examined in the play (eg. Co$t of Living). These formats have been, in large part, dependant on the appropriate funding.\textsuperscript{12}

The lack of permanent space, a shortage of funding opportunities to support a different education model within touring, and a desire to build new connections with their audience led Green Thumb to develop a new project that would address some of these gaps. With the creation of new work central to their artistic vision, and an interest in the “language and stories of today's generation”, Green Thumb became interested in offering a school-based program that would put creation in the hands of the youth who make up their regular audience.

**The Edge Project**

In 2009, Green Thumb launched the first ever Edge Project, billed as a “multi-community outreach project for youth”.

*Over the course of the Edge Project (September-December), Green Thumb mentors the collective creation and presentation of an entirely original play: written, performed, and designed by youth from four different Lower Mainland secondary schools at the Roundhouse Community Centre. The entire project is supported by a professional theatre director and the students also have the opportunity to work with other theatre professionals, learning many artistic, technical and organizational skills. The EDGE provides students with the opportunity to learn and practice new and innovative performance and creation skills as well as the chance to behave as a professional theatre artist while dramatically exploring contemporary community issues.*

*The project begins with students working with the EDGE project coordinator in their drama classes. Each class then puts together a theatrical segment that is student*

\textsuperscript{12} At the time of research Green Thumb was planning to move into a permanent facility with a rehearsal space. I anticipate that the company’s education model may change and expand as a result as a fixed space may encourage new community engagement opportunities.
written, performed, stage managed and designed. The four schools get together four or five times throughout the fall at a rented rehearsal space and are also expected to work with their respective drama teachers to develop material/rehearse when the director is not present. The group sessions enable students to explore many areas of the performing arts from acting, to dance, to music; the student participants work with professional actors, dancers, musicians, designers, composers and stage managers to create and support all the performance material. The project culminates with three full days of technical and dress rehearsal at the performance space and then four public performances.

Working with classes and teachers from four demographically distinct schools within the lower mainland we will rehearse inside and outside classroom time to create a fully realized performance for public presentation. The EDGE gives young people a unique opportunity to work with theatre professionals, learn and develop skills, and perform a play in a public theatre to a public audience.

The Edge Project is a product of a theatre culture developed around a need to meet the not so “mythical” requirements of existing in the “space-between”. It combines community, social, educational, and artistic objectives required to be a “fund-able” project and also gives Green Thumb a new point of interaction with their audience.

In some senses, The Edge Project is closely related to the Artist-in-Residence model that is a popular mode of integrating the professional arts and education. While it is hard to pin down a “typical” artist-in-residence program, the main concept is that a professional artist will bring their expertise directly into the classroom, creating a partnership between the artist, teacher, and students. Work in the Edge Project starts in the classroom but extends out into a professional theatre setting and, for the purposes of this inquiry, I will be exploring it primarily through a lens of collaborative play-making.

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To further guide this inquiry, I will be mindful of the goals of the Edge Project (as outlined by Green Thumb Edge Project materials 2011) and how they may influence the process and the product under observation:

- To provide voice, through performance, for youth 14-17 years of age
- To build and strengthen relationships between youth of varying social, economic and cultural backgrounds
- To encourage and foster healthy self esteem for youth by presenting their original creative work and providing them with the skills necessary to perform and speak publicly
- To promote respect and interest in different cultural backgrounds and practices. To break down cultural and social stereotypes
- To establish educational opportunities for youth by developing a mentor relationship with Green Thumb Theatre and the students
- To provide students with tools in team building, setting realistic and achievable learning objectives, reaching goals and appreciating and evaluating the work of their peers
- To bring new educational practices and innovation to teachers
- To build a broader economic and cultural audience for Green Thumb Theatre

**Methodology**

"Methodology is something that we construct after the event, once we reflect on what we did and what was effective. Using hindsight we tidy up what are usually pretty messy events” (Kushner, 2006, 15)

As I sit here looking back on the “messiness” of “the event” I am struggling to answer the very basic questions of “what did we do?” and “how did we do it?,” in the interest of constructing a tidy methodological package. I have tried to describe the basic premise and operation of the Edge Project and, in the following chapters, will go into more detail of what exactly happened within the walls of the classroom, the
rehearsal hall, and on the stage. As far as my method as a researcher, it is grounded in the aim to tell a story of lived-experience. Tracing my way through the mess, I have chosen to look to scholars such as David Breare, Kathleen Gallagher, Lynn Fels, and Caroline Fusco, among others, to help me make sense of the practices, the dilemmas, the strengths, and the limitations at work in the methods of my inquiry.

Ethnography, Inquiries, and Chaos

When it came to starting out, ethnography seemed to be the best fit for me, my interests, and the circumstances, of my research. Ethnography comes from social anthropologists trying to illuminate and understand people and cultures through multiple perspectives. As a methodology it examines what people “do and say in particular contexts” with emphasis on first-hand experience and understanding. (Hammersley, 2006, 4). With Eisner’s school and classroom ‘cultures’ in mind, ethnographic research is a natural fit for an inquiry situated in education. Gallagher remarks that ethnography is “critical” in drama research, highlighting its ability to capture process, action, and spontaneity in the classroom and in reflection (Gallagher, 2000, 14). I am interested in how the teachers, students, and artists, “think, feel, and act”14 within the multiple settings of the inquiry (the classroom, the rehearsal hall, the stage). But how will I carry out my ethnographic research?

Gallagher (2000) talks about a “reflective-practitioner” (10) approach which doesn’t quite seem to fit because I am not performing an inquiry into my own practices as an educator, but rather observing more broadly the experiences of others in an educational context. I can, perhaps, be placed in the ‘emerging genre’ of scholarship that Burdell & Sawdener (1999) call “critical personal narrative and autoethnography” as this text foregrounds my personal experience in arts education but also tries to trudge through the “complex and contradictory nature of theory and research” (Gallagher, 2000, 14).

14 Taylor as quoted in Gallagher, 2000, 14.
Fels (2012) presented me with performative inquiry as an alternate jumping-off point but, again, I hesitate at adopting it fully as a framework. My understanding of performative inquiry requires the researcher to be an active participant and guiding hand in the research and I see my role more as an audience member than an actor. While not a perfect fit, at the heart of performative inquiry is the exploration of “relationships and interactions between individuals, communities and their related environments” (Fels, 1998, 32), which resonates beautifully with my central interests in the Edge Project. Furthermore, in developing performative inquiry as a methodology, Fels points to Peggy Phelan’s statement:

Performance boldly and precariously declares that Being is performed (and made temporarily visible) in that suspended in-between. (35)

Phelan’s metaphor of the ‘rackety bridge’ supports my interest in that which connects and also what else might be suspended in the space between.

Finally, performative inquiry ‘encourages active and collaborative participation’ (Fels, 1998, 37) which reflects the nature of the Edge Project itself, and is something that I hope is modeled in the form of my research—whereby the student/teacher/artist contributors are viewed as collaborators rather than subjects.

I like Booth and Wells’ (1994) proposal of ‘communities of inquiry’, as discussed by Gallagher (2000). This concept of having more “differently positioned eyes” to “complete the picture” makes room for a researcher who is neither educator, nor practitioner in the process (14-15). I, as the university-based researcher, am welcomed as a collaborator by the teachers, the students, and the artist who will become my co-researchers in this shared inquiry.

Like Beare (2003), some of the philosophical underpinnings of my method come from social constructivism where, as he describes, “reality is shaped through dialogue and is determined by group consensus, or influenced by the person or
people in a position of power” (46). As a researcher I am not looking for a universal truth or concrete law, but rather the “multiple truths and multi-realities” created by the individuals within the culture I am observing (46).

I may be no closer, at this point, to a clear methodology or theoretical framework but the foundations are in place and I trust that a methodology will spring from the work and surprise us at the end (with that all-important hindsight). This study, for now, situates itself at the Edge of Chaos\textsuperscript{15} and has resorted to a flexible definition of its “methodology” allowing for it to evolve in the writing and move freely between the available frameworks and philosophies.

**The Data**

I gathered my live ‘data’ by a range of methods:

- I sat in on classes and rehearsals keeping my own notes and observations (ethnographic field-journal) and I had on-going casual conversations with the participating teachers, students, and artist to clarify what was happening.
- I requested that each of my contributors email me once a week with a reflection on a moment related to the Edge Project. The reflections could take whatever form the contributor wanted and could be any length.
- I conducted an individual exit interview, in person, with each contributor on the last day of the project.

One of the potential limitations of my study was that I invited the students to respond in whatever format and however frequently was most comfortable for them. I was very conscious that my role as an “outside” researcher meant that any writing or responding that they were doing for me was above and beyond all the regular work and expectations from school, The Edge Project, their parents, etc. This realization pulled into focus the foggy space I was occupying in this project and

\textsuperscript{15} See Fels & Meyer, 1997, 30, for a conversation about the metaphor and concept of the edge of chaos in the space between science education and drama.
meant that I received a wide range of responses. I had to manage each relationship individually to suit the particular conversation that was taking place. Some students responded weekly describing detailed moments, some students responded with longer reflection pieces encapsulating several different aspects of their experience and some students rarely sent a response. Some students preferred to have specific questions or prompts to answer and others were happy to just report something that they had observed. Some students were uncomfortable with the email format and chose to have recorded conversations at different intervals and some students were happy to engage in on-line chatting. While there was a lack of consistency in the form and the frequency of the conversations, my research benefited from this format of ‘story-collecting’ because it allowed me to truly embrace the dialectical nature of the project and really work with the tensions between the individual and the collective experience. When a student would respond to a prompt or a question, I would continue the dialogue by asking them to expand on a statement, provide examples, clarify, or ask a segue into a related question. I was careful not to push them towards any particular response but rather to listen openly and be directed by that which came up for them. My questions or prompts were open-ended with the hope that participants would be encouraged to choose the story they were interested in telling.

The exit interviews were the most controlled aspect of my research because they were all conducted on the final day of performances and there were several specific questions or prompts that were used with each student respondent. By this point I had developed a personal relationship with each student and there was a certain level of comfort in our conversations. The exit interviews were relaxed and informal: an opportunity for reflection and storytelling. These interviews were recorded and later transcribed.
The Analysis

Researching lived experience comes with a lot of pit-falls and what Kathleen Gallagher calls “methodological dilemmas.” And, as I moved from gathering the data to the enormous task of analysis, I began to encounter monsters on either side of the path and started to see how the choices I make in my research and analysis impact the way my subjects will be represented and the “truths” that will be constructed by this representation. What a terrifying notion: not only do I need to make clear methodological and analytical choices, but I also need to be aware of how these choices carve a path towards one “monster” while avoiding another.

The Teenager Dilemma

Working with adolescents presents its own set of dilemmas, some of them theoretical (seen here) and some of them practical (as we will discover later). On the theoretical side, the debate about teenagers pulls between research that suggests development comes from opportunities for independence and research that argues that connecting with others is where identities are formed. (Beare 2003, 15) The dilemma that teenagers face is steeped in the present socio-historical context, reflecting the growing tension playing out in workplaces, our homes, our political arenas, and our cultural outputs: the value of Relationships vs. value of the Individual.

There is no question that today's teens value relationships above everything else. However, at precisely the same time, they are mirroring Canadian society’s unprecedented emphasis on the importance of the individual—personal freedom, personal rights, personal values, personal dreams, personal fulfillment, and personal power. (Biddy & Poteski, 2000, 164)

My research takes an approach that assumes and favours the relational development of the individual. I focus on how relationships, connections, and

\textsuperscript{16} Gallagher (2000) compares methodological research to mythological situation of having to pass between two sea monsters, where moving away from one monster puts you in danger of the other (4).
shared experience impact the individual, rather than exploring the participants as singular subjects.

But as Gallagher et. al. (2003) suggest, representation is the main fertile ground for dilemmas in qualitative research and representation of adolescents, from my vantage point, appears to be a particularly tricky beast. As a non-adolescent, how do I work with adolescents and write about adolescents without creating misrepresentations based on my position as “other”? How can I be careful not to project stereotypes and assumptions that come from previous experience as an adolescent myself, or my learned behaviours from working with adolescents over the years? As a “group,” adolescents objectively have nothing in common except their age, however the cultural functions of this age group have nonetheless created a particular set of representations and generalizations. The Edge Project itself was created in part to “give youth a voice” and therefore cannot easily be separated from the representation of “young people” as a distinct group with shared characteristics and experiences. The tension of being an individual within a larger group is magnified by the struggle against the label “teenager”—and is the dilemma around which the Edge Project is constructed.

The Narrative Voice Dilemma

While one could sit and theorize all day, the purpose of observing the dilemmas at work in my research is to make conscious choices about how I will present and represent the data gathered. How will I tell the story of my research? Searching for a story to tell in my research is not unlike the colossal job of turning the material created in The Edge Project into a final, cohesive, play. Just as “The Artist” is tasked with helping the stories and voices of 100 students come alive on the stage, I am charged with bringing life to the same voices in this document. In order to accomplish such a feat I first need to find my own voice: as a storyteller, a narrator, and a guide through the places, the people, and the moments that define the
experience of The Edge Project. As you can tell, I chose a personal narrative voice but this, of course, comes with its own questions and dilemmas.

*What is the value of my narrative voice? How does my lived experience of this event contribute to a larger story or dialogue? Why is my story important?* Choosing a narrative voice that is personal, and grounded in lived experience, allows me to have conversations with the material as I write it and explore the data from a purely subjective perspective. It also makes room for the multiple positionings or roles that I might move between, each with its own perspectives, ambitions, and concerns. My narrative voice explores the research as it appears to *me* and relates to *me*, which gives me (and hopefully the reader) a first point of contact that is comfortably within reach. Ideally, the words will extend from there into a multi-layered and multi-faceted story. Using a narrative voice creates a certain sense of freedom. As Fusco (2008) explains:

> My self-reflexive narratives allowed me to make public my personal observations, reflections, interpretations, doubts, and dilemmas, which enabled me to become both an object and subject of my own inquiry. (170)

But without the restrictions of a traditional third-person report, new challenges arise. A personal narrative requires the reader to trust the narrator's authority and erases the clean (and safe) line between the researcher and his/her subject(s). A personal narrative risks lacking the clarity of a more objective format and of coming across as self-indulgent. Furthermore, there is a question that constantly plagues the back of one's mind: “who cares”?

**The Name Dilemma**

Inspired by Boleslavsky, who communicated his actor-training method through the conversations with his student “The Creature”, I hope to transmit the “lessons” of the Edge Project largely through the voices of the participants. In turning
Boleslavsky’s form on its head, “I”, the narrator, ask the questions and “the creatures”, in their answers, provide the wisdom at the centre of our “lessons”. Boleslavsky’s creature is the subject of his “play” and the vehicle through which he teaches the basic principles of his method. In our case, the creatures are the central subject and a vehicle for learning, but they also occupy the driver’s seat in said vehicle and, in doing so, cross freely over the painted line between teacher and student. I have chosen to simply refer to all of the student participants as Creature because, my understanding of the spirit of Boleslavsky’s work is that his Creature is a symbolic role, representing less a particular acting student or character, and more an archetype to pose him questions. In my writing, Creature serves a similar purpose, giving the participants anonymity and allowing their voices to speak for the collective. I like how the concept of multiple voices coming together as one mirrors the collaborative experience at work in the Edge Project. I also like the etymological link to “create” and how the participants are somehow creators of and created by the process they are describing and experiencing. My intention is not to create a “uniform” voice, but to allow a “multiplicity of voices” to speak under a shared name, honouring the strengths of the dramatic form. As Gallagher reminds us, “drama is deeply invested in collective meaning-making, understood less for its uniformity of voices and more for this multiplicity of voices” (2000, 68).

I recognize there are a number of analytical approaches to this material and there would be a certain value to following the participants individually through the Edge Project, comparing their experiences and highlighting the various subjective learning processes at work. However, I have chosen to tell a version of the story where the collective voice of the Creature illuminates instead thematic paths for us (as readers and storyteller) to pursue.

I have similarly chosen to use “Teacher” to represent the four classroom teachers involved in the process. Using a shared handle when quoting individual participants also serves to protect their anonymity, as per my research ethics. In the case of the “Artist”, I am quoting the words of one artist in particular (the Green Thumb artist.
working on the Edge Project) but I hope that, as with the Creature and Teacher, the Artist can also serve a symbolic or archetypal role.

**Meet the Players:**

**The Creature:**

100 students from four different schools, in four different communities, who created the project. Their presence is felt and their voices echo throughout this study in the final script, the submitted materials and the events witnessed in the classrooms, rehearsals and performances. Of those 100 students, 10 students volunteered to be in-depth contributors to my research. Conversations and reflections from the teachers involved and the artists at Green Thumb also inform the moments and the stories told in this document.

With diverse voices and opinions, this paper is in many ways a journey of collaboration, just like the creation process it is looking to describe. Getting to know the participants throughout the process was one of the great joys of this project. It deepened my role with the Edge and helped me to find my place as both observer and contributor. The students welcomed me into their thoughts, shared their ideas, and challenged my preconceptions.

The in-depth collaboration with 10 of the students brought into focus some of the observations of the group at large. The 10 individual voices help to express the variety of experiences that came from the creation, the rehearsals and the performance of the final product.

The participants represent all four schools and a variety of backgrounds and student profile. By chance, 5 of the respondents are male and 5 female. One student is a foreign exchange student, one has participated in the project before, and one student is new to his school, offering a perspective informed by his transition into a new educational space. One respondent is participating in the project as an
extracurricular activity because he had transferred schools but was still keen to be involved. Two of the respondents speak a language other than English at home. The respondents range from grade 10-12. As representatives of the 100 students involved in the project, my respondents enter the Edge Project with a range of previous experience in theatre/drama and a variety of levels of engagement.

As players, with the guidance of the Artist and the teachers, the students are responsible for: the generation of material, creating and writing a script, coming up with design ideas, original music, video elements, and choreography, rehearsing and performing their work.

The Schools

The four schools involved in The Edge are from four different school districts in British Columbia’s lower mainland. The districts are found in four different municipalities and the schools represent four very different communities.

I have chosen to exclude the names of the schools in interest of providing anonymity to my participants and also because I hope that the schools involved in the Edge Project can act as representatives of public secondary schools in British Columbia. The identities of the schools are not as important as their profiles, and the schools, while chosen carefully by Green Thumb, are not the focus of the project itself.

In May of each year, Green Thumb accepts applications from schools hoping to participate in The Edge Project for the following September. Green Thumb selects the participant schools based on a range of criteria including need, location, and interest. Green Thumb tries to get a read for the culture within each drama program and the compatibility of the schools and the teachers that will be selected. Ideally, Green Thumb is looking for schools whose drama program will benefit from their participation in the Edge Project and a teacher that will show a commitment to the project (and in turn inspire the same from their students). Green Thumb aims to
bring together schools that have varied profiles, are in different school boards, and may not ordinarily get the chance to interact.

Green Thumb attempts to have a “veteran” school in each project—a school that has participated in the Edge Project in a previous year, with the hopes that this will both provide a certain amount of continuity or stability to the project, and that the school will benefit from deepening their involvement.

School #1
Located in an Inner-City East Side neighbourhood, School #1 has a population of 989. English is the language spoken at home for 32.5% of the student population. Tagalog (19.2%), Vietnamese (12.4%) and Cantonese (11.6%) are the next three at-home languages spoken. Mandarin, Punjabi, Tamil, Spanish and Hindi are also in the top ten.

School #2
Located in a lower-middle class neighbourhood in between urban-residential, suburban and light industrial neighbourhoods. It has easy access to inter-urban transit. School #2 has a population of 826 and is the second smallest school in its district. 63.2% of its students speak English at home, with Cantonese (12%), Chinese (3.9%) and Mandarin (2.9%) following in the ranks. Spanish, Korean, Tagalog, Persian, Vietnamese and Punjabi are also listed in the top 10.

School #3
School #3 is the veteran school, and the largest school in this year’s project. It is located in a lower-middle class suburban neighbourhood and has a student population of 1218. Cantonese is the language most spoken at home (30%) followed by English (24%), Mandarin (20.9%) and Chinese (11.3%). Tagalog, Spanish, Punjabi, Filipino, Japanese and Vietnamese rank in the top ten. Of the schools participating, school # 3 has the highest percent of “English Language Learners” (21.4%).
School #4

Finally, School #4 is the smallest of the participating schools with a population of 760 students. The school is located in an upper-middle class neighbourhood and 85.5% of the students speak English at home. 2.9% of students speak Korean at home and the remaining languages in the top 10 (Chinese, German, Portuguese, Spanish, Mandarin, Other, Persian and Cantonese) are spoken at home by less than 2% of students. The school serves a small community, with a recorded population of less than 1,200, and a catchment area with only three public elementary schools. It is the smallest secondary school in its district. (British Columbia Ministry of Education Public School Reports (2010).

While the school profiles can give us an idea of the demographics, it is the school culture, and more specifically the classroom cultures, that factor directly into the lived experience of this project. Elliot Eisner (2002) talks about school culture in two ways: The first, an anthropological approach, based on community and a shared way of life; The second, a biological definition wherein cultures are used to “grow organisms”, in this case, to “growing children’s minds” (3). Both senses require attention to the “hidden messages” (158) that are conveyed by teachers and fellow students.

The conditions of teaching and learning in a classroom or in a school are a function not only of the curriculum and of teaching practices, but of the entire cognitive ambiance of the classroom and the school. (157)

With four different schools contributing to the same project, we will see how the Edge Project becomes the ground for cultural exchange and conflict in the pursuit of building a cohesive community of learners\textsuperscript{17} and performers. Teachers have a

\textsuperscript{17} The concept of school as a community of learners was first explored by John Dewey in his 1899 book \textit{School and Society} where he claimed that schools should be “a miniature community, an embryonic society” (Dewey, 1915, 15). In 1938 he published \textit{Democracy in Education} in which he stated: “Education is essentially a social process. This quality is realized in the degree in which
significant role in the creation of classroom culture. They set boundaries and expectations, have a certain amount of control over the environment and over the ideas and values that permeate its membrane.

The Teachers

The teachers are key players in the story of the Edge Project because they are, in many ways, gate-keepers to their students. A large portion of the project takes place within the classroom environment and so the teacher’s relationship to their students, the culture they oversee, and their partnership with the Artist are important to the dynamics of the learning community at play.

At the outset of the project, the teachers come with a variety of backgrounds, experiences, teaching styles, and skills to contribute, just like their students. One teacher was relatively new to teaching drama and had previously instructed in visual art. Two of the teachers had between 10 and 15 years experience. Three of the four teachers contributed directly to my research by responding to questions and reflection prompts.

The drama programs at the four schools range from underdeveloped to sophisticated. At one school, the drama program competes directly with the music program, and each rose to the challenge in order to attract dedicated and talented students. Entrance into the program was at the discretion of the teacher. This program has regular out-of-school excursions to see professional theatre, an annual one-act festival, a variety of playwrighting, acting and directing opportunities, and a large number of students who pursue arts activities outside of school. Another school also saw competition between the drama and music departments, however the music department has long been the beneficiary or better funding and support, while the drama program shrinks in its shadow. This school offers limited

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individuals form a community group” (Dewey, 1938, 65). Dewey’s theories on education remain central to contemporary scholarship and pedagogical practice.
opportunity for performance and the teacher focused on creating a welcoming space for students who have struggled elsewhere in their school life.

The teachers may sometimes occupy the background, as I focus more closely on the experiences of the students and the artist, however their role is not to be underappreciated. Their reflections on their own learning, and the perspectives and insights they offer into their students’ minds, are invaluable both to me, as a researcher, and to the Artist, as he works through the process. The teachers were my trusted allies in moments of frustration and generous supporters of my work, in my research and in my role as education liaison.

As players, the teachers are responsible for: classroom management, discipline, support of the students and the artist, directing creation and rehearsal when the Artist is not present.

The director gives the four drama teachers the opportunity to select which of their classes is the best fit for the project (based on scheduling, other projects, interest, etc) and work with Green Thumb to accommodate the weekly artist visits. The school groups are, therefore, not only diverse in terms of their socio-economic backgrounds, their community demographics and their school cultures: the students also enter the project from a range of age/grade levels and experience. In this year’s project there are students in grade 8 to grade 12. We also have to consider that students choose to study drama for a variety of reasons and not all of them are immediately keen to take on a project of this size, scope and commitment.

**The Artist**

The Artist is a professional actor, director, playwright and dramaturge, hired by Green Thumb as an Artistic Associate to, among other responsibilities, direct the Edge Project. This is his second year in the position and he therefore brings the
experiences and lessons from a previous Edge Project to inform his choices and his approach.

As a player, the artist is responsible for guiding the collaboration and the creation process. He is the director of the show, managing all the elements, staging the large group numbers, selecting other artist-mentors to support the student work, and transforming the created material into a cohesive script. He is aiming to give the students a “professional theatre experience”.

**The Researcher**

At this stage, I hope that I require no further introduction, except to describe the hat I am, sometimes reluctantly, wearing as “researcher.” I am an outside researcher, in the sense that I am not a direct participant in the event being researched and I am not controlling or facilitating the playmaking process. My position as researcher is a visible and subjective one.

As a player I have many “costume changes” in this story. To the Artist I am an assistant and a trusted confidante. To the teachers I am a liaison and an extra set of hands in the classroom. To the students I am a representative of Green Thumb Theatre and a source of information, comfort and support. I am also a university student conducting research whom the students are keen to help and develop a relationship with.

**Roles and Relationships**

Having profiled the cast of characters, there are already potential dynamic shifts to observe. While the project sets out roles and responsibilities for all of its collaborators, throughout the process we will take notice of how these roles are played and what new parts the players must step into at different moments. The relationships that develop between the different players are points of connection, and empty spaces of disconnection, that we will revisit throughout the story.
Telling the Story

David Breare (2003) describes what he calls “the collaborative play-creating process” as “moving back and forth between four overlapping components: scriptwriting, rehearsing, performing and ongoing reflection” (11-12). This dance between the stages of the project is natural and necessary in practice but makes it somewhat difficult to describe the process in a linear fashion. I have tried my best to organize the moments and themes under the four chapters that I have named Creation, Rehearsal, Performance, and Reflection. However, one should note that these sections are fluid and require some jumping forward and backward across the timeline of the project.

Notes on Conversation

Where I quote the players (CREATURE, TEACHER, ARTIST), their responses have been directly transcribed from audio recordings, emails, and other written response materials. These bits of conversation are inset from the main text and formatted in the style of a play. Some conversations appear in italics, these are imagined or paraphrased from my memory or field notes. I also use italics when I am having conversations with myself or with the material and when quoting thoughts, feelings, or questions, fortuitously scribbled down in my field notes.
CHAPTER TWO: Creation

The Creation Process

The creation of the play is by far the longest and most challenging aspect of the project. By the end of the creation process, the Artist needs the students to produce a “final script,” which is to include a section from each of the four schools as well as three large group sections. In a linear construct of the process we could consider the final script as “Point B”. Unfortunately, Point A is not so clearly marked. The starting point is more like a giant empty container than a fixed place of beginning. There are times when I picture it as a deep, dark, pit that the students out of which the participants need to climb. Luckily, the Artist and the Teacher came prepared with some provisional supplies like safety harnesses and torches to light the way. Also, the Artist has been in the pit before so he knows for sure that there is a way out. The edges of the pit are steep and foreboding and when the Artist hands the students shovels and pick-axes (in the form of classroom activities) they may not immediately see how digging deeper will bring them closer to the surface. But slowly, in the act of digging, a series of options are unearthed and from there, a route out is devised. The challenge for the Artist is to keep the opening in view but let the students construct their own way to the top.

Once above ground, the journey to point B may seem more familiar but it is not without its detours. Before arriving at a “Final Script”, the materials and structures developed in “the pit” have to be transformed into four separate coherent sections and a single coherent piece of theatre. This involves circling back and forth between writing and rehearsing, until complete scenes and sequences develop.

Let us consider everything between Point A and Point B, pits, circular routes, detours and all, as “the creation process”. The Artist has to guide the students
through the process while also looking ahead to what’s beyond Point B—the product.

**Process vs. Product**

The Edge Project is concerned simultaneously with process and product, placing it in conflict with the binary understanding of drama’s potential uses in education. Outside of the realm of “education” the process/product binary in theatre may appear less rigid. However, when Clurman spoke of revolutionizing theatre in the United States, it was an unholy marriage of the process and product that he had in mind. Clurman recognized that the product benefits from the rigorous process it goes through, and that the promise of product is what feeds the months (or years) of “process” it takes to get there (and that, of course, producing quality work is the only way to shore up support for experimenting with process). In Clurman’s case, he was interested in shifting the focus from a product-focused consumer theatre to a tradition that developed actors and writers through the very process of creating great theatre. In the case of the Edge Project, we attempt the same marriage of competing interests (Professional Theatre: Product vs. Education: Process) embodied in the role of the Artist who is both director and facilitator. The tension between the professional theatre “product” driven goals and the education “process” driven goals appears at the earliest moments of the project, and is a tension that is central to the Artist’s experience. In order to ensure a successful marriage, the Artist needs to establish and then maintain the fine balance between process and product. If he lets the product out of sight—the process spirals out of control, and if he focuses too heavily on the product—the potential locked in the process is wasted.

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18 The binary conflict between process and product takes up significant space in scholarship around drama education. This thesis plays through this conflict, sometimes not so gracefully, searching for the dividing line. According to Neelands, “the product approach is often associated with ‘theatre’ as a subject of study and the ‘process’ approach with improvised forms of drama used as a method of teaching and learning across the curriculum” (2008, 4).
So, before climbing into the pit with each group, the Artist has to have a strategy for turning an ordinary pit into an idea mine. A mine with the resources to support a fruitful process/product relationship.

The Plan

ARTIST: I devised a ‘curriculum’ outline which helped guide my process. I deviated from it almost from the outset, as each school developed its material in its own way, but the outline was helpful in giving me an overall game plan for creation and rehearsal.

The Artist starts by visiting each class once a week and introducing the students to the tools they can use to develop the material that will eventually become the play. The students start to generate material using improvisation (improv), writing prompts, and recorded classroom discussions. The Artist is trying to get a sense of what is important to the students and to get them in the habit of creating and playing.

The first part of this chapter is concerned with these initial encounters between the Artist and the students, and how the different groups face the challenge of starting from “nothing”. The first few weeks (phase one) of the project are crucial to structuring the play and establishing the roles and relationships vital to the envisioned community of collaboration. Later, we will explore how the material and ideas that were generated transform into full scenes and eventually a completed script (phase two).

Here, the Artist describes the detailed plan for supporting the students through the first phase of creation:

ARTIST: In each school, over the first few visits, I did the following:
● Facilitated a group discussion about the issues and challenges facing them. I created a list of themes or ideas that reflected the concerns that each group faced. This would then form the launching point for scene building exercises that would come later.

● Led an improv workshop. Most schools have a lot of experience with improv, but I taught them exercises geared specifically to story-telling and scene building, so that we could use improv to generate material.

● Led a writing workshop, so that they felt equipped to approach the basics of scene writing.

Once these basics were covered, I used the list of themes and ideas that they were interested in exploring as writing prompts for scene building. I would split the class up into groups of five or six and write down the themes onto pieces of paper and have each group create a scene based on whatever they pulled. Many of these scenes formed the structural basis of each section of the show.

The Invitation

The Artist starts the project with lesson plans and grand ideas, but really little more than a compass pointed towards the final performance. His first task is to win the students over to the process, which, as we will see, is a marathon more than a sprint.

I: It's day one. How are you feeling?

Artist: I am excited, and nervous... but I feel more prepared than last year, like I know what I am getting myself into.
I: You say that now.…

Artist: Remind me in three months how optimistic I was feeling at this moment.

I: I am writing it down. It's data.

Artist: Good.

I: Do you have a plan?

Artist: The plan is to raise the bar. To give the kids even more ownership of the project. To transfer even more of the decision-making to them, about what gets into the show and how it is staged. To have more big group numbers that play with the strength of the ensemble we are building, which is its size...like big choreographed numbers with all 100 kids...

I: Sounds like we aren’t heading to the easy road...

Artist: At least this time I can see some of the roadblocks ahead and know the detours. There are big new challenges but I think as long as we hit the trail running...

I: Optimism. Got it. I’m writing it down.

The first thing that the Artist does with each class, even before implementing “The Plan” is to sit down and ask the students to talk about their talents. This helps the artist get to know the individuals and the groups that he is working with but, more
practically, it helps him to create a list of skills that he can draw on when creating the larger group numbers and the multi-disciplinary aspects of the show.

In asking students about their talents, the Artist is inviting them to think about how they will contribute to the shared task of creation. This invitation places value on the individual in the process of building a collective. The interplay between the individual and the collective is one of the central tensions of working on a collaborative project like The Edge. Ultimately, the product is a shared expression, but the individual voices are integral to the creative process. In this spirit, in my role as researcher, I asked the students to share a little bit about what they thought they could contribute to the Edge Project. Their responses, as voiced below by the Creature, captured a certain excitement about the options open to them, the possibilities of making something brand new:

CREATURE: I am hoping that I will at least be able to contribute with the music and hopefully with live presentation of it. I would also love to help with the writing and have a scene of my own presented, as well as being in other scenes.

CREATURE: I'm hoping on contributing a little of everything, actually. I'm looking forward to acting in it, but I'm also looking forward to writing material, as well as working on the musical component.

Encouraging the students to see themselves as individuals, with a vital role in something larger than themselves, is instrumental in the goals of empowerment and “voice” at the heart of the Edge Project.

CREATURE: It’s amazing how [the Artist] believes in us and our abilities, it’s sad to say but I’ve always felt that adults don’t believe in teenagers, and for maybe the first time ever I feel that people are interested in us, are trusting in ourselves. The first meeting
with [the Artist] was awesome, we had to share our abilities and all the features we have that could be useful for the Edge Project. Every one of us have something to contribute to the project. I like the project because everyone will have his space, his part in the creation part and in the performance too. We are called to share what we know to create something.

As a first response, the Creature captures the hope, the idealism, the possibility, and the optimism of 'beginning.' From this initial place of empowerment, she expresses a willingness to share, and acknowledges the invitation (or the 'call') to do so.

From the very beginning, the students are introduced to the collaborative process as something that is completely in their hands. The empowerment that The Creature expresses in the response above indicates that she feels a certain amount of control over the outcome of the project. The Artist invites the students to imagine their role in the Edge Project and, in so doing, seeks to establish a power structure that is different from the conventional Adult-Teenager relationship to which The Creature is accustomed. Fels (2009) explains how such a power structure, with decentralized control, is a key condition in a “collective learning system”:

Decentralized control within a complex system requires that individual components be in a relationship of reciprocity where “control”—the directives of action and interaction—are shared and interdependent rather than located in a single entity. Within a collective learning system, no one individual exclusively dictates the actions and interactions that evolve. (129)

Moving away from centralized control puts the decision-making in the hands of “the many” and therefore raises questions about how to establish a functioning democracy. Later in the chapter we will look more closely at the nature of

19 Fels draws upon the writings of Brent Davis and Dennis Sumara, (2006), whose work introduce concepts of complexity theory into the field of education.
democracy in The Edge Project. For now, we examine how an improv game can reveal a simple economy at work in the early stages of play-building.

The Gift

The Artist stands at the front of the class and directs the students in the very first exercise: an improvisation game. The students await their instructions with wide-eyed apprehension. A few cheers surface at the mention of “improv,” with an equal number of quiet groans. The Artist takes the students through the exercise, step by step, carefully explaining the intentions and providing examples with the help of the teacher.

There are two lines: line A and line B. The person at the front of each line goes to the middle of the playing area. Person A must vaguely mime an object (general size and shape) and present it to person B as a gift. Person B has to accept the gift and name what it is.

The Teacher and the Artist do an example scene:

The Artist mimes a relatively large and heavy object, pushing it toward the teacher.

Artist: Happy Birthday!
Teacher: OH MY GOODNESS! A HORSE!? THANK YOU SO MUCH!!!! I LOVE IT!!!

(The teacher mimes trying to get on the horse, the artist mimes trying to steady it)

Artist: Ya, this ol’ girl is just for you (patting the horse on its imaginary hind)
Teacher: I am going to take it for a spin! Giddy-up!

The students laugh enthusiastically at the teacher as she mimes riding her horse away. The atmosphere in the class seems to shift slightly because the Artist and the Teacher
were the first “fools,” but as the students wait in line for their turn, some are clearly more nervous than others. The first few scenes mirror the example pretty closely, although the gifts are much smaller, the miming less precise, and the voices much quieter. There is chattering in the line and less than half of the students seem to be paying attention to the scenes. From my seat in the audience I first take note of how the interactions are superficial, awkward and self-conscious before realizing that I am judging the students on their performances rather than looking for what they are experiencing. It takes me a minute to shift from a “product” to a “process” lens, to settle in as “researcher”, just as it takes the students time to settle in to the rhythm of the activity. Slowly as we move down the line, the gifts get more outrageous, the thanks get more effusive and the attention of the whole class is soon drawn to centre stage. What if, in the beginning the students weren’t uninterested but, like me, were focusing on the product, thinking or worrying about what they were going to do when their turn came up? Once we let go of the product, what do we see (and engage) differently?

The activity is simple but is designed to teach some of the fundamentals of improv: First, the participants co-create the event, through the vague suggestion of A and the definition of the object by B. Secondly, the activity reminds us of the improv maxim that all offers must be accepted—in this case, OVER accepted. The idea is that B should gush and be overly grateful for the gift, and do his or her best to start using the gift right away. This enthusiastic receiving promotes the requirement of categorical acceptance in an improv scene of whatever is placed on the table. This is how we can ensure that everything that is introduced in a scene is used to push the scene or the story forward.

**ARTIST:** Improv is all about accepting offers and this game distills that lesson.

This activity is symbolic of the collaborative creation process as a whole. Everything contributed is accepted as a gift and used to move the creation forward. The Artist,
at this very early stage, accepts all the ideas, written responses, and scenes that the
students offer, using all of them to push the play-making forward. Giving and
receiving, contribution, acceptance and gratitude, are all themes that we will revisit
as the process continues. I want to pay close attention to the ways in which theatre
is a gift-based economy\(^\text{20}\) and how this economic system, based on gifts of offering
and receiving instead of other forms of transactions, such as an exchange of labour
for money, impacts the relationships between the players. *Can we achieve a system
that is communal and generative, relying on momentum instead of balance?*

**Writing: First Steps**

The Artist asks the students to contribute a lot of written material at the beginning
of the process. There are in-class writing prompts in which The Artist encourages
“free-writing”\(^\text{21}\) or short, one-sentence responses. There are also longer
assignments like poems, song lyrics, monologues and dialogues. The Artist’s goal in
the writing assignments is to create a strong base of material to draw on for the final
product. In his commitment to letting the students guide the direction of the piece,
he attempts to design activities that provide them with as much freedom as
possible:

**ARTIST:** For me the biggest challenge with the writing component of
the show is coming up with ‘invisible’ writing prompts. In
other words, prompts that succeed in pulling out insight and
honesty from the students without looking like a writing
exercise.

\(^{20}\) A gift based economy is one in which goods are given without an agreement of reward (instead of
being traded or sold). Lewis Hyde explains “In gift exchange, the transaction itself consumes the
object. Now, it is true that something often comes back when a gift is given, but if this were made an
explicit condition of the exchange, it wouldn’t be a gift” (Hyde. 2007. 11). He goes on to say: “A
market exchange has an equilibrium or stasis: you pay to balance the scale. But when you give a gift
there is momentum and the weight shifts from body to body” (11). Hyde suggests that as gifts
circulate, cohesion emerges (xx). These are all concepts I attach to the gift based economy that I hope
the Edge Project will establish.

\(^{21}\) Freewriting is generally agreed to be writing quickly for a set amount of time without stopping or
editing. The concept was described and developed by the writing theorist Peter Elbow (1973).
Everything that is written in each class is kept in a giant binder so that it can be revisited and potentially incorporated into one of the scenes that have yet to imagined.

\[\text{ARTIST:} \quad \text{Often, it isn't until a staging concept emerges that the writing material generated from a prompt becomes interesting or engaging.}\]

All the material is handed in, no matter how polished, and a large number of them are read out loud and discussed by the class. I was curious to see what the students would write about and also how they would respond to having their work read and discussed openly in class.

In one class in particular, the students were very wary of having their material read out loud. The Artist gave them the option to remain anonymous and, as a group, they latched onto this option quickly and emphatically. I asked one of the students to describe the experience of being asked to write and share their work:

\[\text{CREATURE:} \quad \text{This week [The Artist] asked us to either write a poem or song lyrics. This was definitely one of the types of writing assignments that make me nervous. I used to write poems quite a lot but I haven't written any recently. I've never let anyone outside of my family read my poems because often times they are too personal. I'm kind of afraid to share my opinions because I am afraid that some people might not agree with me and that they might feel strongly enough about it to end a friendship. I've had that kind of thing happen before. The easiest stuff for me to write is the simple sentences that [The Artist] had us right last week which were "Everyone thinks I'm} \]
but really I’m ___." Those are easy because it’s just filling in answers and it was anonymous.

I was intrigued by how openly she talked about the fears that came up for her when she imagined sharing her work with her classmates. The next week I asked her how everything turned out with her poem:

CREATURE: The poem went okay. He didn’t read it out loud and no one responded to it. Which is a relief but also somewhat disappointing I guess. It would have been interesting to know what people would have said if they had read it not knowing it was my work, but I didn’t get that opportunity.

While she is nervous and even fearful to share her work and risk being misunderstood, she is also curious about how her writing would have been received by her classmates. The anonymity, for this student, created a manageable risk.

In one of the classes that I visited, the students chose to forego the anonymity option. The Artist selected several of their poems to be read out loud and redistributed them so that the author was not reading their own work. After listening to the poem, the author would identify themselves, and their classmates would provide feedback on their work. I observed that this format was one that the students appeared to be very comfortable with. The students were accustomed to speaking about their own work and providing comments and questions to their peers. Writing is a significant part of the drama program at this particular school: there is an annual festival of one-act plays that are student written and directed.

In another class, students were less accustomed to writing their own material and there was a split between students who wanted to remain anonymous and students who chose to attach their name to their writing. One student, who was a self-
identified leader in her class and confidently attached her name to her work, wrote a poem that was selected by The Artist to form the “Middle Section” of the show. The poem was turned into an ensemble scene with all 100 performers. When The Artist asked her if she would be comfortable having her poem used in this way she was thrilled:

CREATURE: I think it’s pretty awesome. I like what I wrote and what [The Artist]’s doing with it, so I am happy that it did get used. It makes me feel more connected to the creation process.

She draws a direct link between having her poem ‘used’ in the show and being connected to the creation process. Is the disappointment that the first student felt, when her poem was not read out loud, a moment of disconnection from the process? In the development of the final show, some ideas, scenes, and written items are included and some are excluded. Sometimes, as the director, The Artist is in charge of selecting material that he feels is rich for further exploration, in order to keep the process moving. However, generally, the students are asked to drive the decisions about inclusion and exclusion. The classes vote (formally and informally) on what scenes make it into the final script for their section. I wonder if the democratic nature of the project provides enough opportunities for each individual to influence outcome so that it is possible to maintain connection to the process, even in moments of exclusion?

First of all, what do we mean by democracy? Jonothan Neelands (2009) explores this concept in depth and clarifies the distinction between participatory and representative models suggesting that “ensemble-based theatre” can (and should) “offer a model of fully participatory, rather than representational, democratic community offering a fully participatory, rather than representational, theatre. A better version of the real world on an achievable scale” (186-187). The Edge Project aims for participatory ideals but how can it ensure that the views of “the many” are not be replaced by “the few”? Do voices that are louder or more polished drown out
the other voices, shaping the dynamic of inclusion and exclusion? Is being asked to write enough? One student suggests that it is:

CREATURE: I think a lot of people liked the writing exercises we did cause a lot of people don’t think of themselves as writers and they wouldn’t have thought to volunteer before so I think a lot of people enjoyed that.

Students who “don’t think of themselves as writers” are asked to contribute and, whether their individual writing appears in the final product or not, they get the chance to play the role of playwright. Does this opportunity for expression fulfill the promise of voice in the democracy? Engaging students in writing activities certainly encourages the dialectical foundations of the play-making project and sets up conditions where a collective voice can emerge. The chance to express themselves in writing strengthens the individual voices and at least provides more representation within the democratic collaboration.

Maxine Greene (1995) suggests: “Democracy, we realize, means a community that is always in the making. Marked by an emerging solidarity, a sharing of certain beliefs, and a dialogue about others, it must remain open to newcomers, those too long thrust aside” (39). The Edge Project is a continuously changing entity that is shaped by the open dialogue that emerges from the writing itself, not only in the decisions about inclusion and exclusion in the final script. In fact, the writing very rarely appears in the play in its original form. The material is handed over to small groups or the whole class for dramaturgy and development. The ownership shifts from the individual to the collective. Ideas are added, manipulated and re-imagined by the members of the group. In some cases, students have a hard time identifying which idea was theirs because the concept is transformed by the many hands through which it has passed.
In one class, the students broke away into small groups to script scenes about themes or topics that the members of the class had identified as important. The students would start by brainstorming story ideas and then create improvised scenes to bring their ideas to life. The scenes had to then be recorded in script form and presented to the rest of the class so that the writers could receive feedback and the larger group could re-work any necessary parts. Co-writing scenes through this format reveals some of the challenges of working within a democratic collective and ensuring that work reflects all the voices involved. One student describes her experience with the group dynamic:

CREATURE: I feel there is a very big divide between personalities in my group. Three of the people in my group are very loud and extroverted and have no trouble sharing their ideas. While two of us, including me, have a tougher time expressing our ideas. Although I’m sure both of us have great ideas, it’s harder for us to put our two cents in with 3 big personalities talking all the time. I do think eventually it will come together, hopefully soon. I think we need a bit more time to flesh out our ideas and get the script down on paper.

In one-on-one interactions with this student I found her to be engaged, insightful, and eager to contribute. However, when I observed her in any group setting, she appeared to be withdrawn to the point of near misery.

ARTIST: It is sometimes hard to find ways to include students who are exhibiting very clear discomfort with the work that we are doing. I am worried about making it worse by putting them on the spot, but at the same time I want to push them to new limits.
The Artist recognizes the discomfort of the students as fertile ground for growth: a natural state for creative work and, according to John Gilbert, a common requirement for both theatre and education:

Theatre and drama should be unsettling, should make us ‘un-easy’ in the positive sense of the word, as should education. (as quoted in Gallagher & Booth 2003, 107)

The Artist comes from an industry where this ‘un-easiness’ is actively chosen by those involved, to a classroom full of young people who are being thrust into contact with their limitations and fears with less training and less control over where and when the lines are crossed. This is not to say that the students are powerless, but rather that they are participating in a project that pulls into focus their not-yet-defined comfort zones, as well as the various stages of readiness they inhabit when it comes to moving outside these zones. In the case of the student being drowned out by her louder peers, I was curious to find out what could be done to accommodate both her desire to participate and her shyness. I asked her to speak to a situation that would make it easier for her to express her ideas:

CREATURE: I usually feel best expressing my ideas to one of the teachers or to one of my friends.

Coming to understand how a student wishes to be heard helps to make the lines of their comfort zone visible, which makes it easier for the Artist to gently direct the student towards expanding them.

Gallagher (2000) argues that relational experiences (like the Creature’s discomfort) strengthen the collaboration by pointing to Christine Warner’s (1997) work. Warner explores the variety of ways to engage in the drama process beyond vocal contributions:

[...]she identifies groups she has called ‘Processors’, ‘Participant Observers’, and ‘Listeners/Outsiders’. Possibly the greatest contribution of her study is
its evidence that engagement processes are elaborate and usually begin before there is public evidence of that engagement. (70)

While The Creature’s quiet nature made it, at times, frustrating or difficult for the Artist to draw her into a group discussion, it cannot be used as an accurate indication of her engagement or contributions to the project. Her response does, however, represent The Creature’s individual reality, which needs to be negotiated with all the other active realities at work, in this particular case, the Artist’s desire to include her. Gallagher (2002) goes on to say:

Drama as a collective process is not about consensus, but an accommodation of perspectives and a collectivity of ideas. It is not an easy or swift process, but one that relies on and is enhanced by the collective negotiation of meaning. This collective negotiating process is important in a drama classroom because there are many kinds of engagement, many levels of ability, indeed many realities operating in that classroom at any given time.

(73)

With this in mind, when the Artist and the Creature meet at the “lines” of her comfort zone, they are asked to acknowledge the elaborate engagement processes occurring beneath the surface and find a way to re-negotiate the meaning of “participating” in group discussions.

**Expectations**

Before getting further into what the project is asking from those participating, I wanted to find out what the participants were asking of the project. I asked each of my creatures, as they shuffled tentatively near the starting line, if they had any expectations.

While each individual had their own set of expectations, experience, knowledge and relationships were common themes.
CREATURE: One thing I am trying to get out of the Edge Project is experience, and to do some networking.

CREATURE: I'm hoping to gain some knowledge about working with a large theatre company, some experience writing material, and experience working with new people.

CREATURE: I expect to gain new friendships and experience in the field of theatre, a field in which I still have much to learn.

One student had a specific skill she was interested in developing:

CREATURE: I hope I will be more confident especially with speaking on stage. I've been doing dance for almost eleven years so being on stage isn't a big issue for me but speaking on stage is.

And another wanted to further explore a skill that she already has confidence in:

CREATURE: I expect to gain more knowledge of myself as an actor.

One student responded with expectations for himself, relationships, learning outcomes, and in doing so, provided a clue as to how he sees himself in the world:

CREATURE: From the Edge Project I am expecting to become a lot closer with a few people from my school (especially since I am new there so it will be a great way to get to know people), I expect to learn about a lot of issues in the world and in the life of teens and ways that people are dealing with it, I think I can learn a few things about other teens brains which is something I am very interested in, I expect to be able to express myself
creatively and hopefully fuel it through new activities including writing.

This participant appears to be searching for belonging but also draws a thin line, separating himself from “other teens”: a group that he hopes to learn more about, and come to understand.

One of the teachers also identified the potential for connection and belonging as something that she wished for, both for herself and her students:

TEACHER: I would like to find connection with other drama teachers, perhaps get some teaching ideas from [The Artist], and take joy in watching my students create / be a part of a big production. I see the class coming together and really bonding over this experience. I want the students to experience putting on a full show and experience the guidance / mentorship of professionals. This is such a special opportunity - I want the students to feel like they are a part of something special, something larger than themselves and I want them to be inspired to continue creating theatre.

Talking about expectations helped me to get a first look at the students and where they were coming from. I interpreted some of their vague responses to the question as perhaps not knowing what to expect and waiting to see what happens before investing any “hopes” into the process. If you were to ask students lining up to audition for the school play what their expectations were, they might name getting a specific role or being part of the ensemble. In our case, there are so many “unknowns” it is hard to find something to hold on to. Expectation opens you up to the risk of disappointment. The student’s willingness to consider what they want from the project is, in my mind, an act of courage.
Trust and Risk

...To act, to speak out bravely although unprepared and frightened. (Mamet, 1997, 32)

I use the phrase “act of courage” because I believe that the students, faced with “the unknown” of the project that lies before them are asked to actively take a “risk” and, in turn, “trust” an outcome. Courage is confronting the uncertainty/the danger behind the “risk”. The act of courage is in the choosing. The risk of being disappointed through creating expectations may be a familiar and a seemingly low-impact risk, however it speaks to a culture of risk-taking at work in this project, the theatre, and the theatre classroom, that I am interested in exploring.

Risks are not unique to the theatre or to the classroom, they are normal, everyday occurrences as we evaluate actions and consequences from moment to moment. And yet, the theatre and the theatre classroom seem to be environments where there is an elevated expectation of risk.

*What is special about the risks in the creation of theatre?*  
*What sets them apart from other daily risk-taking opportunities?*

Mamet (1997) acknowledges that to stand on the stage, to “Act”, requires courage, and, in fact, that this courage is essential to the relationship between the Actor and her audience:

Stanislavsky said that the person one is is a thousand times more interesting than the best actor one could become. And when the actor picks up her cue, then speaks out though uncertain, the audience sees that interesting person. They see true courage, not a portrayal of courage, but true courage. The individual onstage speaks because she is called upon to speak—when she has nothing to support her except her self-respect. (21)

22 See Appelbaum and his discussion about “intelligent choice” in his book The Stop (1995)
In order for Acting to require courage we can assume that there is risk or danger involved. What does the Actor risk in the act of performing a play? How does the Actor accept the risk of standing on the stage “speak(ing) out though uncertain” at a moment where Mamet says she has “nothing to support her but her self-respect”? In my own drama education and actor training we were encouraged to accept the risk by employing trust: “Trust the Script”; “Trust the Audience”; “Trust the Director”; “Trust your fellow Actors”; “Trust Yourself.” Over and over we were being asked to trust, and I’m not sure that I ever considered what it actually meant. Where does trust belong in a culture of risk-taking?

Niklas Luhmann defines trust as “a response to moments of uncertainty and risk” (as quoted in Nicholson 2002, 84) making the instruction to “trust” given by my acting teacher a solution to a perceived risk that I was facing. Trust, however, is one of multiple possible responses to risk — so why was I instructed to respond with trust? How does trust function? Why do we choose it? And what does it serve? In reflecting on my theatre education, the trust-response continuously surfaces in a pattern that seems to reinforce an instinctive positioning of “trust” as integral to theatre creation and performance.23 However, as I look for evidence of risk and trust in the Edge Project, complexities and questions emerge which make me uncertain about a status quo that accepts a broad-sweeping conception of trust and its inherent value to the theatre (/classroom). Essentially, I have stopped trusting trust.

Helen Nicholson (2002) calls trust a “slippery” concept (82) and yet, despite ambiguity and abstraction, in drama education “the practice of trust has been taken as a pre-requisite for cooperative relationships of mutual benefit between individuals working towards a common goal, the creation of drama” (82). As

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23 This instinct is supported by Nicholson (2002) who calls “the very atmosphere of mutual trust and collaboration” “one of the special qualities of drama education (82).
Nicholson looks for a working theory for the practice of trust in the drama classroom, she defines trust as a "performative act".

...in drama education, a critical understanding of scope and limits of trust relies not on sentiment alone, but on the visible enactment of trust, as a performative act. (84)

How do we know trust is being performed at any given moment? How is trust made visible? What are the indicators? Luhmann (2000) suggests that trust requires the presence of both risk and action:

The case of trust [...] depends not on inherent danger but on risk. Risks, however, emerge only as a component of decision and action. They do not exist by themselves. If you refrain from action you run no risk. It is purely internal calculation of external conditions which creates risk. Although it may be obvious that it is worth while, or even unavoidable, to embark on a risky course—[...]--- it nevertheless remains one’s own choice, or so it seems if a situation is defined as a situation of trust. In other words trust is based on a circular relation between risk and action, both being complementary requirements. (100)

Now we can start to see the natural association between Act-ing (Mamet’s actor who courageously steps onto the stage), action (in circular relation to risk in a trust situation) and trust conceived as a performative act. The ACT-ivity of trust may be part of why the drama classroom is an environment that we associate with risk and trust relationships. Perhaps they are more easily identified in a setting where the students use both their bodies and their voices in action.

If risk and action are both requirements in situations of trust, it could follow that if we can identify risks and corresponding action responses, we will be able to determine if trust is present. What risks can we presume the participants are taking in the Edge Project? And do these risks lead us to observe moments of active trust? Let us return briefly to the Creature who was afraid to have her peers know which written work was hers. I qualified her choice to write anonymously as
accepting a “manageable risk”. Can we assume that her anxiety about sharing her work translates into a lack of trust? Annette Baier (1991) calls trust “acceptance of vulnerability to harm that others could inflict but which we judge they will not inflict (137).” The Creature judges that others will inflict harm and does not accept the vulnerability to this harm. Or in Luhmann’s terms: the Creature’s internal calculation about the external condition of having her work read aloud and attributed to her creates a risk. Without the action of publicly taking credit for her work, the circular relation between risk and action is incomplete and we can conclude that a situation of trust is not present. Anonymity protects the Creature from the harm she judges the others will inflict. Once her name is removed from her work the Creature chooses the action of having her work read out loud. Is there still risk involved? To what kind of harm is she vulnerable? Does the Creature perform trust? Can one simply perform trust? It seems to me that trust can be a performative act but, like the actor needs an audience, trust needs to be performed to someone or something. One trusts a person, one trusts an outcome, one trusts a situation. Essentially, I am interested in trust as a transitive verb.24 A transitive verb needs a direct object to which or to whom the action is performed. In keeping with the grammatical rule, trust’s functionality depends on being directed, having a location.

For example, if we consider the action of participating in the Edge Project, which involves the risk of not knowing the outcome, a performance of trust, where are the participants being asked to locate their trust? Could we say that the students are asked to trust that The Artist knows what he is doing and that the exercises he is leading them through will eventually take them towards an end goal? Could we equally say that we are asking the participants to trust the process? Each other? How does the performance of trust change depending on where it is directed?

24 Grammatically, trust can also be an intransitive verb ... and obviously a noun.
Invisibility, Blindness, and Other Problems with Trust

On one level, the Edge Project offers a particularly rich climate for exploring how trust is enacted (or absent) in a variety of overlapping moments and relationships. And yet, I find the search for trust and trusting relationships to be an inherently problematic pursuit.

Nicholson (2002) describes trust as something that is constantly being "negotiated and renegotiated" (81) which speaks to "the dynamic quality of trusting relationships and to the vulnerability of trust as a commodity or good" (Baier, 1991, 110). Even if there is an effective way of determining whether trust is present, the level of "trust" that a participant has in the Edge Project cannot be considered static, making any evidence of trust unreliable. The negotiation of trust is further complicated by its invisibility, as the changes to and the limitations of any particular case of trust are potentially unseen and unseeable.

If the moving components of trust and trusting relationships are not necessarily seen, blindness may play a role in achieving the particular trust relationships that creative collaboration is believed to require. Blindness in trust creates the conditions for exploitative power relationships to flourish. As Baier (1991) points out, trust is not necessarily a good thing and that striving for a "climate of trust" is "risky" due to the ease with which trust coexists with "contrived and perpetuated inequality" (111).

The concept of "trusting the process", is particularly problematic for me because it infers a certain amount of trusting first and understanding later. This sets a precedent where the truster is encouraged to enter into or enact trust with a requisite blindness. Encouraging participants to "trust the process" might disempower the individual participant from the choice of whether to perform trust as well as the choice of where to locate their own act of trusting. The consideration of some of the problems with trust raises the question: Are we interested in
fostering an understanding of trust that is simplified and makes the performance of trust easy? A format that relies on the presence of trusting relationships or assumes their presence if the work is taking place, over-simplifies the complex interplay between trust and distrust and abandons an opportunity to consider alternative modes of interaction and risk-taking. Demanding trust would, in this case, be a disservice to the project and the individual participant. It could leave participants with less grip on their own slippery understanding of what it means to trust and interfere with the development of tools that help them to assess when to give and when to withhold trust.

For all of the potential benefits that trusting relationships could have in the creation process, there are also potential drawbacks. Is a participant who “trusts” that the Artist knows what he is doing and that everything will come together in the end, as likely to challenge the status quo and shape the project to her own creative impulses? A lack of trust may require the participant to be more active, to bring criticality, and to make resistance a place of possibility and learning.

**The Construction Site**

While I acknowledge that theories of trust in drama education allow for dissent and debate (Nicholson, 2002, 12), I remain challenged by the role that assumptions and imposters might play in the elevation of trust to a “required” feature of collaborative theatre work. This is not to say that I think trust has no place in the theatre classroom, but instead that it needs careful construction and should not be a proxy for the host of other coexisting and intersecting actions and reactions at work in cooperative relationships.

A lack of trust, or resistance to trust, provides the construction site on which we can begin to build the foundation for integral collaborative interactions (including but not limited to trust). Rethinking trust gives us the opportunity to dig below the broader concept and come up with essential elements or visible actions that will
serve as materials for participants in their individual and collective relationship building pursuits. The Edge Project actively ruptures familiarity, which is often misconstrued as, or at least acts in the place of, trust (Luhmann, 2000). From the beginning, the participants are thrust into a setting where the format of the project, the lack of script, the power relationships, the Artist in the classroom, the students from other schools, are all working to destabilize the comfort achieved by familiarity. When Mamet’s actor picks up her cue and speaks although unprepared and frightened we don’t know if she performs trust but we do know that she chooses to step forward or engages willingly in the act. Similarly, the participants are invited to, despite the intrinsic discomfort of the process, willingly engage themselves in the Edge Project. In the space between the invitation and the act of engaging, is the risk, the fear, the resistance, the tension: the active construction sites.

**Resistance**

While I hope to avoid stereotypes that project unusually high levels of emotional stress onto teenagers, I do think that resistance is a theme that is worth considering in the specific context of “teenagehood”. As a developmental stage, adolescence is typically charged with increasing the differentiation of self/identity and an intellectual shift towards abstract reasoning abilities. The replacement of concrete thinking with abstract reasoning, combined with a shift in social focus from parents to peer groups (Breare, 2003, 26), makes it possible to imagine that new tensions around trust and resistance emerge in adolescence. First of all, the ability to assess multiple outcomes and hypothesize about the future may mean that adolescence is a time of re-evaluating trust. Cognitively, a teenager is developing skills that threaten blind or immediate trust. Socially, a focus on identity and group belonging favours building trusting friendships with peers, which may leave room for resistance to extending trust beyond the peer group sphere. Teenagers do not

25 These stereotypes have been largely disproved. See Breare, 2003, 24.
26 Breare (2003) sorts through a range of developmental models (24-32) and his work chooses to follow a model of development that is relational—adolescents striving to be interdependent.
necessarily trust less, but there is a sense that a tearing down of existing structures is an essential part of a maturing negotiation of trust relationships.

The Edge Project is designed to be an exploration of the teenage experience and perhaps the form can best serve the function if we focus on the moments of resistance rather than chase or imbue a faulty construction of trust.

**Finding the Unfamiliar: Searching for Moments of Resistance.**

It has been established that some “un-easiness” is a desired state in the creative process, and that risk-taking is an indicator of a positive collaborative environment. By separating “familiarity” and “trust” I can look more closely at the conditions within the Edge Project that encourage or limit willingness to act. Earlier, while describing the first writing exercises, I observed that for some students, having their material read aloud in class represented a risk, and that anxiety and resistance were indicators of this risk. I also hypothesized that there is a difference between the participating classes in what students are “used to” in terms of sharing their work. The students who were more “familiar” with the actions of writing and sharing their personal perspectives, appeared to show less resistance to this particular risk. Paying attention to where the participants (artist, teachers, and students) came in contact with the unfamiliar therefore offered me an opportunity to witness possible moments of resistance in the creation process. The appearance of fear, discomfort, anxiety, withdrawal, or unwillingness to participate helped to direct me towards these moments.

TEACHER: One thing that I’ve noticed is that some of the students are scared of sharing their writing with the class. I’ve never had that problem with students before and I’m wondering if it has something to do with this process. Or maybe, someone new coming into the classroom. Or maybe, because I would normally get to the bottom of the problem so that it wouldn't
be an issue. But because we’re on a tight timeline and I don’t really want to interfere too much, I’m holding back on things that I would normally do. And the funny thing is that I don’t think that (the Artist) would mind if I interfered.

As noted earlier in this chapter, there was a range of willingness when it came to identifying and sharing one’s work. I have attributed this to both “school culture” and “risk” but I think the teacher identifies another key consideration: The “new”ness of both the project/process and the Artist himself, which concurrently impact familiarity and may account for some of the resistance observed. The students are behaving differently, likely as a result of multiple factors, one of which could be that their Teacher is behaving differently (by not dealing head-on with problems as she normally might). While the Teacher is primarily concerned with the students who appear “scared” to share, she also gives an indication of her own limits of familiarity being reached.

The teacher also speculates that there may be something particular about the process that is causing the change in behaviour, which some of the participants identified as a “new”ness, or a lack of structure or knowing (in this case, knowing what will happen).

CREATURE: I feel a bit of anxiety because it seems like we haven’t gotten much work done. Since we have no solid script for our section of the Edge yet. But we do have a lot of work and ideas that we can use.

While he acknowledges that there are “a lot of work and ideas”, he notes that the lack of “final script”, or in my interpretation, visible structure, challenges his comfort zone. Having a script from which to memorize lines and rehearse may, at least for this Creature, be a more familiar understanding of a play, and would provide a
useable framework for judging how much work is already done and what is still left to do.

A little bit later in the process, with only one month to go before the performance date, and still no final script, the Creature speaks to the “unknown” of what will come:

CREATURE: Personally I don’t really feel much for the fact that it is cutting close. Since I’m used to procrastinating and deadlines a month away seem like forever. But I still kinda wonder if it will work out.

By approaching The Edge Project through a lens of his experience with other projects and deadlines he does not appear to be anxious about the approaching performance date, and yet, his wondering “if it will all work out” indicates that there are still unfamiliar or unknown factors, and ultimately, risk.

For this student, the fact that he is used to leaving things until the last minute gives him a certain amount of steadiness looking ahead. For another student, the experience of some successes in the early stages of play-making may provide the confidence to carry on:

CREATURE: Before we started i thought it would be so hard to decide how to develop the show and take decisions all together but now I see that it’s possible and we are learning how to work in a group too. Sometimes it’s hard to understand the meaning of something [The Artist] wants us to do cause we don't have a clear view of the steps we need to do to finish the project.

While she is encouraged that some of her doubts have been disproven, she still laments the fact there is no “clear view of the steps” or, again, visible structure to
follow. Similarly, one of the teacher’s remarked that a lack of “big picture” or longview makes it hard to keep the students on task between meetings:

**TEACHER:** It’s challenging during down time to ensure students that things are coming together. Teenagers want immediate results and I find are less patient and don’t respect the “process” enough to understand how the big picture looks. They need instant gratification.

Ignoring, for now, the generalization about “teenagers”, the Teacher identifies the gap between the experience the participants are having and the results they are expecting. The play-creation phase is long, slow, and may at times appear to be endless. In the Teacher’s observation of impatience can we interpret another form of resistance?

**Buying-In: From Resistance to Willingness**

The Edge Project, by design, is meant to be driven by the collaboration of the participants, under the direction of the Artist. In order for this model to function, it requires a certain amount of “buy-in”. For some, the lack of visible structure acted as a barrier to this ultimately necessary commitment. One could say that the participants needed to “trust the process” or “trust” that the Artist is leading them in the direction of the shared end goal, however I wonder if, in the absence of a trustworthy trust, we can imagine other paths from resistance to investment? How do we sort through the chaos and find a balance between comfort and discomfort that serves the creative ambitions of the project but manages to keep the participants engaged and willing?

From the beginning, the Artist tries to maintain as much transparency as he can about the nature of the project. A lot of time is spent explaining the steps and how each activity, writing exercise or scene-exploration ultimately fits into the final goal.
of creating a complete work ready for performance. One participant suggested that he could go further to build confidence in the play-making process:

CREATURE: I think he could give us some examples of ways that the techniques he’s using have worked in the past. I’d love to hear about some of the shows he’s seen or worked on where they’ve used strong non-script elements; I think there’s a feeling that what we’re doing is very experimental and that [The Artist]’s playing around until we get something right, and that’s not the best feeling to have when the show’s going up soon.

The Creature and her fellow students are under the impression that they are playing around and that knowing more about the Artist’s previous work would provide reassurance. While her class has done play-making before, it has never been such a long and abstract process and in previous cases it was led by their classroom teacher. Would creating familiarity with the Artist make it easier to accept the unfamiliarity of the project format, thus encouraging a buy-in and bridging some of the distance between resistance and action?

For a student who had previously participated in The Edge Project, the familiarity of the overall process seems to make it easier for her to transform the negative “unknown” structure into positive “freedom” to create, even though there are lots of things that are still unfamiliar:

CREATURE: Okay, so I was in the Edge in the first year they ever did it, two years back. I more or less know what The Edge is like, how it works, how the scenes come together. What continuously gets me excited is the fact that it is not identical to the first year. I feel like there is a lot more creation and more time to create, the first year it felt as though we needed to get it done and start rehearsing in the very beginning. I think we had probably
only done maybe 2 writing activities. This year we get to do writing almost every week. I absolutely love it. I love having the freedom and letting ideas flow from the prompts we get.

Does this Creature have an advantage over her peers because she is less worried about how the project works, or what to expect? Does it free her up to work more creatively? And if so, what steps could the Artist, the Teachers, and I take in order to make the process easier for other participants to buy-in?

In her work on complexity theory and performative inquiry, Fels (2009) describes enabling constraints as “the framework and logic that simultaneously limit and permit dynamic learning and neighbour interactions” (26) Enabling constraints are required for the classroom to be a “viable and generative” system (25), one of the five key characteristics as identified by Brent Davis & Dennis Sumara (2006).

The concept that constraints “enable” a complex system to function resonates with my experience of the Edge Project so far. There is value in boundaries, walls, or curtains: a membrane that gives body to the living thing (in this case the living play creation process). Fels’ (2009) implementation of enabling constraints is designed with such a purpose: to simultaneously “limit and permit” learning (26). But how do we know when the constraints are limiting without permitting? How do we establish boundaries that are flexible enough to allow the living play to grow? The ecosystem of creative collaboration that the Edge Project aims to develop appears to at once need the opposite and complementary features of comfort and discomfort. Can these be achieved simultaneously? What constraints can be put in place to enable this fine balance? By providing some comfort or familiarity (limiting risk) is it possible to nurture the discomfort needed to encourage (permit) risk-taking?

Searching for and identifying trust may be a problematic pursuit but it centres on a view of the creation process that favours positive collaborative relationships and recognizes that there are particular conditions in which creativity and risk-taking
flourish. Many theorists\(^{27}\) have approached the challenge of establishing such an environment in the drama classroom and have created frameworks for educators to apply in classroom practice.\(^{28}\) Luhman asserts that:

> As educators we have a role in identifying for participants the specific risks, challenges and benefits presented by a particular dramatic situation so that they might feel *safe* enough to experiment. (as quoted by Nicholson, 2002, 7)

The drama classroom has been designed by many to be a “safe” space. Booth (2003) believes that the “safety of the theatre frame is the only place that some ideas can be shared” (21). While I don’t disagree with Booth about the value of theatre and the drama classroom, with its unique ability to “shock”, “surprise”, and engage challenging ideas\(^{29}\), I am challenged by the use of the word “safety”.

**The Danger of Safety**

The need for a “safe” place to practice drama/theatre pervades educational theory on the subject (Barrett, 2010). While it may seem like semantics, *safety* is the opposite of what we are trying to establish. The theatre creation process, the drama classroom, and the stage, do not need to be turned into “safe” spaces. The barriers for taking risks need to be lowered so that the spaces become, in fact, riskier. Furthermore, the idea that a “safe” space can be achieved is a flawed, and even dangerous notion. Barrett (2010) and Ludlow (2004) contend that the impossibility of creating safety for marginalized or oppressed students means that “dominant and empowered positions” are reinforced by the privilege of safety (Barrett, 2010, 7). A “safe” space assumes comfort, non-judgmental acceptance, and equality (6-9). Safety, in this context, erases opportunities for learning from discomfort, difference, and inequality. If the classroom acts as a microcosm (Ludlow, 2004, Fruscianti,

\(^{27}\) I am thinking of Jonothan Neelands and Gavin Bolton.


\(^{29}\) I borrow shock and surprise, again, from Booth (2003) who writes: “I need for students of all ages to be shocked and surprised by ideas that can only be shared in the safety of the theatre frame” (21).
2008), why would we want to create an artificial world where these challenges do not exist? As a solution, Barrett (2010) offers a classroom ethic that favours “civility” rather than “safety” (9). To form her argument she relies on Marini’s definition of civility: “the ability to act as a ‘citizen’ of a group and function in a positive manner so that individual engagement can benefit both the individual and the group” (Marini, 2007, as cited in Barrett, 2010, 9).

The problematic extension of “safety” into a false reality came up for the Artist in the tension between the educational and artistic goals of the Edge Project. It raised the questions: Who gets the privilege of being heard? And why?

ARTIST: I want this project NOT to be about being a good actor and more about just being real onstage, but the truth is that we need a product that is engaging and watchable, so it’s easy to default to the kids that have talent--but I don’t want to leave anyone out or presume that just because someone can tap dance or sing that they have more to ’say’ or deserve to be watched more than someone else.

Trying to achieve an environment where everyone is treated equally and everyone feels “safe” and “free from judgment” conflicts with the creative needs of play-making. Shifting from safety to civility, as Barrett (2010) suggests, would allow the Artist to work with the real exhibition of behaviours, rather than the assumed psychological constructs (comfort), present in his working environment (10). Instead of focusing on providing “comfort” or “safety”, the artistic and educational goals of the project are better served by providing a “supportive milieu for student engagement” (11).

The Artist needs to find a balance between ensuring that as many voices as possible are heard in the final performance, and creating a learning environment that takes into account the risks of difference and inequality. After all:
If devising, in its efforts to build community demands sameness at the expense of difference, the potential for democratic pedagogy is lost. (Wessells, 2011, 131).

**Limiting Constraints: Finding One’s Voice in the Crowd.**

While the Edge Project appeared to many of the students to be formless and in need of structural constraints to enable creation, one student found the existing constraints oppressively limiting. What seemed at first to be an ordinary moment of resistance, developed over the course of the project into a broader conversation about how to provide young people with a voice to tell stories of personal experiences, without confining them to a constructed concept of “teenage-hood.” In reflecting on the experiences of this student, through his own words and actions, I wonder what we can learn about the complexity of representation and the role of resistance in establishing an “authentic voice.”

On one of the first writing days, the Artist asked the students in one class to free write a short piece about a recent experience. It could be a dialogue, or if one preferred they could write a short poem or monologue. He explained that the Edge Project would be made up of stories “by you and about you” so the only rule was that the story or idea had to be about something real or imagined “happening to yourself or someone else your age.” He immediately met resistance from one participant, sitting in the corner.

*Creature:* Why can’t we write about old people?

*Artist:* You can, but the idea is to try to write about or from your own experiences.

*Creature:* But what if I want my character to be an old person? How can you make a rule like that?
**Artist:** The exercise right now is to work on a short scene or story that is real or realistic for someone your age.

**Creature:** That's not interesting or creative. What about imagination?

**Artist:** You can imagine a story or situation, just try to imagine yourself or someone your age as the main character.

**Creature:** Is it mandatory?

**Artist:** No.

**Creature:** Good.

As the creation phase progressed, the Creature became more frustrated and alienated, and more vocal about his discomfort with the loose framework of the play. After one All Schools Jam he wrote:

**CREATURE:** I'm reminded when I'm there of how offended I am of the generalization and what's been contributed.
It's disgusting that anyone would write what we're doing.
The Edge Project is extortion. If we don't go, we're losing marks in school and we might even fail in Drama or get removed completely from the class.

When I asked him to clarify some of his feelings on the subject he answered:

**CREATURE:** Something about the swarms of everything that is thought to be popular among our age being exposed all at once in an attempt to satisfy everyone is disgusting.
The hip-hop.
The over-simplified motions, as if we don’t have the ability to so much as shake someone’s hand when we meet them.
The lines, these disgusting, horrible, lines that we memorize and quote. The flow of how they work from short, five simple word lines to a paragraph of text, where everyone speaks a cliche at once relevant and supporting the ideas that we can all be one entity.

The "lines" that The Creature is talking about are all written by his peers. Why does he feel exploited? What could we do to give him more agency and feel more connected to the material? What if the ideas and the words that his peers are coming up with are "over-simplified" and "cliched"? What does it mean to include those lines, ideas, words, movements in a play? Is it an honest representation or diluted by the process and the sheer number of voices? Can one truthfully represent such a big and diverse group?

Another student also had concerns about how the content of the play would reflect on “teenagehood” but was hopeful that sticking with the work would reveal more interesting topics:

CREATURE: It’s so ‘in’ to express your differences and to have new-stereotypical teen angst, and it feels like because that’s what is common at the moment, it becomes what Edge is about.
Pushing boundaries for the sake of boundaries. Difference for being different. It’s not an awful thing, I just feel that it defeats the purpose of The Edge. I hope for this show to break past that regular teen angst and find some real and beautiful moments.

The project’s goal of “providing voice to young people” anchors the writing exercises and creative activities in subjects and experiences that are relevant to the authors of
the play (the participants). They are encouraged to write about themselves and the people around them. This particular “constraint” is put in place to enable a starting point for the project. A play by young people about young people is, from the perspective of the adults envisioning the project (myself included), a valuable opportunity to encourage agency and self-reflection through theatre. The Edge Project aims to put into practice Booth’s (1994) assertion that: “we must learn to use the tools of theatre to help our students create not just their own drama, but produce their own culture where their experiences matter; where their questions matter; where their voices matter” (Booth as cited in Zatzman, 2003, 35).

What the disillusioned participant did not know is that the Artist and I shared some of his concerns when it came to representation. We spent a lot of time looking for ways to invite the young people to use their authentic voices while hoping to strike a balance whereby the whole exercise avoids descending into our biggest fear: (what we playfully called) “a teen angst play”.

Commuting between schools, The Artist and I would talk about how to get away from the “clichés” of “teen angst” and yet allow the students to write freely with as much “angst” as they want. After all, the last thing we wanted to do was tell the young writers what to say and/or how to say it.

_I:_ Isn’t the best part about “teen angst” that you can’t see it clearly until you emerge from the other side? I don’t remember thinking about my “teen angst” when I was a teenager…because at the time all the frustration, the confusion, the tears, were super real. Slamming the door on my mother or lying on my carpet listening to sad-lady folk would have been so much less satisfying if I packaged it as “angst”.

_Artist:_ It’s only after, when you look back, that you think “Oh my God. I was such a cliché.”

_I:_ “The angst” is such a delicious right of passage,

_Artist:_ And often an honest representation of where some of them are at.
I: And where I am at!

Artist: Exactly! Angst is not uniquely “teenaged”...

I: Then why are we so resistant to let the writing descend into angsty clichés? And why are we scared that this generalizes teenagers and shows them in a simplified, unfair light...I mean...if it is what they are actually writing and feeling...what are we afraid of?

Artist: I am afraid of a terrible play. A painful, unwatchable, first level play.

I: One that is written about clichés that are pre-constructed so teenagers think they have to write about them to be interesting?

Artist: I am afraid that all the real, different, and challenging voices will get drowned out.

I: But where is the line between “teen angst” and equally angst-y anti- “teen angst” angst?

Teenage-hood is a particularly strange (and modern, middle class) construct. After more than 50 years of pop-culture and advertising, teenagers (or young people) are very aware of their “teenage-ness”. They see it represented and packaged in so much repetition that they are at once hyper-aware of the clichés and yet (at least in part) programmed to try to live them out. When we are adolescents do we play the assigned role of “teenager”, as shaped and reinforced by social influences like family, peers, school, media and prevailing culture? Is it possible to write about the experience with an authenticity that is self-aware but not stuck in the distortions of the teenage mirror? And if so how? And how do we as facilitators, educators, and artists, encourage honesty, even when it fits the dreaded cliché?

The answer, at least for me, was: Don’t overthink it! Resist the urge to be lazy! Let them write! Listen to their voices!

30 The concept of “teenager” as role comes from an area of scholarship called Role Theory, popular in Drama Therapy, that assumes “human beings are role takers and role players” (Landy 2009, 67) and that those roles or “patterns of behaviour” are changeable based on circumstance (67). It is rooted in Jungian archetypes. For further reading on role theory see Landry (1993, 2009) and Jennings et al (1994)
As I have mentioned, there are pitfalls to researching the young person as “other” and many intelligent scholars, like Kushner (2006) have done a great job of trying to point out the flaws in such representations:

The world of research into the lives of young people is littered with lazy assumptions—generalisations which are based on observations of behaviour which subsequently are a) subject to interference rather than verification b) proliferated and unchallenged truth—*youth is problematic.* (15)

As a researcher, How can I avoid generalising and interfering? How can I challenge the truth that “youth is problematic”? As Gallagher (2000) reminds us:

I have generally found that adolescents are interested in making life significant, particularly because there is often pressure to behave as though it were tedious and uninteresting. Adolescents are supportive and honest when they believe that the adult world is taking them seriously. (9)

Eliminating the “difference” and “otherness” of adolescence, this statement could also say: *We are all interested in making life significant. We all have the capacity to be supportive and honest when we are believed to be taken seriously.* It follows then, that training, testing, and using one’s voice is a worthwhile pursuit. At any age.

In the end, when the conversation went quiet, the Creature, with his resistance, taught me to listen more closely and reminded me that I was, in fact, right all along: I am the one full of angst!

**Contributing Factors: Willingness to Act**

While one creature chose to remove his voice from the collective, another participant found value in contributing her voice to the final performance:

CREATURE: There isn’t anything specific I want to contribute to the Edge Project but I know I want to contribute something significant. I
want there to be a part of the show where I can point it out to my family and say “I wrote that.”

A wish to “contribute something significant” gives us an idea that in a collection of voices raised together, the individual still wishes to have agency, to be heard, to matter. Another participant and I had a conversation about what it is like, from her perspective, to add her voice to the crowd:

I: What is it like working with [The Artist] so far as you try to create a new play?

CREATURE: I really like the way he’s approaching the project. He’s getting student contributions without putting pressure on us, which I think is fantastic. His style is different than what we’re used to, and I’m really enjoying working with him.

I: Can you expand on what you like about his approach to project? And how it is different from what you are used to?

CREATURE: [The Artist] has drawn a lot on student contribution, be he doesn’t ask us to produce something that WILL go into the show, which is what I’ve been used to do doing. He uses what is actually good material; because he get’s so much of it he’s able to be selective. I think he’s been able to encourage students who haven’t been too eager to write in the past to produce some really good material. I think his visits give a feeling of professionalism in our classroom. I get the sense that we’re working with a person who knows about the theatre industry and wants to produce a production of higher quality than we’re used to putting on.
I: I know you can’t read minds or put your class into one group. But from what you have experienced, do you think that it is possible that everyone in your class feels like their voice is being heard?

CREATURE: Now, that I am not always sure about. I feel like [The Artist] is very open to the class and does welcome suggestions, but the students do often feel a bit wary about talking to him about concerns, probably because they don’t want to be a hassle. As with anything, there’s always dissatisfaction, and there are some people who want to be doing more who aren’t. For the most part, I think people are getting their suggestions in, and feedback from the actors has helped to improve the show.

In a creation process that is negotiating a multitude of experiences, realities, and individual voices, this Creature offers us her unique perspective. In places where I observed moments of resistance (the new-ness of the process, the ruptured familiarity of [The Artist] in the classroom), this Creature exhibited willingness to act.

The conversation about voice, agency, and action, asks us to circle back briefly to the concept of courage. According to Brene Brown (2010):

"The root of the word courage is cor- the Latin word for heart. [...] Courage originally meant “To speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart. (12)"

Even though the script will be a collection of diverse voices, the courage to contribute to the creation of the Edge Project play, despite the unknowns, in the face of risk and resistance, is the action that gives agency to the individual and definition to the collective voice.

The actor, in learning to be true and simple, in learning to speak to the point despite being frightened, and with no certainty of being understood, creates his own character; he forges character in himself. Onstage. And it is this
character which he brings to the audience, and by which the audience is truly moved. (Mamet, 1997, 22)

The Final Script

A “final script” is printed and collated for the director, the stage manager, the lighting designer and the stage crew. The word “final” is used loosely as changes are made up to the last minute however for our purposes here, the “creation phase” is officially over with this document (skeletal as it may be in places). The script circulates, and attention is turned to rehearsing and performing.

CREATURE: At first I was a little bit skeptical because it didn’t really seem like the writing and other things we were doing in class were doing much. But now it’s all starting to come together and it’s actually kind of interesting.

The Creature responds to witnessing visible progress as something that was important for her own level of interest and engagement in the process. When she was unable to imagine the outcome or the direct purpose of the writing, it was hard to stick with it or “buy-in”. Once she could see the writing activities and improvisations transformed into scenes, she is able to re-orient herself on the path and re-activate her enthusiasm. Her response illustrates that while the creation process benefits from the limitless possibilities of the empty page (or stage), it is also important to have markers along the way from which one can look back to see achievement and look forward to see what still needs to be done.

CREATURE: I definitely think that we have done a lot and I feel more at ease now that we actually have the first draft of a script. There are a lot of things that we still need to work on, and I’ll feel much better once all the kinks are worked out.
Little shifts between anxiety and ease, risk and reward are valuable moments in the creative process for the individual. As educators, facilitators, and artists, it is hard to watch our co-collaborators suffer or withdraw/disengage. But to structure the Edge Project in a more familiar or “safe” way would remove some of the fertile ground of resistance. It would be easier for us if we had “buy-in” from the beginning but the small shifts and transformations witnessed in these moments of discomfort may better serve the individual and the community we are trying to create. Avoiding the temptation to mitigate risk at earlier stages (by providing familiarity, comfort or more structure) makes the arrival at the “final script” impactful. Marking the spot with a flag, the Creature can use it as orientation in other moments of doubt or resistance.

I: What have you learned so far?

CREATURE: I think I’ve learned that not everything looks like it’s going to work right away, and that it takes time before you can see the finished product. It’s a little discouraging sometimes because we are working with a lot of teenagers, and we tend to get impatient.

The path to the final script was long, slow, and fraught with resistance:

Part of the strength of this kind of collective process is its inclusion of voices and its overt position that there is not just one way to experience a story. It is not a clean, fast, or direct movement to a conclusion. It is slow and meandering in its progress. (Gallagher, 2000, 69)

In the next chapter, I will look at how the seeds of collaboration planted in the creation phase extend beyond the classroom sphere into the larger community the Edge Project was designed to build. I will carry with me themes like risk, trust, contribution, agency, and voice, and welcome new topics and themes as they emerge from the chaos. I will seek new moments of resistance and look closely at the spaces
between, in the hopes to discover new building materials and tools at each active construction site.
CHAPTER THREE: Rehearsal

The rehearsal process is on-going and inter-woven with the creation process. Rehearsal happens in the classroom as well as in outside rehearsal halls. The four main types of rehearsal that take place as part of this project are:

1. Classroom rehearsals with The Artist as the material is being developed and in order to prepare for final staging.
2. Classroom rehearsals without The Artist, when the Teachers help their students to feel prepared for the next visit.
3. All-schools jams, when all four schools meet at an external rehearsal hall and the large group numbers are staged.
4. “Tech Week” rehearsals when the students rehearse the final version of the show in the performance venue with all the technical elements in place.

In this particular re-telling of the Edge Project story, I will draw the most attention to the All-Schools Jams and the Tech Week rehearsals as they are suitable container events and can be distinguished from the in-class creation stories.

All Schools Jams

The All-Schools Jams took place every three weeks leading up to the final performance. The Jams are the only opportunity for the four schools to come together, outside school hours, in a central location, prior to moving the show into the final venue. One of the hurdles of working with difference schools across different districts is that it is difficult to coordinate meetings of the whole ensemble. The All Schools Jams represent a small extra-curricular commitment from the students and the teachers. While the out of class time proves to be problematic for some and possibly limits access, bussing between districts would cause classroom interruption and would make it vastly more difficult to offer the program free of charge. The atmosphere in the Jams is automatically different from the classroom
creation/rehearsal process because the collaboration suddenly extends beyond the classroom unit and the classroom walls. This is the first time that we witness how a change in space impacts the process. The students find themselves in a large, downtown studio with 100 other young people, the majority of whom are strangers – a vastly different setup from being contained within the walls of their classroom with 20-30 students whom they have been working with on a daily basis.

The first All-Schools Jam began with The Artist explaining the format of the afternoon, as well as the goals and expectations of the project. As I sat at the front of the room with the Artist, there was a palpable nervous energy circulating. The students were seated on the floor, in groups with classmates, their attention turned to the front of the room where the Artist stood. At least most of their attention was on the Artist: Whispering, giggling, and lots of searching the faces in the crowd, appeared to keep a small portion of each student’s attention occupied.

Observing from my position opposite the massive, I could sense that I was sharing a small part of the apprehension, excitement, and nerves that I was witnessing.

What kinds of feelings does this conjure up?
If I were facing the other direction would I be whispering and giggling too?
What separates us?
I am excited and unsure.
I am scanning the crowd, hoping maybe to see signs of what is to come.

My role (researcher) is, to a certain extent, self-created and self-defined so I am not entirely on equal footing with the students who are being presented with a framework (however loose) and set of roles by which to define themselves (student, actor, musician, dancer, filmmaker, etc). I am still, at these early stages, curious about how my role will play out in practice. What will it mean to be a researcher? How will I find my place in the project while keeping enough distance to look critically at its unfurling? This curiosity makes room for doubts and fears that seems to close the gap between my experience and that of the students. And, as we will observe
more closely later in this chapter, all of our roles turn out to have, not entirely unexpected, moments of fluidity and rigidity

The activities at the first All-Schools Jams are designed to get the creation of the larger group sections underway but also to help the students get to know each other and become familiar with the format of working in such a large cast. One of the first warm-up exercises was an “Ice-Breaker” game, that the artist hoped would get the students up and moving and also ask them to interact with people from other schools. The students were asked to move around the room and then form groups of varying sizes to create tableau scenes. Despite The Artist’s constant request for the students to “break apart” and “work with someone new”, I observed that many students gravitated back to groups with their classmates at every possible chance.

**Belonging**

One group of students reacted to the new space/format by a loud display of school spirit, which may have acted as a bond between their immediate group, but alienated some of the students from other schools. This overt exuberance was met with indifference from some students, but a clear (while mostly quiet) resentment from one class in particular. It seemed, from my perspective, that this group immediately distanced themselves from the other students, and the project, as a result:

CREATURE: When 3/4 of the people there act very young and immature the activities become that. This will make it hard to become something I can enjoy, but I plan to have the best attitude I can and try my best to get to know these people and maybe get past their fronts and really get to know who they are, rather than the shows they put on.

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31 I group their reaction “as a class” because it was not the individual reaction of one student and there was a generally shared attitude that prevailed—based on interviews and observations. There were, of course, outliers and exceptions but I am, for the moment, interested in a that which was “shared” or “common”.

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The divide that was created fed attitudes of “difference”, particularly in judging the “maturity” of the other students. Immediately, some students exhibited a loss of interest in connecting to students from other schools because they were unable to see commonalities across the gap in behaviour in this new setting. While there were, in fact, differences in age between the participants, this initial perceived divide was a reaction to the loud and raucous behaviour of one small group, who, in fact were the same age and grade level as the Creature who identifies them as “young and immature”. The dynamic that emerged from the first All-Schools Jam and the perspectives I received from various students helped me to see how the individual students, in their search for place in the large and mostly unknown group setting, were observing and judging one another, forming opinions and trying to define the “space between” themselves and “the other”.

CREATURE: So when I met these kids from other schools I watched the way they acted and found that they were really conceited. I don't wish to say I hated them or disliked them, in fact some of them (after they grow up a little) I could very well get along with. And of course I would never act against them in any way, I will always be kind to these people and try to befriend them because that is how I am, but I cannot stop myself from seeing the way they are acting. [...] They are cocky and arrogant toward the world, they are very self absorbed, and this is because they have been raised that way and around those kind of people and the media has told taught them to act this way and I admit there have been times in the past I have been subjected to such behaviour, but it’s about growing up and getting past this behaviour and selfishness.

In his observations, The Creature creates a clear separation between himself and the other students. He groups 'these kids from other schools' into a clean package that he can identify, analyse, and draw conclusions about. There are more than 80
students from other schools, and yet, this Creature’s first impression is that they have a set of qualities that makes them different from him. He doesn’t “blame” the students for their behaviour but he indicates that they need to “grow-up” in order for him to be able to relate to them in a significant way. He can be “kind” to them and “try to befriend them” but he has already judged the way that they interact with the world and he does not see what they have in common. He seems pretty certain that the gap between cannot be closed and so sets up separate planes for “us” and “them” to exist on.

The resistance to standing on the same plane with the “others” was particularly evident in one school-group who, from this point forward, showed signs of turning more inward rather than outward in the large group situations. This particular school also had the lowest attendance rate at the first All-Schools Jam and struggled with attendance and participation throughout the process. Although the students all signed contracts at the beginning of the Edge Project, which indicated that the All-Schools Jams were mandatory meetings, many students from this school were absent. The Artist was particularly frustrated because the students had not contacted him or The Teacher to excuse their absences. The Artist brought his frustration with him when he visited the classroom the following week. The Teacher expressed that he was embarrassed that his school had failed to turn up in numbers comparable to the other schools and wanted to re-clarify the commitment with his students. Suddenly, instead of moving forward in the creation process, the first half of the next class visit was dedicated to one of many ‘discussions’ about commitment and priorities.

On one occasion, as the Artist and I drove to the school, we tried to figure out how to best approach the subject of commitment. We found ourselves frustrated that the students were unable to “see the value of the opportunity” being provided to them.
I: What are you going to say when you get there?

Artist: I don’t know...it is so frustrating that we keep having to have this conversation.

I: I think the first step is to remind yourself that it’s not personal: A rejection of the project is not a rejection of you...

Artist: I know that it’s not personal, but I can’t help but feel defeated when I get the sense I am not being heard or, you know, that I have to fight to even get them to show up.

I: It triggers me too because I know how much work goes into even offering this project to them, and how much of your time is dedicated to creating a positive experience for them, and it makes me crazy when they don’t seem to appreciate it.

Artist: This situation wouldn’t exist if we were working with professional actors.

I: Of course...they would want so badly to be there because it is better than their waitressing job...collaborating, creating, and rehearsing is exactly what they want to be doing. When you go into the classroom you are competing with a list of “things we would rather be doing”...

Artist: I am committed to treating this as a “professional theatre experience” and yet, I can’t really fire them for missing rehearsal so...

I: Somehow the balance is thrown off? You have to find your feet on new terrain...

Artist: And that terrain is rocky and includes a huge canyon that sometimes I am not sure we can cross.

I: Between the ‘theatre’ parts and the ‘education’ parts?

Artist: Yeah. Although I’m not sure the two or so separate. But sure...for the sake of the image I am trying to create...I think it is important that we have both a canyon AND rocky ground making up the terrain.

I: So on one side of the canyon the kids are treated like professional theatre makers...
Artist: And on the other side is all the other....the constant nagging and lectures.

I: Right. And you have to find your feet without the regular comfort of a group of willing and committed actors. Thus, the rocks.

Artist: Well, just without access to the whole toolkit and protocols of professional theatre.


Artist: How can I stay on the side of the canyon where I am a director in a professional theatre experience if they keep forcing me to jump to the other side and lecture them about attendance? They won’t get the ‘professional experience’ if they don’t show up but I don’t know how to convince them to show up because, well, it’s not really a professional experience.

I: So basically all you need to do is find a way to have one foot on each side of a canyon that is rocky and unpredictable?

Artist: And unfortunately I am not a mountain goat. Or a gymnast.

I: But you can manage to sometimes be sure-footed and sometimes be flexible. Figure out the terrain as you go? Maybe inside you there is a gymnast goat.

Artist: One can only hope.

I: So...what are you going to say once you get there?

Artist: Do you think a loose metaphor about a goat who does gymnastics will help?

I: Probably not.

Artist: Then a song and dance about commitment and priorities to the same old tune.

I: Try to remember that they are on new terrain too.

Artist: And that the rocky surfaces are exactly where this “value” we keep hoping they will see is hiding.
I: Maybe if we keep inviting them onto the rocks and stretching across the canyon...

Artist: We will all gain a little surefootedness and flexibility?

I: Maybe.

While the Artist and I lament about the students missing the value of the opportunity that we are so generously offering them, we find ourselves questioning the whole fabric of the Edge Project (and, indeed, this thesis).

_How can we create a “Professional Theatre Experience” in an “Educational Setting”?_ 

_What is the point of the encounter between the Professional Artist and Education? Are we missing it?_

_What are we hoping the students will “learn” and “gain” from this experience? Are those goals clear and shared?_

_How does the Artist change his approach when dealing with students rather than other artists? Should he? Why or Why not?_

_What if the project wants too much? Can it really be a “professional theatre experience” if the students aren’t choosing to be there?_

In focusing on our generosity in offering the students this program, and, in turn, their assumed failure to realize or appreciate its (potentially invisible) positive effects, we create an imbalance in power, voice, and agency. In projecting what we have decided is valuable rather than letting the participants (including us) discover as we go through, we fall into a trap of “knowing” “better” than “them”. We, like the Creature trying to create space between himself and “the other”, are building barriers to connection and resisting standing on the same plane as our co-creators.

In the theoretical realm, I see a shift in attitude from “knowing better” to “not knowing yet” as essential to understanding how we, as artists, educators, and adults,
can effectively connect with each other and our young co-creators, in practice, however, I wonder how it might be achieved? Is it possible to fully eliminate the roles and assumptions that move us onto separate planes? And if so, what does that look like? Furthermore, if/when we get there, does attendance and commitment magically stop being a problem?

**Roles at Play**

While we try to imagine ways that we could act as co-creators in the fragile space occupied by the Edge Project, between professional and educational theatre contexts, it is helpful to consider some of the conflicting and competing roles already at play. As Neelands reminds us, roles are often best understood relative to their context:

The agreement required by theatre convention is more easily secured if those taking on the roles of spectators and actors have elected to be present through choice and have an inquisitive interest both in the content and the form of the performance or dramatic experience. In educational contexts, however, this is often not the case. Within any group there may be a range – from those committed to the drama, through those who are uncomfortable with the idea, to those who are only there because they are forced to be so. (as quoted in O'Connor, 2010, 27).

While the Artist may wish to approach The Edge Project from the relative ease of the professional theatre convention, the fact is that the participants are coming directly from their roles as “students” (with all the “range” and varied experiences that accompany their educational context). Adapting to a new role will require adapting to a new context and, as a context, the Edge Project offers constantly changing parameters. The roles played will emerge and develop relative to their environment and in relation to the other roles being played.
As the Artist negotiates his role somewhere between facilitator, director, and educator, he needs to be sensitive to the negotiation and re-negotiation of roles around him. For example, the “student” may move fluidly between “co-creator”, “collaborator”, “actor”, “artist” and “teacher” (and a variety of other roles) at any given moment. Just as each student comes to the educational context of drama from a range of places, each student may enact multiple roles and inform a range of experiences within the context they have been asked to occupy.

In part, the Artist’s frustration may have been rooted in the theoretical roles of Artist and Teacher overlapping and conflicting in practice. The Teacher’s role is clearly delineated to include matters of discipline, grades and attendance so that the Artist can focus on the artistic aims of the project. This is where we run into a problem of control: The Artist’s creative work requires the participation and attendance of the students and this control has been delegated to the hands of the Teacher. The Artist has no interest in taking on the role of the Teacher, and yet he appears to struggle with the “letting go” of control that is necessary for a functioning model of decentralization. Each of the four teachers can motivate and discipline their students in whatever ways they choose, which adds an extra layer of complexity for the Artist who is attempting to manage and move smoothly between a dynamic network of realities. The roles we play are partly self-imagined but also shaped and reinforced by external social influences. In this case, the Artist seems to need to move fluidly between the roles of Director/Facilitator/Co-collaborator/Authority Figure and simultaneously reinforce and respond to rigid boundaries between these active roles.

In the above conversation, the Artist and I are concerned with protecting the integrity of the professional experience, which adds some rigidity to his internal role-play, ignoring the reality of a project that is equally interested in educational outcomes. Internally, the Artist is interested in playing the role of a professional director but the external factors that exist in the educational setting require him to adjust his positioning. Unfortunately, while some outside forces seem to push the
Artist to overlap with the Teacher’s theoretical role of discipline and authority, there are institutional constructs that disempower the Artist, as an outsider, from fulfilling this role. The Artist therefore finds himself trapped somewhere between the roles which is a possible source of his frustration. The in-between position limits the Artist’s options when it comes to strategies to encourage a shift from resistance to willingness.

The Teacher, in his pre-defined and accepted role, is empowered with more internal and externally supported authority. In the case of absenteeism, the Artist, therefore can make a speech about the importance of attending the All School’s Jams but it is the Teacher who is in the position of enforcing the negative consequences.

The Teacher’s role and available strategies, however, are limited by other external influences related to the school culture in which he or she and the students are also playing roles:

TEACHER:  
[The Artist]’s address was needed and completely appropriate, I am in full support of what [The Artist] said to the students and I agree with him completely. To be blunt, [this school] is a school where the vast majority of students have not been held accountable for their choices, they have a difficult time prioritizing and believe that they can do everything without sacrificing anything. They are gifted and very talented students but have endured no real consequences for blowing things off.

The Teacher’s words indicate a frustration, or a helplessness, on his part, in terms of encouraging commitment from his students. While he is empowered to set and enforce consequences, his role is limited by a prevailing culture at the school that, in his opinion, doesn’t favour accountability and commitment. The teacher is a player in school culture but distances himself from the role because the culture limits his ability to make the impact he envisions in his self-imagined role.
TEACHER:  I believe the Edge Project is something extremely new to [this school] and has a great deal of value. I hope the students don't realize the project's benefits too late. [This school] is a very grade driven school, unfortunately, so as far as consequences go, there is not much I can actually do. This year's teacher job action will not allow me to print report cards or progress reports and unless some students have something tangible that they can see and look at, they have difficulty understanding where they stand in class, even when they have been told numerous times.

The Teacher reiterates the challenges discussed in Chapter Two: Just as the lack of visible structure made it hard for some students to “Buy-in” during the creation process, this teacher identifies the lack of “tangible” progress reports as a hurdle for his students in understanding their place in the class. He identifies the job action as external factor that makes it difficult for him to fulfill his role and that impacts the way the students envision their role in the class. The Teacher recognizes grades as a driver embedded in the school culture and a possible strategy of motivation, but without the vehicle of progress reports the driver loses some of its impact.

TEACHER:  Having students commit to something is difficult enough [...] but without the prospect of being fired or losing pay, it's very difficult to have students think of the whole picture and the others involved in such a large project and not simply of themselves.

Is the Teacher herein suggesting that participating in a project like the Edge Project requires a different mindset than other school assignments and if so: what might this mindset be? And how would we better develop/nurture such a mindset?

When he explains to his class the consequences of not participating in the project and being absent from All-Schools Jams (losing marks) he is met with a resounding:
“That’s not fair!”

And so we come back to the paradox of democracy in the classroom: The students express a need and desire for structure and boundaries, but are quick to respond when there is an apparent threat to “choice” or “freedom.” From his point of view, the teacher is making a reasonable request and following through on the commitment he made, on behalf of his students, to the Artist and Green Thumb Theatre. He applies his experience and value-system, with the assumption that the benefits of the project will outweigh the temporary discomfort or inconvenience.

As I sat and listened to the Artist request more dedication from the students, the Teacher impose consequences in support of the Artist, and the students protest the whole operation I started to wonder:

If it is indeed an invitation to engage, are we making room for the students to RSVP “no”?

It is interesting to think about this situation in the context of the four different student groups participating in the project. What are the drivers, invisible and visible, that motivate the students to participate and encourage them to commit? What are the unique conditions of this particular school culture that seemingly made it difficult for these students to attend the All Schools Jams? How does this compare to the challenges faced at other schools? Was the students’ reaction to firm conditions of engagement or boundaries particular to this school because these students are accustomed to more choice in the projects that they complete?

From the perspective of the students, they are being “forced” to participate and they “can’t help it” if they have other commitments that conflict with the Edge Project and “shouldn’t be penalized.”
When the Artist and the Teacher act out specific roles with rigidity, the participants will play relative parts in the leftover space. The imposition of penalties made a slight shift in the roles and power dynamics in this particular school group. The participants were pushed ever so slightly towards the “student” end of the spectrum and away from the role of “co-collaborator.” How does such a shift, in turn, impact the environment/context of The Edge Project? If the Edge Project lives in between Professional Theatre and Education, pulling context and roles from both sides, how will that space be defined by the negotiated and re-negotiated terms?

Between the divide (whether real or imagined) created at the first All-Schools jam, the initial reluctance to “buy-in”, and the lectures about “priorities”, threats of lost marks, this group of students had the material and the motivation to build walls in the “spaces between”.

**Within the Walls**

As we saw in the last chapter, sometimes imposed constraints, aimed to “enable”, can actually be limiting to some participants. But what happens when the participants themselves start to construct constraints of their own? A practice that favours decentralized control (Fels & Belliveau, 2008) should encourage a complex system wherein the edges are flexible and defined by the changing needs of the participants. The structures that are hastily built in the spaces between could be metaphorical bridges to “connect” or scaffolding to “hold up” the system but at the given moment in this project, the class in question appeared to be building walls: barriers in the way of connection.

*Why do the students need “walls”!*  
*Do they meet a need for control? “Safety”!*  
*What “walls” are we providing?*  
*What “walls” are the students creating? What purposes do they serve?*  
*Who do they protect?*  
*Who do they let in?*

---
Who do they keep out?

As we have already established, boundaries are a valuable source of structure and site-definition for creative work. A class that builds walls around themselves may create barriers to new connections, but could also strengthen bonds within the existing classroom unit (those inside the wall) and foster a level of focus that serves the project in a different (and equally positive) way. While a metaphorical wall can be rigid and unforgiving, it is also imaginary which creates space for change should the wall no longer be needed or wanted. At first I was concerned that erecting a wall, even an imaginary one, would threaten the ability of the group to find points of connection with the Artist and the other participants, thereby limiting the value of the experience for them. Then, in a radical act of acceptance I let go, knowing that all of our boundaries (at least the imagined ones) are in a constant state of renegotiation.

Thinking about and accepting the imaginary walls or barriers being constructed, and the prospect of them being torn down (and reconstructed), led me to consider the less temporary walls that surround the project: The physical spaces the Edge Project occupies. In the last chapter we saw that familiarity may act as a proxy for trust and that seeking the unfamiliar becomes an exercise in exploring boundaries, comfort zones, and creative risk. With this in mind I venture to ask what role the physical space plays in organizing the chaos?

The Edge Project, as it moves through creation, rehearsal and performance, also moves through different physical rooms. The creation process largely takes place in the classroom, All Schools Jams are held in a large hall, and the final rehearsals and performances occur in a professional theatre space. How do the participants interact with each of these different spaces? And what can we learn about familiarity, risk, and performance in considering the physical foundations and walls that surround the play-makers?
At the outset of the project, The Artist, who makes his work in the professional theatre, is moving into the classroom space which, for him, is unfamiliar. On the other hand, the student participants, the classroom space may be a source of comfort, security, or at least familiarity. As we have seen, familiarity can act to both limit and foster risk-taking, depending on the balance of other elements at work in the given system. How does the classroom space impact the work created in the Edge Project?

I: Does it change your artistic process to be in a classroom space?

ARTIST: A lot of the times, depending on the classroom, it feels really limiting. And also, because it’s their comfort zone, I’m going into their home, I really kind of have to go there…it’s on their terms in a way.

I: Can you imagine what would be different if the project started in “your” space?

ARTIST: I feel like if we were importing them into a theatre space that was new to them, they would behave in a completely different way. So I think that’s one thing that definitely influences the way that things go, is working in their drama class, they’re there all the time so they have a real sense of ownership of the space that I don’t have, at the beginning anyway. So that influences the creation dynamic for sure.

How much is the project shaped by the fact that the first physical space is the classroom? Does it situate the project in a realm that is too familiar? Does the view of the Artist as guest help or hinder him? In the previous chapter we encountered some moments of resistance that centered on these tensions between familiarity
and the unknown. Would the “buy-in” change with a different set of walls? What new problems would arise?

ARTIST: And then there are space limitations...some spaces are just not good they’re just not conducive to creativity. They’re really awful, claustrophobic, tiny, gross, rooms.

I: How does the space impact the creation of material and scenes?

ARTIST: Staging stuff in that room is really challenging. There’s a very faint kind of indication of what it’s going to actually look like on stage. So that’s really challenging as a director to sort of know what it’s going to look like in a room where you have crappy fluorescent lights, and a low ceiling, and like a tiny little carpeted area to work on. Doesn’t really lend itself to creativity necessarily.

As the Artist describes, the limitations of space aren’t only about relationship dynamics. While we are wrestling with creating an emotional space fit for creative exploration, we also need to take notice that the physical space can have a positive or negative impact on productivity.

Space can also transmit our values. Does it make a difference that one drama class has a new, state-of-the-art theatre space as their work environment and another class has a small, low-ceilinged basement room? Do these spaces impact how the participants relate to themselves? To their education? To the Edge Project?

The physical walls of the classroom, in contrast with the boundaries constructed and deconstructed in playmaking, are relatively immovable. What we choose to do
with those walls and the spaces between is, however, in our control. As Peter Brook, (1968) famously wrote:

I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across that space whilst someone else is watching him and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged (7)

The first significant shift in space happens when each group leaves the walls of their classroom to meet at the large, rented rehearsal room. The room will be the setting for the assembly of the complex group numbers and of the imagined collective. The space is neutral in the sense that no one is in the comfort of a familiar environment, and big enough to stage scenes that were cramped in the classroom, but can it, in its neutrality and physical size, contain and nourish the objective of community building?

The Chorus

The chaos we first encountered during the creation phase is amplified as we begin to assemble as a full group. New challenges to collaboration emerge and conflict becomes a site for learning. With such a large group of students performing on stage at once, chorus work is an important skill to bring into the process as early as possible.

A chorus of this size can create an incredible impact when it stands together on the stage, but only if it knows how to work together. From the very first All Schools Jam, the Artist is tasked with creating an ensemble out of the 100 young people sitting on the floor of the giant black box studio. The ensemble needs to learn to talk and move in unison. To hear each other, see each other, to give each other cues. It is in the creation of a living, breathing, unit of collaborators that the project hopes to foster a sense of community.
One of the challenges of the All Schools Jam format is that there is a lot of work that needs to be done in a short amount of time so there is not a lot of room to purposefully create and nurture new relationships. Instead these relationships are expected to develop as a bi-product of the work itself. The work can also be a bit tedious at times because the students are asked to be quiet and cooperative while the Artist arranges them in order for large group numbers. There is also a lot of repetition. To get 100 collaborators listening to instructions, listening to each other, and remembering order, spacing, and lines is a large, and sometimes seemingly insurmountable task. As the students stand on attention in their “grid” (the starting position of the play) are they making the connections that we hope?

One participant, before the first All Schools Jam identified his reasons for being averse to meeting his co-collaborators:

CREATURE: I’m nervous to meet new people because I hate it when people make assumptions on me. They try and predict how talented I am just on my appearance without even talking to me. I’m nervous because in a big group of people, I feel as if people are just going to ignore me, and I’m going to go unnoticed.

Another participant, after two All Schools Jams still hasn’t connected with “many” students:

CREATURE: While I’m not the shyest person, I do need to have a bit of a facilitator before I talk to new people. I’m not always comfortable with striking up conversations myself. I think for the most part people from their own schools have stuck to each other. I can’t really say I know too many of the other students, which is really too bad.
“Meeting new people” is the first step to connecting with the wider community of the Edge Project but both the comfort zone of the Creatures, and the format of the rehearsals (not enough facilitated communication) limit the opportunities for connection.

The other challenge with the All Schools Jam is that they are scheduled infrequently at first so there is a lot of information to retain between meetings; there is a lack of continuity when it comes to opportunities for connection. To try to address the gap in communication continuity, the participants are invited to join an Edge Project group on Facebook™, in the hopes that they will stay in touch, share their views, and start to develop social bonds.

The majority of students have active online lives and this mode of connection may actually offer an easier or more familiar format for social interaction. Online community can not act in place of the kind of connections that we are hoping to create (and may in fact be the enemy of some of our goals) but it provides a tool or a “way-in” to belonging at the earliest stages of the ensemble.

The Facebook™ group was created to bring everyone together but it was the site of the first major challenge in community cohesiveness. After the first All Schools Jam there was a lively online discussion that in some way related to the exuberant demonstration of school spirit, mentioned earlier in this chapter. A student reported to her teacher that she had been bullied online by a student from one of the other schools. Her complaint was taken seriously by us as administrators of the project and by the teacher of the bullied student. All of a sudden, at the second All Schools Jam, the Artist was faced with mending a growing divide in group cohesion, just as the project was meant to be lifting off.

When we looked more closely at the incident all that could be determined was that some of the competitive banter may have been taken personally, in what, by most accounts was a playful exchange between several students from different schools.
Unfortunately, the damage was already done. The conflict hung heavy over the Edge Project: The Artist was demoralized by the lack of connection between the members of his cast, and the students from the two schools directly involved in the incident were frustrated and hurt. A student from one of the other schools also expressed disappointment:

**CREATURE:** I had [heard] about the bullying situation only through my teacher. I had no idea anything was going on until she mentioned it. I think its [sic.] really outrageous that people would be that mean to people that you are supposed to be working with. Drama students generally are a little bit more unique than others and I always thought because of that we had some kind of connection but I guess not.

The Artist’s strategy was to address the problem as a group. He prepared a speech about professionalism and respect in advance of the next meeting, so that he would be able to express himself clearly and choose his words carefully in the hopes of defusing the situation and ultimately moving forward. At the beginning of the second All Schools Jam, The Artist gathered the cast and used the first twenty minutes for conflict resolution before proceeding with the task of play-making.

Here are some excerpts from the speech:

*I have learned of some negativity between schools. We’re having a hard time determining exactly what happened but any kind of aggression or bullying is very serious. It can’t happen for many reasons, one of which is that all the schools have strict policies about it. But, more importantly for our purposes here: IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO WORK THAT WAY AND MAKE ART.*

*I know how much is being asked of you. I know that you are being pulled out of your comfort zone. This is challenging for anyone. The bar is high. This is an experiment in growth and community. And it is scary to put yourself out there.*
In writing, in creating, in performing, but also in showing up to an All-Schools Jam, thrown into a room with people you don’t know.

We can start by practicing instant forgiveness.  
Of ourselves when we are having a hard time.  
Of ourselves when we make a mistake.  
Of each other when one of us is struggling.  
Of each other when one of us makes a mistake.

It’s easy to focus on our differences. Our world is all about that. It’s easy to default to that and stay protected. But remember that everyone is here for a reason and has something of great value to bring to this experience.

We need to shift our thinking out of our individual schools and into being artists engaged by Green Thumb Theatre. As artists we are all bound to the same code of conduct. You and me, we are all operating by the same rules of working together. We are, from this moment forward a new ensemble.

In Chapter 2, I started to consider the implications of “trust” and “safety” in the building of relationships. The Artist’s speech emphasized the importance of acting as one ensemble and highlighted mutual respect as fundamental to a successful working relationship. Between the disconnection experienced with the Artist and the absent class discussed earlier in this chapter, and the visible cracks in the ensemble after the online bullying incident, the rehearsal phase opens up new questions about how to effectively facilitate and negotiate the network of relationships to fulfill the “community building” aspect of the project.

Initially, I was demoralized by the false start in building a cohesive ensemble but just as resistance proved to be valuable in the creation process, the conflict, in the
very least, offered an action site for learning. From the perspective of one of the teachers a lot was gained from the conflict and its resolution:

TEACHER: [...] I was thrilled with the way [The Artist] addressed the group last Sunday. Although, I think that chat should have happened at the first all schools jam. When you bring four schools together, and you don't have the time to build up trust, it's important to make it clear that they are one ensemble. I am all about preemptive strikes. Knowing teenagers as I do, I know that every time they are in a new environment, among new people, they struggle to find their place. It's our job to establish their place. As in, we are not 4 schools...we are one ensemble. Our number one job is to take care of each other, etc....

This business about the conflict caused me a lot of unnecessary worry and stress. My students created 2 anti-cyber bullying plays last year that we toured around the district. I could not imagine them bullying someone on the Internet. It just didn't make sense and it shook me up. I discussed it with them and at the end of the discussion, I was even more sure that they had nothing to do with it. But I did struggle because I didn't want to be "parent with blinders on." It truly is a credit to my students that they suggested that perhaps the person assumed it was [their school] (how astute is that observation?). We did debrief after the [Artist] talk and they were great, really classy, did not judge or harbour resentment towards anyone. And to boot, [The Artist] followed up in my class by saying that he was sorry if we felt like we were being blamed for something we didn't do.
The lesson: Don’t jump to conclusions! Before addressing any type of conflict, I always investigate all angles before speaking to the people involved. Often times, you can avoid a hot mess just by understanding the root of the problem. I teach lessons on conflict resolution with my students and the number rule is to CHECK YOURSELF before you address the situation. Make sure that you know why you’re upset and what you hope to accomplish. There’s no point in allowing your lizard brain to take over and make things even worse or potentially to create a problem where there was none.

How I would have handled it? The way [The Artist] did. The only difference, as I stated above, is that I would have had the chat at the first all schools jam. Always set expectations and acknowledge potential difficulties at the beginning. The students then know what they are supposed to do, and there is a reference point. That way, if things come up you can refer back to that initial chat!!

The Teacher, like Neelands (1998, 55-56) and Hornbrook (1998, 123-125), advocates for relationships of trust that are facilitated by a contract that binds them to certain codes of conduct or rules developed with communally agreed upon understandings. Perhaps the Teacher would have approached the “contract” with a casual conversation but she outlines the value in outlining the pre-conditions for demonstrating reciprocal respect.

One participant responded vividly to the importance of respect in theatre relationships:

CREATURE: The speech [The Artist] gave was definitely needed, honestly had no clue about the cyber stuff until our drama teacher
brought it up. The group really does need to start acting like one, no putting down other schools because they're not yours. It'd be nice as well to be able to bond with them, but personally I'm bad with new people, so I can't find the opportunities. The speech triggered some basic actor rules that I realized so many people don't consider. For one thing, working together and respecting each other. It's such a common thing, but when it comes down to it so many people don't. To respect someone is to let them have their time and not just talk and be in your own world. I thought this was really obvious in the last all schools jam, trying to work through that huge scene. People need to learn when to be quiet and let people have their time. It's frustrating not doing anything, I know that, but everyone's time comes. I can be guilty of diverting my attention too, everyone can, so we need to work on this.

Moving past the conflict, with lessons from the Teacher, the Artist and the Creature about the value of mutual respect to their visions of a positive and fruitful working environment, what other elements will prove to be essential to community building in the Edge?

**Shared Purpose**

As the rehearsal process progressed, the All-Schools Jams offered opportunities for the participants to witness the pieces of the show coming together:

**CREATURE:** The [All Schools Jam] was tiring, but I definitely had better time than the last one. I liked putting the scenes together and rehearsing, the whole thing went surprisingly fast. I think the show is starting to come together, we started this whole project off with absolutely nothing. I think it's really
great how we are putting this whole show together from scratch.

For this Creature, the value of the play creation starts to emerge in sync with the formation of scenes that can be “put together” and rehearsed. She recognizes the shift from “absolutely nothing” to the “something” that will be the play. Her words “it’s really great how we...” mark one of the first times I, as observer, felt like I was listening to someone who was connected to a community of creation: one of which she was proud to be part.

While a sense of accomplishment starts to find its place in the rehearsal rooms, the performance dates are approaching and the excitement and nerves are building:

CREATURE: I think the final all schools jam was probably our most productive, I think people are finally starting to realize that the show is coming up fast. I didn’t mind performing in front of the schools in our group sections but I was sort of nervous when it came to the scene where I had to run some lines with a partner, most of the time all of the focus is on you and every mistake you make is seen. Even though we were just rehearsing it I was still a bit scared.

The All Schools Jams offer the students the chance to test out their material in front of each other, giving the scenes their first “audience.” The Creature describes the feeling of having the “focus” on her and her “every mistake” as a different experience when compared to rehearsing the group sections. Is a scene practiced in the classroom further away from the reality of “performance” than one rehearsed in front of the larger group of co-collaborators? What will happen to nerves that appear in the All Schools Jams setting when the audience of peers turns into an audience of public on performance day? For this Creature, the All Schools Jams offer less comfort than the classroom work and can be interpreted as a rehearsal with
higher stakes. In contrast, another participant is nervous because the rehearsal stakes aren’t yet high enough:

CREATURE: I’m really excited about the Edge Project going up. I’m a little nervous, since we haven’t really started formal rehearsal yet, but we’ve got some really cool looking stuff going into the production. I think this is going to be a really awesome show, and I hope we don’t hit any snags before we do open the show.

There are still signs of anxiety, uneasiness, and even disconnect deep into the rehearsal stage, but at least the All Schools Jams provide a setting where the common purpose of the project starts to become self-evident and this potentially provides stronger roots for the community building pursuit at play.

**INTERMISSION: Imagining and re-imagining community**

Of course, a shared purpose alone doesn’t create community. To paraphrase Maxine Greene (1995): Community needs the active process of recognizing together and appreciating in common that shared purpose.

In thinking of community, we need to emphasize the process words: making, creating, weaving, saying, and the like. Community cannot be produced simply through rational formulation nor through edict. Like freedom, it has to be achieved by persons offered the space in which to discover what they recognize together and appreciate in common; they have to find ways to make inter-subjective sense. (39)

In order for the Artist, the students, the teachers, and myself, to make “inter-subjective sense” (Greene 1995, 39), and create community, we need to find ways and spaces to connect. Each individual experience of the Edge Project is valuable and important, but it is when those experiences are shared and linked to each other that a collective begins to take shape.
**Why should we care?**

“Community Building” is one of the main goals of the Edge Project, but why do we care about the “collective” taking shape in the creation, rehearsal, and performance of this play?

So far, Boleslavsky and Mamet have both offered insight into developing the individual as an actor and illustrated ways in which acting forges the character of the individual as a person. From Clurman’s (1983) perspective, development of the actor, artist, or human for that matter, cannot be best achieved in isolation:

> When the American individual had built his house, made his machines, enriched himself with every comfort and finery that he could bear, he found himself more nervous than proud, more lonely than certain, more wistful than mature. He did not wholly understand the things that he had wrought, which saddened and frightened him somewhat, even as he boasted of them. He did not know himself, he did not know his fellow man. He reached out with some suspicion and fear (reaching out may not pay), but reach out he must and will even if his first reaching are tentative, shaky and spasmodic. His need for a co-operative interdependence (which is what I mean by the term “collective”) is slowly becoming greater than his slogans of self-preservation and self-aggrandizement. He begins to realize that his competitive sense tends to kill of not only his competitor but himself. He is no longer sure his isolation spells strength or that his power means security. The enormous structure that he has built is not yet a home. (288)

In rehearsal, I can see that the enormous structure of the Edge Project has been built, and that there are “tentative and “shaky” moments of “reaching out” taking place.

I wonder, as we move towards the final performance, how we, as artists, students, teachers, participants and co-collaborators, will meet our need for “co-operative
interdependence” and whether we, in so doing, can transform ourselves into a “collective”, and the Edge Project into a “home”?

If one is to believe Clurman (1983), community is not just a bi-product of the theatre, it is integral both to its artful creation and to its social role. Building community or a collective meets a specific human “need”, “greater than” “self-preservation and “self-aggrandizement”.

Many approaches to drama education echo a Clurman-esque pre-occupation: The drama classroom is theorized to be a site of moral and ethical education (Winston, 1998, Edmiston, 2000), and drama education has a considerable and acknowledged role in developing citizenry (Neelands, 2009).

According to Helen Novak (1998) in the realm of education, drama has been charged with such diverse social functions as: developing role identity, empathy, self-and-other-understanding, and narrative sensibility (Case, 1991), enhancing the quality of social relationships (Schonert-Reichl 1993), improving interpersonal problem solving strategies (Wentzel & Erdley, 1993), and improving social skills (Downey and Walker 1989) (Novak, 1998, 2). Winston (1998) and Edmiston (2000) agree, as articulated by Edmiston that “classroom drama can be significant in students’ moral education, enabling them to express, explore, and develop complex conceptual moral understandings (64).” All of these proposed skills are designed to teach the individual student how to live and work in relation, first to their peers and then to successively wider groups. The individual learning that takes place in the drama classroom is therefore inextricably linked to acting in community with others.

Just as Clurman (1983) built his collective on the principle of developing actors and writers through a shared creation process, Neelands advocates for learning that favours “socially shaped knowledge”: 

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Today there is a growing conviction that most learning occurs not as a private, interior experience but as an interactive one, socially shaped knowledge is less a personal acquisition than an inter-personal production: relational, collaborative, and more specifically a matter of exchange (as quoted in O'Connor, 2010, 45)

The prosocial benefits of the drama classroom are borrowed from the theatre itself. The act of making theatre and the act of watching theatre are defined by built-in relational exchanges. Remember that Peter Brooks’ (1968) description of an act of theatre includes, and requires, both the man walking across the empty space AND the person watching him (7). At its most basic, theatre cannot happen alone and as a result, at any level of sophistication, theatre and drama education, are social endeavours, reliant on inter-personal engagement.

The obvious point of exchange in the theatre is between the actor and the audience member, but one must consider all the other concurrent inter-personal exchanges that may be taking place at any given moment: The actor engages with another actor on stage, the actor engages with his imagined character, the audience member engages with another audience member, the stage manager engages with the lighting director, etc. When connections are created across these points of exchange, the community-in-the-making starts to become visible.

Remember my acting teacher who insisted that I needed to

\textit{Trust the script. Trust the audience. Trust the director. Trust my fellow actors. and, Trust myself?}

Underneath this command is a simple relational understanding of my job as an actor. What if, we replace “trust” with “connect to” and instead he invites me to:

\textit{Connect to the script. Connect to the audience.}

\textit{Connect to the director. Connect to my fellow actors.}

\textit{Connect to myself.}
As we have seen, the creation process and the Edge Project “as community”, need
for the participants to (willingly) confront limits of expression and find ways to
engage personally and purposefully with the material and with each other. How
does one skillfully create and embody these connections?

**Acting Out Empathy**

When I think about *connection* in relation to the moral and ethical dimensions and
functions of the theatre and of the drama classroom, I am drawn first to the concept
of empathy. Eisenberg (1992) defines empathy as:

> [...] an emotional response to the emotional state of another – “feeling with
another”. (as quoted in Novak, 1998, 5)

Isn’t that what the theatre is trying to evoke? Isn’t that what we are asking students
and theatre artists to create? In the theatre aren’t we searching for opportunities to
observe, accept and understand our own emotions in relation to the emotions of
someone outside of ourselves? The chance to be *moved*? And furthermore could
this ‘ability’ to feel *with* another serve in the development of a citizenry of moral and
ethical fortitude?

My own understanding of theatre practice, and of the inherent value of my arts
education, has long been grounded in a belief that the theatre and the drama
classroom offer a platform to explore, practice and perform empathy, and
furthermore, that empathy is an ability or skill required for success in three distinct
but overlapping realms I frequent: the stage, the classroom, and the real world.

This understanding has grown out of that moment in my actor-training when I
decided that learning to “act” and learning to “be human” were intrinsically and
inextricably linked: the moment that I left acting school in search of an education in
“living truthfully” in *real* circumstances so that I could better live truthfully in the
*imagined* circumstances of the stage. As I walked out of the doors of that theatre
school my conviction was this: Ideally, actor training provides valuable lessons, skills, and tools that can be applied to life in the ‘real’ world, and in turn, the employment of these acquired abilities in everyday life, interactions, and relationships, trains the actor for the stage.

Any theatre graduate who has sat through a job interview for a non-theatre related job has learned how to argue at least a couple of key transferable skills from the drama classroom or their actor training. I know that my own cover letters have often espoused that my work in theatre has prepared me for such tasks as public speaking, making presentations, working as a team, and thriving in high pressure situations. Of course, drama education is not only designed to churn out employees who can speak loudly and clearly in a boardroom full of people, and thus I began to think of empathy as the single most important skill an actor, a student, and a human, can learn on the stage, in the classroom, and in the world.

At first glance, empathy is a convincing point of intersection between the interests of the stage and the classroom. Noted scholars of arts education and process drama (Eisner (1998), Greene (1995), Heathcote (1984), etc) have identified empathy as both a necessary component and a desired outcome of classroom exercises, engagement with art, and imaginative play. Eisner (1998) defines empathy as: the ability to don the shoes of another human being (37), which is a useful skill if one is, for example, teaching or learning curricular material through role-play. In theatre practice, an actor’s job is, according to actress Harriet Walter’s (2003) well-titled memoir, to walk on stage, both figuratively and literally In Other People’s Shoes. Since Aristotle in ‘Poetics’ first wrote that tragedy should inspire pity and fear and that from these the audience should find catharsis in witnessing a play (Aristotle, trans. 1902), theatre-makers have recognized empathic connections between artist/character and audience member as central to the social value of the art of theatre. (Or, in the cases of Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal, and St. Augustine, empathy, as a central feature of the relationship between the actor and the audience, distracts the audience from potential critical thinking [Silberman et.al, 2015]; tricks
the audience member into not challenging the oppressive status quo [Babbage, 2004]; or vicariously releases the audience member from having to take action to end suffering in the real world [Snyder-Young, 2013]). At the very least, it is evident that empathy is written about at length both in theatre and arts education contexts, broadly offering common ground and potential intersecting interests and outcomes.

Imagine for a moment that developing an empathic citizenry is the central goal of both the theatre and of education. While Boal and Brecht may worry about whether empathy impedes their social goals, Maxine Greene (1995) uses the concept of empathy to position education and the arts as drivers of social change. She argues “imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible” and it “enables us to cross the empty spaces between ourselves and those [...] we have called “other” over the years” (3). Empathizing with, or bridging the difference between, the “other” is a basic action towards building community and employing a potential social force of theatre education. The actor, in creating a character, must similarly employ his/her imagination to cross the empty space between oneself and “the other”. By linking imagination and empathy, we can also re-consider Meisner’s directive to “live truthfully in imagined circumstances” (Esper 2008, 18) as an opportunity to actively practice a form of empathy. If connection, on the actor’s part, is achieved with empathy and imagination, must the audience perform similar actions/have similar abilities in order to connect to the actors/characters on stage? Dani Snyder-Young (2013) asks the question thusly:

...can theatre engage spectators in ‘caring’ about and ‘respecting’ others?
Certainly. Empathy allows spectators to care about the people whose stories they watch onstage.
Catharsis is a product of empathy. Audience members identify with elements of a character they recognize in themselves, and, as a result, may take a vicarious emotional journey leading to an organic, extreme, emotional release. (91)
Along with Eisenberg’s and Eisner’s (earlier stated) definitions, empathy can be understood here as either an action that the actor (spectator/participant) takes, or an ability that the actor (spectator/participant) has, to connect to a character, (fellow) actor, or audience member. *Do these conceptions of empathy treat empathy as something that can be taught and learned? And if so how do we as artists, educators, and citizens ensure that we are teaching active empathy and not a passive imposter?*

What do we really mean by empathy? *Is it interchangeable with, for example, pity (Aristotle), sympathy (Hume in Agosta 2010), compassion (Nussbaum 2001), or concern (Prinz, 2011)?* To have a clear working definition of empathy is important at this intersection because, as Levy (1997) argues:

> the question of whether empathy is willed or unwilled, active or passive, is of the first importance, for it speaks directly to the question of whether empathy can be elicited or taught. (181)

On the surface, empathy appears to be the essential ingredient and the desired outcome of the co-relational nature of both theatre and the drama classroom. However, when one digs deeper, problems with empathy begin to emerge. As we saw with “trust”, empathy is an unreliable construct because it has too many imposters and ambiguities.

Gunkle (1963) and Levy (1997), both suggest that the main problem with empathy is that it has been simplified, stretched, and manipulated over the years to mean so many things, that as a word and a concept it has lost clarity and meaning. Gunkle warns that in the performer-spectator relationship in particular, reducing the conversation to empathy alone, masks “the multiplicity of processes, each of which may have a separate claim upon our attention” (Gunkle 1963, .23). Muse (2012)

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33 “Empathy now commonly means several different but easily confusable things” (Levy, 1997, 180) and “However, it appears that while theatre aestheticians were influenced by Langfeld, they seized upon the concept of empathy with more enthusiasm than accuracy, with the result that the term, stretched to mean almost anything, has come to mean almost nothing” (Gunkle, 1963, 17).
does not reject empathy as a label for this interaction but worries that a definition of empathy that envisions it as an “instantaneous event risks oversimplifying the emotional experience of spectator and downplaying one of the cardinal attractions of watching many performances: the complex and gradual experience of engagement with a virtual world and the emotional lives of its figures” (Muse, 2012, 176). While Boler (1997) presents certain risks of empathy in practice, and Gallagher (2011) points out that pedagogical challenges exist, Gunkle (1963) calls for the abandonment of the term empathy in favour of “semantic well-being” and bringing “empirical research closer to fruitfulness in theatre arts” (23). At this stage, I am not ready to completely abandon empathy, instead I am hoping that further excavation will reveal a construct or concept to account for the inter-personal connections theatre and arts education favour and promote.

In digging for a rooted empathy or a root of empathy, that provides reliable foundation for a discussion of community, I want to suggest an exploration of vulnerability. If we return briefly to the construction metaphor from Chapter 2, it is possible to imagine that each individual room or structure has a series of doors or windows that offer points of exchange and that our job is first to find these points and then to build corridors (or bridges) that connect or link the rooms together. In order to build these connections we could theoretically use trust (however faulty), familiarity, respect, understanding, empathy, or another inter-personal, co-relational construct. Unfortunately, the corridors are essentially useless if the doors and windows are locked: if access is still denied. Vulnerability offers the potential for access to any of the forms of connection we imagine creating. What if vulnerability is the key?

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34 I use interpersonal from Corness’ description of performer/spectator relationships: “The fundamental understanding that our experience in the world is related (as subject and object) to others suggests that audience-performer connection is, at least partly, interpersonal” (Corness et al., 128).
Towards Vulnerability

In contrast to the plethora of conversations and incarnations that left me (in theatre and education) with an ill-defined, difficult to observe, or cloudy conception of empathy, I found a large gap in scholarship when it came to vulnerability. Looking for what role vulnerability plays, or might play, in empathic connection, I turned to Boston, Towers, and Barner’s (2001) work on risk and empathy in palliative care, Hodgson’s (2000) paper on vulnerability in outdoor education leadership and Brown’s (2010) research on shame, vulnerability and whole-heartedness.

Boston et. al. (2001), in exploring the defining features of an empathic end-of-life caregiver-patient relationship, conclude that: “Empathy involves humility in the process of learning. It also requires personal risk and accepting one’s own vulnerability” (253). Brown (2010), similarly, argues that vulnerability is essential to authentic connection and Hodgson (2000) questions whether vulnerability plays a role in leadership, within a context of education (53). From here can we assume that a humble process towards empathy in theatre-making or education also requires personal risk and accepting vulnerability? And that the authenticity of the connections we hope to create in the Edge Project rely on vulnerability?

What do I mean by vulnerability?

The first two definitions of vulnerable when I opened my dictionary were:

1. Capable of being physically or emotionally wounded.
2. Open to attack, harm, or damage.

Etymologically, vulnerability comes from vulnus, the Latin word for wound. Admittedly, to be “vulnerable” appears, from these definitions and origins, to represent a clearly negative physical or emotional state of being. According to Mackenzie, Rogers & Dodds (2014) there are two main directions of study in vulnerability common in moral theory and bioethics. Both thrusts emphasize that vulnerability has a “fundamentally social or relational character” (6) but one focuses on a common human ontological response and the other on “the ways
that inequalities of power, dependency, capacity, or need render some agents vulnerable to harm or exploitation by others." (6) While Mackenzie et. al. go on to develop a taxonomy of vulnerability that includes three sources and two states of vulnerability (7), for the purpose of my line of inquiry I will favour the conception of vulnerability that they suggest directly connects the “wound” origin to “the capacity to suffer that is inherent in human embodiment. To be vulnerable is to be fragile, to be susceptible to wounding and to suffering; this susceptibility is an ontological condition of our humanity. (4)

Coeckelbergh (2010), in an ethical exploration of whether there is potential for empathy in human-robot relations, suggests that to develop a “fellow-feeling”35 a “necessary condition for this to happen is the requirement that the robot (or for that matter, the animal, or the human) mirrors our own, human vulnerability” (6). He goes on to explain:

Our embodied existence renders us vulnerable beings. Human empathy is based on the salient mutual recognition of that vulnerability. (6) [and ...]
In this sense, we are each other’s ‘vulnerability mirrors’. We can feel empathic towards the other because we know that we are similar as vulnerable beings. (7)

With an understanding of vulnerability that borrows mirroring and embodiment from Coeckelbergh, I can start to envision how vulnerability could be re-imagined as a positive state of being and a valuable pedagogical function of theatre and drama in the classroom. If one of the problems with empathy is that, in emotional theory, it is caught between a cognitive and an imaginative-emotional function (Coeckelbergh, 2010), vulnerability’s strength is that it is by nature corporeal. Our bodies are what make us vulnerable beings and the stage and the drama classroom are locations where we confront ourselves, and mirror each other, as embodied creatures.

35 Coeckelbergh brings “a hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective on empathy rather than a cognitive science perspective” (2010, 6).
In this light, relationships (and eventually community) develop as by-products of theatre because they have the same basic ingredient. At the molecular level they both ask for vulnerability. Vulnerability, in turn, makes empathy and connection possible, on stage, and in life. Until we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, where can we find the open space to welcome the experience of someone else: the character, the other actors on stage, the audience, or the person sitting beside us on the bus?

When we understand vulnerability as a fundamental element in community building and theatre-making, we can revisit the trust-risk paradigm. Making vulnerability visible and celebrating its presence transforms the hidden dangers of trust. Baier, 1991), describes an ideal and lasting scheme of cooperation as needing:

- empowerment of the more vulnerable,
- equal respect,
- balance of power,
- provision for amendment,
- a place for hearing grievances,

all give us ideas that we could try incorporating into rules for the design of other stable schemes of trust-involving cooperation so that all trust would come closer to being mutual trust and so also to being mutual vulnerability. (149-150)

Baier's example is written as a model for governing nations, with a hope that the theory extends to other spheres. I propose the theatre classroom and the play-making collective are two possible extensions, as places where trust-involving cooperation needs both mutual trust, and mutual vulnerability to succeed.

Moments throughout the creation and rehearsal of The Edge Project that I earlier identified as risk, resistance, or unwillingness, can be re-named as access points for vulnerability. Accessing, acknowledging, expressing, or sharing one’s vulnerability provides an opportunity for empathic connection, trust, co-relational understanding, and creative output. It also presents the risk for exposure, which is what I imagine to be the opposite of vulnerability. A conception of vulnerability as strength, is opposed by exposure as weakness. When access to vulnerability is not
chosen, shared, accepted, or mutually appreciated, it becomes an exposed wound, increasing the chance for pain, harm, or damage.

**A Moment of Doubt**

*Can we recognize a moment of vulnerability in ourselves or in another?*

As I observed earlier, towards the end of the creation and rehearsal processes, the participants appeared to be gaining confidence and excitement about their work and looking forward to the fast-approaching performance dates. At the same juncture, the Artist, who had remained steadily positive and hopeful to this point, began to encounter limitations, doubts and insecurities:

**ARTIST:** I remember really clearly our last rehearsal in the CBC studios, the big last rehearsal where we had all the band equipment and everything there. My goal didn't even come close to being met, in terms of what I wanted to cover that day. And I was really crestfallen that we had bitten off more than we can chew. And that I made the show too big and we would be terribly under-rehearsed. You know, the thing that feels the worst is feeling that I caused them to be under-rehearsed. That it was my responsibility to make sure that they were ready and they're not because I tried to make the show too big...and they did all that they could but...and on top of that we had lots of absences and people not showing up and it just compounded the problem, especially when we are trying to rehearse music and half the band isn't there, it was just crazy and super stressful.

The Artist’s experience of the last rehearsal left him discouraged, and worried that he was sending the participants unprepared into performance. The approaching public presentation of The Edge Project is a reminder of the product-driven side of
the endeavour. Does the Artist’s stress give us a moment of vulnerability to witness and consider? What would happen if the Artist were to share his fears with the participants? Is there room for him to have doubts? In the moments where he admits that he “does not know” does he reach eye-level with the students? Is the moment of access to his vulnerability wasted if it is not shared, or mutually witnessed and appreciated? What shifts when these connections are made and missed?

**Moving Ahead: The Theatre Space**

The next big dynamic shift happens when the play and its players move into the theatre venue for the final tech rehearsals and performances.

I: Did you notice a change when you moved into the theatre space for the first time?

ARTIST: The whole dynamic is completely different. Their behaviours different, their relationship with one another’s different, their relationship with me is different, they’re tentative, they’re excited, they’re um... they have to treat the space with a different kind of reverence or respect than they treat their space with. So yeah, things are vastly different once we move into the theatre.

On the first day of tech rehearsals, the now familiar roles are flipped on their heads:

In the school the artist is a guest of the educational world. In the theatre, the educational world is a guest of the artist. (Ardal, 2003, 192)

The Artist is now on his home turf and the participants are all strangers. This disruption of space (see Lois Adamson, 2011) creates a noticeable break between the experience of the creation/rehearsal phases, planted in the quasi-educational realm, and the new, unfamiliar, “professional” theatre experience.
ARTIST: What happens, I think, once the theatre becomes the next step is the level of anxiety, the level of excitement, the level of nervousness, all sort of gets ramped up. It's the first time that, I think, the four disparate groups actually start to feel like they have to kind of work together to make this thing happen. And so that kind of coalescing of the four sort of separate entities happens fast and it feels really good when that starts to happen.

The rapidly decreasing timeframe, and the change in physical location to a theatre space, act to increase stakes and launch the project forward—both in community-building and artistic pursuit.

In the next chapter I will look at the performance of the Edge Project and what happens in the new and final space, with high stakes, an audience, and four chances to stand on the stage.
CHAPTER FOUR:
Performance

“Put things in their proper place. Rehearsal is the time for work. Home is the time for reflection. The stage is the time for action” – Mamet (1997, 102)

CREATURE: Our first performance was like “this is happening, there’s people in the audience, we can’t mess up!”

More than 100 teenagers in a makeshift “Green Room” whisper excitedly as they wait to enter the door to backstage. The audience files into the theatre and, as the house lights go down, the (seemingly well-trained) opening night crowd obeys the cue, turns their attention to the stage, and, with a few last second shuffles to turn off phones and scurry into seats, the pregnant hush arrives.

The opening video sequence plays,

V.O.: I know I’m a teenager but I wish I wasn’t.
    I wish I could escape my own self diagnosed deficiencies that remind me of the very stereotype I wish to leave behind.
    That jumble of angst and uncertainty portrayed by the media only feels eerily true when I look in the mirror.
    That is what I wish to escape.
    The very idea of adult- it does terrify me.
    I’m not afraid to admit that
    But for some odd reason I wish I could confront it that much sooner.
    I want to live life. Love. Be loved.
    See the world.
    A teenager can do all these things but I feel that I can’t.
    I feel restricted by the vaunted requirements of society.
How I’m supposed to meet them? I don’t know.
Maybe my love of acting is really a love of being someone.
Not in terms of being a celebrity but the act of emulating
and creating emotion in order to imbue it upon others.
The act of creating a person.
The idea of knowing who I am.
An idea I wish I could put into action.

[Excerpt: The Edge Project Final Script]

200 feet are stomping from offstage to the sound of a metronome. The lights come up
on one student in the middle who delivers the first line of the show:

THE EDGE PROJECT.

S: We are brave. We are strong.

ALL (from off): We are unstoppable. We are unstoppable.

[S lays down a wicked tap solo. Then the entire group enters. The form a giant grid on the stage.]

[The 200 feet stomp onto the stage.]

ALL: We are the future, we are here and now.

[Individuals speak the following text, during which the clock ticking morphs into a steady drum beat.]

M: We are the change

RA: We are afraid

RE: We are proud

M/RA/A: We are not responsible

W: We are weak

G: We are brutal

I: We are intimidated
I/D/A/M/I/SH/S/C/D/ A/AI: We are hopeless in our hearts

SW: We are careless

SL: We are different

H: We are unique

A/G/J/R/H/K/V/T/H/ S/A/G/J/A/M: We are undefined

[The next pieces are spoken freely, not in rhythm.]

1: We are over-diagnosed with mental conditions that we don’t really have.

V: We are maryjane clogged minds behind Versace sunglasses

E: We are surrounded by technology that not even we can keep up with.

H: We are not little balls of angst like the tv shows say we are

5: We carry the burdens of past generations

6: We are misunderstood and overlooked

M: ONE! TWO! THREE!

ALL: We are survivors, we are strong, we are connected, we are the sheltered generation

[The entire group does a bit of ‘flash mob’ type choreo. From this, individual dance solos pop up. S does a cool rap. Out of the rap:]

M: ONE! TWO! THREE! FOUR!

[Eight people do some hip hop choreo. Then the rows, from back to front, each speak a line together.]

ROW 8: We are confused
ROW 7: We are emotional
ROW 6: We are curious
ROW 5: We are sad
ROW 4: We are kids
We are strong

[Then they all start stomping again then they converge in a huge clump downstage.]

ALL: We are loving. We are hunters. We are the change. We are epic.

[Everyone exits during the TRANSITION.]

(Excerpt: The Edge Project Final Script)

All the creation, the preparation, the rehearsal, was building to this: The Performance. The stage is the final destination for the Edge Project and, to adjust Mamet’s quote above, it is the time AND the place, for action. Moving into the walls of the theatre may have caused a dynamic shift (as explored in Chapter 3), but the invitation to perform transformed the Edge Project from an educational exercise into a play and the participants into players or, act-ors.

**Acting and Audience**

“For much of the beauty of the theatre, and much of the happiness, is in a communion with the audience.” (Mamet, 1997, 46)

Opening night is the first time that an audience, not made up of fellow participants in the project, will see the created play. This is a pivotal moment. As Schonmann, (2006) suggests: “It is self-evident that a live theatre must communicate and that the real power of a play is found when it is tested upon an audience”(52). The relationship between the audience and the performer is, for Grotowski, the most powerful and essential component of the theatre. In fact he defines theatre as “what takes place between the spectator and the actor” (as quoted in Schonmann, 2006, 52). Imagining theatre itself as the connection created in this space between the stage and the house, makes the arrival of the audience on opening night a transformative moment of truth. Meisner says “The foundation of acting is the reality of doing” (1987, 16).
The reality of the performance calls the actors/participants into action— the act of connecting: to each other, to their audience, to the material that they have created. Meisner’s approach is to bring the actor back to his emotional responses and to action that is firmly rooted in the instinctive. His method is based on the presupposition that “all good acting comes from the heart, as it were, that there is no mentality in it” (Breese 2013, 6). This reminds me of Brene Brown’s (2010) definition of courage, “To speak one’s mind in telling all one’s heart” (12), and, that standing on the stage is only an act of courage because it puts the actor in a vulnerable position. If the actor, in that moment, accesses his own vulnerability, and the audience witnesses and accepts that vulnerability, connection is possible. The audience, at the same time, accesses their own vulnerability in order to mirror the vulnerability on stage. Connection is what happens when the offering of the actor is received by the audience and the offering of the audience (their attention, vulnerability, humanness) is received by the actor. Performance is all about tiny moments of access, with high stakes, strung together to create an inter-active connection.

Since the audience plays such a vital role in the performance of the play, it is also worth considering who is in the audience. The Edge Project was performed four times as part of a professional theatre festival. The audience included invited friends and family, students from other schools, supporters of Green Thumb Theatre, and members of the public who heard about the play through festival advertising. A public audience places the show outside of the regular educational drama experience and re-enforces the professional theatre experience objectives of the project.

**Theatre Conventions**

When the house lights go down at the beginning of the show and the stage lights illuminate the set, the conventions of theatre, designed to draw the audience in, are
present and in use. The set itself is simple: A black stage with a large white projection screen in the back. The power of 100 students stepping on the stage, supported by lights, music, and video elements, transforms the space and informs the audience’s experience of the performance.

As I mentioned in the project description, the Artist-Director is assisted by other visiting artists during the creation process to help develop the technical and aesthetic qualities of the show. For example: A musician helps the students compose and rehearse their own music, a lighting technician creates a lighting design, and a video-artist helps the students create any multimedia components. All of these elements lend to the “professional theatre product”, representing a shift from a creative exercise, drama role-play, or classroom performance. For both the performers and the audience, the professional theatre aesthetic of The Edge Project may help to create a sense of an authentic theatre experience, removing it from the fluorescent lights of a classroom and into a recognizable and conventional “theatre”. The theatre space, with its conventions and professional elements, calls the participants to step out of their role as ‘student’ and into the role or the costume of ‘performer’. Does this impact their relationship to each other? Does it invite new possibilities for openness? New responsibilities?

Listen to the voices at the end of this chapter (those of the Artist and the Creature) and one can hear how the setting of the theatre made room for new and deeper connections, and how the pressure and promise of performance transformed individuals, relationships, and the play itself.

**Live-ness and Immediacy**

Writing about the performance can never do justice to its immediacy. According to Peggy Phelan (1993):

> Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of
representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance (146).

The live-ness and the immediacy of the show are part of the high stakes for the performers, as they are vulnerable on stage with nowhere to hide, for better or for worse. Live-ness is exciting and scary for the same reason: anything can happen. Both the spectator and the actor live in the immediacy of that shared experience of live performance.

The ephemeral space occupied by the audience and the actor, according to Harriet Walters, is both the greatest risk and the greatest security of the theatre:

- It’s not just the people watching us whom we fear, it is human interaction itself – the unpredictability of other people, and perhaps the monsters in ourselves. All these fears can be contained and controlled in drama, as they cannot be in life. [...] But in drama these monsters can be temporarily let out. Aggression, Vulgarity, and Vulnerability can rampage round the stage. We have learned how to use them and we know that the consequences will finish at curtain-down.
- Compared to the dangers of real life, the stage can be the safest place on earth. (Walter, 2003, 6)

Stepping into the role of “performer” may require taking big risks, but does it also make accessing or showing vulnerability less risky? In performance does the stage become an acceptable “safe space”, less problematic than the classroom? Does the immediacy of the theatre make it the ideal place to explore vulnerability? Do the conventions of the theatre (lights, proscenium arches, costumes, and curtains) create a human interaction that is both authentically truthful and detachedly safe? Is vulnerability best experienced in these fleeting moments of live(d) action, of communion between actor and audience? In the dark of the theatre, the players and the audience encounter and engage with one another in a unique space of vulnerability.
In the impossibility of saving, recording, or documenting the performance, without interrupting the live-ness and immediacy fundamental to its very nature, I leave you with the Artist and the Creature as they describe and reflect upon their experience of performance.

**Voices Off**

I: Was there anything about the performance that surprised you?

ARTIST: There were two students who totally surprised me and kind of blew me away when it came down to doing the show.

I: Tell me about one of them...

ARTIST: In rehearsal and in creating the show she was really shy about performance. She participated well in writing and she was always there, and she was keen but she was very quiet and I could never ever hear her on stage and I just repeatedly, like I had to with a lot of the students, you know, just tell them to be louder louder louder, And I eventually just kind of gave up because she just couldn’t, I just couldn’t make her understand how I couldn’t hear her.

And I don’t know what the mechanics were of how it kicked in but it was actually on the first show: She came out and her voice filled the entire space and what happens when somebody

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36 This is a playful reference to Michael Frayn’s 1982 farce “Noises Off”. In three acts the audiences watches as a cast rehearse and perform a play. In act one the actors are unprepared, by act two we see them performing (from backstage) and watch as the relationships deteriorate and by act three, it is close to the end of the run and despite the determination of the cast, the play has dissolved into chaos. *Noises Off* is a great reminder of how what happens on stage is just a small part of the action so feels like a good fit at this stage in the Edge Project as we listen to the Artist and the Creature reflect.
does that, it's not just that you can hear them, something else happened for her as a performer, she just understood somehow, and with the energy, I guess the adrenaline, or whatever, she just understood, somehow, what it meant to act. And so, all of the sudden, she became a decent actor, she became somebody who was worth watching, who was interesting, and told the story she needed to tell, and could be heard. And she got better every show.

I: And what surprised you about the other student?

ARTIST: The other one was also a volume issue but it was more about engagement. He was the kind of guy who, you know, was happy to be there and was really well liked by his peers, but it appeared like he didn’t care when he spoke. He was often distracted, he was often sort of looking everywhere else except, you know, directly front. Never really engaged with any kind of audience, never imagined that there was anybody to engage with. It just felt like he didn’t get how to make it work. He was also quiet and very flat-lined, very monotonous, very sort of one-note kind of performance.

After the first show, he just came completely out of his shell. And started acting. And really brought emotion and passion to what he had to say. And I could use him as an example for the others in those scenes with him as the level they all needed to get up to, in terms of just engagement, and crispness, and clarity. He became the model for that and I would never ever have been able to predict that he could have even come close to being able to do that. It was really gratifying, really impressive
And like I said, I don’t know what the mechanics are of that, if it’s just that they’re nervous and an emotion takes over that they just go with and it works for the performance. Or if it’s the pressure of the audience that drives them to sort of go ‘I really need to communicate this’. Or if they just, all of the sudden, start enjoying it. With [this student] I felt like he started to have fun, like he actually started to enjoy performing and it made him a way better performer.

**ACTive Learning**

**ARTIST:** I feel like before we got into the space it was really hard for them to take the notes seriously because we were still in the building of the show process and they were still...they didn’t have the pressure of the audience yet so... I felt like they really held-off on taking those notes. But the working notes that I gave during the run, like I gave notes before every show from the previous performance, and those were the most valuable notes. Those sessions were the most exciting for me and I felt like we were finally really communicating. They all got the value of the notes. They understood finally why it was important to get notes. And they wanted them. They wanted to get feedback... They also really wanted positive feedback. If I gave one of them a note that congratulated them on a success, the entire group would erupt into applause and cheer them, you know. It was really a super supportive atmosphere. But that only happened once the excitement of live performance was there.

Before that it was really challenging to get them to engage in the learning curve of notes. The ones who had experience with
performance, they got notes. They wanted notes. They would come to me and say, you know, ‘what can I do better?’ And a few of the neophyte keeners also had the same kind of approach where it was like ‘please help me be better’. But in a general sense it was almost like they didn’t get why I was still making them rehearse. You know?

But those working notes during the run, those sessions were fantastic because they really understood…and they could also give me feedback about what went wrong. I would get to ask them ‘why were you late for that cue’ and they could explain ‘well, backstage there was a problem’ and we could sort it out right there on the fly together. And it felt really collaborative, and really like we were all part of one team: finally. You know, creating this thing and all wanting it to be better each show.

And you know, the other really gratifying thing about the performances as they progressed was that we shaved time off each one. And they really started to understand the value of moving things forward. And not taking your time with scene changes and making them happen fast, picking up your cues, and starting scenes hard and hot, you know, really making it crisper.

You know, when you have been giving the notes forever and they don’t take them and then you see them finally start to get it, once they are in front of the audience, that is really gratifying. It feels like you weren’t wasting your time. They get it finally. You know, they need the immediacy of that experience with an audience in order to finally, for it to all crystallize for them.
Performing Community

I: What moment in the Edge Project will really stay with you?

CREATURE: The whole process, I wasn't really into it until we actually started performing and then I started to really like it, enjoy it. And when we started performing I actually started meeting people and that's when it really kind of clicked for me. Because you know, I just moved here and I haven't really met that many people. I haven't become really that close with that many people.

The atmosphere that comes when you are performing something with people or you just have this connection with these people, you start to get to know each really well and so I started to get to know a few people pretty well. Like, J over there, he plays guitar and I actually started talking to him and we're pretty similar. [...] so that was one of the big major moments that I will remember---is when I actually met people.

CREATURE: For me what was really memorable was for example today when all these people I had never met before, like these strangers, they actually care, like, about how you feel. And stuff like that. At one point, I was trying to sleep and they all thought that I was really really sad so they all group hugged me.

CREATURE: All the parts here [at the Roundhouse]. I was a little bit scared in the beginning to spend 4 days here but actually it turned out really well because it is the first time you realize what you have done and it’s really good. And now all of us have something the
same together and are becoming friends. It’s different from the beginning.

It is at the moment of performance that I, and the creatures, really began to see the community that had been forged. The action of performance, and the moments of high stakes and high rewards within the walls of the theatre, impacted the participants and therefore the collective.

Esposito writes:

In community—in relationship with the ‘other’—individuals face and find their limits, defining ‘self’ in relation to ‘not me’ and making conscious or unconscious choices on how to define ‘in’ in relation to ‘out’ on both personal and group levels. Individuals sacrifice a degree of autonomy and become responsible to the groups to which they belong, and in return, receive the benefits of belonging. In this conception of community, it is ‘gift and obligation, benefit and service rendered, joining and threat’ (Esposito 2010: 13) (Synder-Young 98)

Listening to the words of the Creature I recognize in the cast and crew of the Edge Project a community in action. In performance the actor/Creature faces their limits and sacrifices some autonomy to be responsible to those on stage and those in the audience, changing the individual and the collective experience simultaneously.

**FINALE:**

[School] leaves the stage. [S] enters slowly like walking on a tightrope walk as the multiple voices soundscape plays. A beat starts. [S] raps. At the end of the rap, the band pushes the riser onto the stage and then takes their places to play the finale song.
Song:
They say we have a mind
They say we have a voice
But the minute we open our mouths
They say we have no choice

We will always be a stereotype
No matter what they say
We’ll show them we can change in time
That’s how it’s going to stay

This is the Edge
Will I fall?
Or take a deep breath
And fly above it all?

Maturity’s a phase
Adolescence is forever
Our growth is not a race
We are kids, remember

This is the Edge
Will I fall?
Or take a deep breath
And fly above it all?

The band keeps playing. [W] steps up and does a breakdance solo (4 bars or so). Then a group takes centre and does a hip hop section.

After this the entire ensemble comes on stage and sings a few rounds of the chorus. During the finale the portraits of the students play in a slide show (starting after the dance solos.)

End.

[Excerpt: The Edge Project Final Script]
Curtain Call

As the finale song comes to an end, the audience erupts into a standing ovation. I was one of the first to my feet and, from my place in the audience I saw the actors standing before me on the stage looking surprised, relieved, exhausted, energized, and proud all at once. Only three more shows to go...
CHAPTER FIVE: Reflection

"Experience itself is neither productive nor unproductive; it is how you reflect on it that makes it significant or not significant, for good or ill, of course." (Bolton 1979, 126)

The sound of the last foot stomping off the stage fades, the audience leaves, and the lights go out. With what are we left? What did we learn?

Eisner (1998) suggests that:

An important data source for determining what students have learned is the artwork students create. (91)

As we saw in the last chapter, the immediacy of the performance cannot linger on the page. And yet, the Edge Project, as a process and as a product, is still an undeniably rich artifact of learning. The voices of the participants, in the words of the play, in the script and in the performance, as well as in their recorded observations and reflections, offer glimpses at learning and hint at moments of transformation. It is impossible to know what each of the participants learned from their experience but we can listen to what they say, look at what they produce, and search for meaning in that which is shared and made visible. We know that they learned both more and less than we imagined (Eisner, 2002, 70) and that we must rely on language as an imperfect proxy for lived experience, an expression of "the ineffable" (88).
While I cannot assume to know all the learning that took place for the individual participants, I can look back at the path laid down, as I walked alongside them—the student whose work was not read aloud in class, the teacher who came up against exchanging roles with the visiting artist, the artist who struggles to convince a group of teenagers to buy-in, and all the others—and try to take stock of my own learning. I can offer this document as a record of my inquiry as a scholar, an object of my learning as a student, and an opportunity for meaning-making as an artist.

Artists seek to reveal meaning. What we attach ourselves to, identify with, and become vitally interested in depends a great deal on the ways in which we reflectively construct personal meaning within a situation. (Burnard, 2006, 8)

Looking at the Edge Project, I can find personal meaning in the moments that stopped me (Appelbaum, 1995, Fels, 2012), demanded my attention, challenged me to ask questions and invited me to consider new possibilities.

**A Conversation with the Gardener**

*As I sit at my desk I can vividly imagine myself in the wheelbarrow, surrounded by rows of carefully trimmed hedges and rosebushes being pruned for fall. The gardener sits beside me on a stone bench.*

*He:* How is your writing going?

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37 The concept of “laying down a path in walking” is from a poem by Antonio Machado, from *Proverbios y Cantares* (1930) as translated by F. Varela, 1987, 63. See Varela (1987)
I: Not well. I feel trapped. There is no way out. No exit. Sometimes I just
stare at the pages and cry.

He: Remember Boleslavsky? Didn’t he say that the theatre brings suffering?

I: He didn’t say anything about the suffering that comes with writing
about theatre.

He: Isn’t it the same kind of suffering? Doesn’t Boleslavsky teach The
Creature that suffering is a pathway to creation? And aren’t you on that
path? Listen. (He reads):

All right then. I must tell you that this very moment you did more for
the theatre, or rather for yourself in the theatre, that you did in playing
all your parts. You suffered just now; you felt deeply. Those are two
things without which you cannot do in any art and especially in the art
of the theatre. Only by paying the price can you attain the happiness of
creation, the happiness of the birth of a new artistic value (Boleslavsky,

I: So what you are saying is that I can’t skip the agony?

He: I guess you could try, but then wouldn’t you risk missing a chance to feel
depthly? And isn’t that what the theatre is all about? And what you keep
saying this project is all about?

I: It is not lost on me that I am confronting some of my own vulnerability
in the writing of this piece. When I sit at my desk terrified to write I
know that it is because I risk being wrong, or unsure, or exposed. Trying
to find the words to tell the story of the Edge Project leaves me
questioning my authority and my voice. Who am I to write this down?
And does it even matter? I feel overwhelmed and lonely. I imagine
myself dumping everything into an industrial shredder and starting
over again. Retreating to the comfort and safety of a more conventional
research project, or just abandoning academia altogether...

He: But you haven’t yet...

I: Because in those moments, when I am paralyzed with fear and anxiety, I
can see the Creature in myself. The Creature who I watched as she
struggled with the risk of unknown, who didn’t want her work to be
read in front of her peers, who was reluctant to buy-in to a process with
no clear outcomes.

He: Poetic Justice?

I: Something like that.

He: Here you are, faced with accessing and accepting your own vulnerability
as a means of connecting to the story you are trying to tell about
accessing and accepting vulnerability.
I: Which of course means that I have the chance to transform moments of vulnerability into a connection with the characters I am writing about. I have the chance to create.

He: And just think, when you finish the writing and hand it in, you will be a “Master”!

I: It’s funny...Boleslavsky’s Master, who gave me comfort in his certainty, is nothing like the Master in these pages. My performance of the role “Master” is one of uncertainty: learning and discovering by not-knowing. 38

He: A Master nonetheless. And in this role, your lived experiences become lessons. Start there. Tell me. What did you learn?

Old Lessons/New Perspectives

As I turn around and look back I can now see my old masters standing firmly alongside the 100 young people, the teachers and artists, who have guided me through this current learning, lessons echoing through the crowd. The convergence of two worlds, distinct and overlapping: the theatre/the classroom, my job at Green Thumb/my academic studies, the Artist/the Educator, the Master/ the Creature, the before/the after. Straddling these dichotomies, the Edge Project gave me the chance to observe the lessons of my masters in living action:

38 My concept of not-knowing is reminiscent of Kirsten Frantzich (2013)’s expansion of Fels (1995): knowledge as: knowing, doing, being, creating. Frantzich added: un-doing, and not-knowing
Boleslavsky taught me that theatre brings suffering / I witnessed his lesson brought to life in the Edge Project in moments of fear, anxiety, and struggle: moments of vulnerability.

Mamet taught me that acting is about courage / I witnessed his lesson in the Edge Project when the Artist and the Creatures accepted their vulnerability, and agreed to stretch their limits, engaged willingly in creation, performance and community.

Clurman taught me that theatre is a social endeavour / I witnessed his lesson in the Edge Project as relationships formed, voices were raised, and participants were changed by a shared experience.

The Edge Project: The First Six Lessons

I set out to explore the space between theatre and education. To find out how theatre for young audiences positions itself in that gap and whether the intersections between professional theatre and education are serving the broad goals outlined in curriculums and theatre company mission statements. What I found was fertile soil, seeds to sow, plants to nurture, and even some fruit to harvest and carry with me. The Edge Project, in its occupation of the space between, offered me a complex eco-system to tend to, to explore, to live in, and to learn from.

The First Lesson: Vulnerability

Consider for a moment that the role of art (and the humanities) in education is: "both coming to understand what it is to be human and coming to appreciate human values" (Addiss, 1993, 117). If being human means to be an inherently vulnerable being, then a pedagogy and practice towards understanding vulnerability serves
arts education in those central aims of understanding and appreciating that which makes us innately human. We also know that “Human beings are social animals. We seek not only love and companionship but civic association. The longing for community arises from a deep need to feel part of something larger than ourselves” (Noddings, 2002, 65). If living and working in community asks that we see each other and recognize our shared human-ness, then it follows that so too our vulnerability needs to be recognized and shared. Theatre, as a collaborative art, aims to understand humanity and appreciate human values in communal or correlative terms, as it can neither be separated from its nature as art, nor from its nature as collaborative. As Jonathan Levy (1998) argues: “theatre- the only art whose precondition is that human beings confront one another- can uniquely stand for life and thus is inexhaustible” (16). Theatre then, becomes a forum, in education and in society, for the essentially human occupation of exploring our own vulnerability and being confronted with the vulnerability of others.

I want to propose that vulnerability is at the root of empathy, of connection, of trust, of belonging, of truth, of honesty, and of performance. By root I mean essential and life-giving, feeding the growth of, stabilizing and grounding. A root is also a pathway for nutrients and water from the soil to reach the plant. Imagining vulnerability as a pathway to empathy, to connection, to trust, to belonging, to truth, to honesty and to performance, we can start to see how the joint pursuits of theatre-making and education, are rooted together in a search for vulnerability.

**The Second Lesson: Action**

We may be inherently vulnerable beings, but putting our vulnerability to use requires action: opening, recognizing, accepting, living with our own vulnerabilities,
witnessing, accepting, living with the vulnerabilities of others. Two hard flat objects cannot connect to one another without adhesive. They will bang against each other like two fists. It is only when we create space (by the action of pulling our hands apart and opening our fingers) that we can interweave our fingers, connecting our hands. *If we consider empathy or trust as modes of inter-personal connection, vulnerability is the space we create for those connections to be possible.*

Just as the open hand is more vulnerable than the closed fist, the act of opening oneself up for connection inevitably puts one in a position where one risks being hurt. Like the curtains that part to reveal the stories and characters waiting on stage, the theatre asks its participants (creators, actors, audience) to pull back a layer, let the light in, and create an opportunity to be seen, to be heard, and, ideally, to be understood.

The cultivated space of vulnerability is created by the action of accepting risk. From the very first spark of creative writing, right up to the moment of applause, accepting risk and cultivating vulnerability are active and ongoing in the Edge Project. Choosing to engage in performance activities is an acceptance of risk and a willingness to *step into* the space of vulnerability created by that risk-taking action.

*How do we, as individuals and members of a community (of learners/of theatre-makers), cultivate a space of/for vulnerability that encourages learning?*

**Lesson Three: Access and Authenticity**

If the challenge of acting is to live *truthfully* in imaginary circumstances, the work of the actor is to aim for authenticity, in emotion and in connection to oneself, to other
actors, and to the audience. The openness (or space) we create by accepting risk allows us to get closer to truth and authenticity both on stage and in relational connections (which, of course, are also playing out on stage). Essentially, the actor must learn to access the vulnerable space within, accepting the risk of being exposed.

Consider the truth the actor is looking for as the difference between vulnerability and exposure. The activities in actor-training classes are often designed with an intention to help its students access “truth.” Some acting teachers interpret accessing truth as an invitation to excavate one’s memories and experience for emotional response. The digging sometimes leads to strong performances and often leads to students crying on the stairs. If this act of human archeology is done carefully, truth is accessed, authentic emotions emerge, and a character on stage is recognizable as human. If one digs recklessly, there is a great chance that you will have a desert full of holes and not a bone of truth.

The danger, of course, is that one might mistake exposure for vulnerability, and exposure is the enemy of the acting student. If students learn that an intense emotional response receives praise, without doing the work to understand, control, and build pathways to that response, they may make a habit of willingly exposing their “insides” as a shortcut to “truth.” The audience (or even the teacher or the student) might not be able to tell the difference at first glance, but an actor who is not connected to him or herself ends up faking emotion rather than feeling it, and not only will the audience eventually lose interest but the actor could slowly damage their ability to live truthfully in “real” life. The difference between being truthful and authentic or being exposed is the difference between choosing to pull back the
curtain to reveal the light and having the curtain ripped down while you stand (naked) in the light. Repeated exposure leaves the body (the actor, the human) damaged and broken, it takes the beauty away from the truth.

Harriet Walter (1993) says, “Acting is what I do with who I am” (111) which is a helpful reminder that acting is a performance of one’s human-ness (one’s vulnerability), in order to form the connections that are essential to achieving a desired authenticity in performance. Accessing one’s vulnerability, one’s human-ness, and using it to connect to oneself, to the audience, and with one’s co-actors is at the heart of the actor’s work. The authentic actor must first create a space for vulnerability within, and then offer a space for vulnerability somewhere between the footlights and the audience.

In the pursuit of authentic human emotion, and authentic human connection, how do we avoid a space of exploitation and land instead in a space of vulnerability?

Lesson Four: Inter/Action and Connection

Locating, for a moment the “space of vulnerability” between the actor and the audience it becomes clear that, like theatre as imagined by Peter Brook in his book Empty Space, stepping into a space of vulnerability requires someone to witness, and likewise engage. Offering one’s vulnerability on stage is an act of inviting the audience into a space of vulnerability. The key difference between a space of vulnerability and a space of exposure is connected access. Borrowing from Heidegger, as described by Agosta (2010), the concept “authentic being with others” (3), as a relational ideal close to empathy, I wonder if the vulnerable space, in its full complexity, is in fact always co-created. Joel Anderson (2014) writes about the
inter-subjectivity of autonomy and vulnerability (134), and the closer he finds the
two entwined, the more I am convinced that vulnerability and connection are
equally so. A co-created space of vulnerability both relies on and creates
connections. Stepping into a vulnerable space requires action. The co-created space
of vulnerability requires INTER-action.

Theatre, as an inter-active art, relies on the connections that are made possible with
access to a space of vulnerability and at the same time builds relational connections
that both define and are contained within this co-created vulnerable space. In the
Edge Project, the theatre is an exploratory site where the Creature, the Artist, (and
eventually the audience) engage in creating inter/actions and connections in order
to create theatre, build community and meaningful relationships.

How do we use the shared space of vulnerability to create and maintain relational
connections that serve to nurture the creative process, the individual, and the
community?

**Lesson Five: Creating Community.**

If creating theatre and creating community share the same need for relational
connections, and therefore have the same basic element of a co-created vulnerable
space, it follows that in the process of making theatre, a community also has the
opportunity to emerge. It is not enough for the individuals involved in the creation
process (creation of art, creation of community) to be in the same space. In order to
achieve connected access to co-created spaces of vulnerability, and thus create
community, we need to remember that the eco-system we are dealing with requires
not only a perfunctory symbiosis of close and living interaction, but a mutualistic
symbiosis where possibilities for mutual trust, mutual empathy, and mutual respect, are rooted in mutual or shared vulnerability. True connection is created when the audience member (or co-actor, co-creator) not only witnesses the vulnerability of the actor, but when they willingly engage in a reciprocal act of vulnerability: to be open enough to receive that which is being offered.

At its most simple, the gift-giving economy of theatre involves the actor offering a performance to the audience, which the audience receives. As a reciprocal act, the audience offers their (open) attention to the actor. Similarly in the improvisation and playbuilding of the Edge Project, the process of offering and receiving requires an active choice of acceptance within the relationships of engagement at work. In Cohen-Cruz’s book Engaging Performance: Theatre as Call and Response (2010) she writes:

> The term “engaged” foregrounds the relationships at the heart of making art with such aspirations, and dependence on a genuine exchange between artist and community such that the one is changed by the other” (p. 3)

The Edge Project participants, through the creation of their play and the evolving inter-personal relationships, generate a living example of how shared vulnerability invites opportunities of mutual trust, empathy, respect to form an active and engaged community within the vulnerable space. The project offers an exploratory space for the participants to engage in genuine (authentic) exchange with one another with the hopeful outcome that they, as individuals and community members, are changed, as is the community within which they find themselves co-creating.
Lesson Six: Moment to Moment

To understand the true nature and value of the authentic co-created vulnerable space, and the exchanges that take place therein, one must remember that the space, the relational connections, and the outcomes are being constantly negotiated and renegotiated. The co-created space of vulnerability is therefore neither static nor fixed but fluid and ever-changing. Through authentic exchange, dialogue, resistance, negotiation re-negotiation, genuine engagement, community, and creation become possible.

Walters says of acting that “Audiences do not like to feel manipulated. Their empathy has to be earned moment to moment over the evening” (p. 215). The same can be said of any human interaction. Access to vulnerability, and therefore other relational constructs, will vary from moment to moment throughout the creative process and the performance. None of these (trust, safety, respect, empathy, etc) should be taken for granted. This ephemeral process of creativity makes the presence of these moments difficult to observe and record, but moments of genuine relational encounter, the output of creative work and changed relationships acknowledged give us an indication, a “tug on the sleeve” (Fels 2012), that they were, and are occurring.

Paradoxically, the creative act requires tension, a willingness of participants to engage in the not-yet known, the not-yet created, in order to create something new. It is within the constant negotiation and renegotiation, resistance, and acceptance of change, of the spaces and connections at work that we find the tension necessary for the creative act. Welcoming this tension is not easily navigated or comfortable. Theatre like community invites creative acts within the tension of in between for
renewal and genuine expression and communication. Learning to engage within the creative edge of tension was the invitation of the Green Thumb’s Edge Project to both Creature and the Artist.

Attending to the questions of risk and comfort, resistance and acceptance, we find ourselves balancing on complexity theorist Waldrop’s (1992) “edge of chaos,” described by Fels & Meyer (1997) as:

[...] the balancing point between order and chaos, neither locked or turbulent but “spontaneous, adaptive and alive.” [Waldrop, 1992, p. 12]. It is within this place where patterns of interrelationships are continually created and recreated through an “endless dance of co-emergence” where possibilities seduce, and life dances into being.” (80).

Creation happens between co-existing states of risk/comfort, resistance/acceptance, in whose measures we attempt to negotiate and re-negotiate creative balance. Referencing the work of theatre director, Eugenio Barba, Fels writes:

Performance realizes a balance in disequilibrium. On the individual level of the actor, a precarious balance must be established if “life action” is to be realized. “The aim is permanently unstable balance (Barba, 1995, 9).” (1998, 33)

Thus, in inviting others to co-create, we understand that we are entering into a shared space of vulnerability, characterized by the tension of balance and imbalance that vulnerability, in its riskiness, requires.
Returning to the concept of vulnerability as a root or a pathway reminds us that to be vulnerable can be a source of and/or that which leads to actions that bridge fear, discomfort, and risk. Vulnerability is a path into mutual trust, empathy, respect, that offer us ways to securely step closer to the Edge and create something new. The connections we find, across the space between, ground us and keep us from falling into chaos—or give us the rope ladder to climb back out of the chaos and plant ourselves precariously back on the Edge. The constantly negotiated and renegotiated spaces of vulnerability and authentic exchange are intended to keep us in this re-balancing act - with enough tension/resistance to create both risk and reward.

The Edge Project: Moving Forward

After the performance was over, the Artist and I sat down to evaluate the Edge Project in a final report for Green Thumb. The Artist described his experience and listed recommendations for possible points of improvement for the program:

Main recommendations for the Edge Project’s future life:

- Move from four participating schools to three
- Come to the project with a unifying concept or structure that the students fill with content
- Partner with another organization (the PuSh Festival) to increase the event’s profile
- Engage schools with film/video design programs and engage students more directly in the design process
- Increase resources for design elements
- Increase our tech time
- Increase focus on publicity and marketing
- Stabilize funding for the Edge
- Create a code of conduct for the students
- Create more clear guidelines for teacher involvement
- Continue to strive for bigger artistic vision for the Edge

[Green Thumb EDGE PROJECT Final Report 2011, 9]

The second recommendation offers a shift towards more “structure” and eliminating some of the “unknowns” that appeared to limit engagement at the beginning of the project. In trying to find a balance between student-driven creation and efficiency, the Artist is interested in experimenting with a new format whereby the students are introduced to a pre-existing skeleton of a play (a story, divided into beginning, middle, and end) and asked to fill in the details with their own content and ideas. This strategy reflects Jonathan Neelands’ approach to play-making and returns to Fels’ enabling constraints.

ARTIST: What I learned from the show this year is that for the most part, they don’t really care about being given the opportunity to ‘be themselves’ and be given a chance to speak their minds. They don’t really get excited by the idea of starting from scratch, brainstorming on the issues that face them, and then making scenes about it. They just want to create. They just want to make a show and perform it. They want it to look cool, they want it to entertain. In fact, they actually get resentful about being asked to be teenagers and really resist the request to write about teen issues. They don’t like clichés.

What this realization has done for me is given me permission to take a little bit of artistic control back. I can now feel comfortable relaxing away from the idea of having the creation
of the show be entirely driven by the students, and can
confidently come to the next Edge with a pre-determined story
structure and get them to fill it in with their ideas. I feel as
though this will go a long way toward increasing their buy-in
into the process. They’ll know that they are creating a
narrative together about a certain subject, which will give them
something to lean on in the first weeks.

More than that, if we want to keep The Edge Project alive and
well, I think it behooves us to keep building on its success and
continuing to strive to make it a bigger and more impressive
artistic accomplishment.

Even at the end of the project, the Artist is still looking for ways to balance comfort
and discomfort as well as process and product. The Artist hopes that by offering
slightly fewer “unknowns” at the beginning of the project, the creative product will
be “more impressive”.

For Green Thumb Theatre to continue to provide programming like the Edge
Project, it is important to understand the benefits to their organization and to the
wider community of arts programmers and educators, beyond the artistic and
educational outcomes of the creative process and performance for the individual.
The research reveals that the project has cross benefits for the participants as well
as for Green Thumb and TYA as a whole.
By its nature as Theatre for Young Audiences, Green Thumb has responsibility to “Theatre” as well as to its “Young Audiences”. As Ardal (2003) reminds us:

Much as TYA has enriched the lives of children, it should also enrich the general world of theatre. (192)

To “enrich the general world of theatre”, TYA must avoid getting lost in the pursuit of educational value in neglect of artistic value. In fact, recognizing the intersubjectivity of the aesthetic and the educational is not only central to the Artist’s role in designing the Edge Project but is at the heart of TYA’s occupation of the space between Art and Education. According to Matthew Reason:

The aesthetic perspective, the engagement with theatre as art and for pleasure, is often neglected in considering all the other good things theatre might do--although the real danger is that without being good in its own right theatre may not be able to do good at all (Reason, 2010, 4)

In short: for theatre to “do good” it has to first “be good“. To fulfill its mandate, Green Thumb needs to continue creating new and relevant plays for young people, of the highest quality. The Edge Project benefits Green Thumb because it gives the company a chance to encounter their audience not just as spectator and performer but as creative co-collaborators, which is a unique and fertile ground for new connections. Coming down from the stage and working at eye-level with its audience offers Green Thumb the chance to develop new material that connects more closely with the young people it aims to serve. As van de Water (2012) reminds us, “Rarely is [the] child audience taken into account as actively
contributing to production and change.” (43). In offering the participants of the Edge Project a different way to experience theatre, Green Thumb benefits because its audience grows not only in numbers but in sophistication and interest. Through the lens of audience development, programs like the Edge Project also benefit the wider world of TYA and theatre in general.

By re-orienting the project towards artistic vision, the Artist aims to increase the profile of the Edge Project which may draw an even wider audience, a clear benefit to Green Thumb, but also an opportunity to create higher stakes and payoff in performance for the participants. In the “be good” and “do good” paradigm of TYA, it is evident that the benefits of an endeavour like the Edge Project are best understood as mutualistic.

Here, the Edge Project embodies the great balancing act of TYA: suspended between the competing but overlapping and intersubjective needs of “Art” and “Education“. After all, Art and Education are not really competing with one another. They offer a healthy tension which, as we have seen in the Edge Project, is the very location of creation. By not only recognizing but also embracing its position in the space between, TYA has a unique opportunity to witness, engage with, foster, and amplify the voices of young people, while also providing spaces to explore and promote the shared values and aspirations at the heart of art, education, and society at large. As D. W. Gotshalk writes,
...art has at least two central values. It is a spiritual asset, yielding to
the members of society a large variety of immediate goods which in
themselves have a justification that is positive and decisive. It is also
a civilizing force, capable of exerting social influence along two
different lines. It can make innumerable specific contributes to an
enlightened social life [...] and it can make at least three major broad
contributions—developing the capacities, the value range and the
personality of the individual; fostering a sense of human dignity; and
providing a vision of human purpose in ideal embodiment that can
serve as a guide for both personal and group life. (1947, 217)

Looking ahead to the next Edge Project reminds me of the impermanence of the
performance and the community that we worked so hard to create. The Edge
Project is an organic action site of learning, changed by the presence and actions of
each participant, artist, student and teacher and hopefully, the participant, artist,
student, and teacher also find themselves changed.

I: Now that it is all over, how would you describe your
experience of the Edge Project?

CREATURE: Absolutely positive because I've never done drama before. All
the feeling of a team working together and the audience and
the feeling of people appreciating what you've done is like
something new for me. It's something real. It's something I've
never tried before. Maybe now I tell you I’m really positive about it but I know there was a moment where it was really hard.

The Creature’s reflection is of value to Green Thumb, TYA, educators, and theatre-makers. She has witnessed change in herself. The Creature describes her experience as new, looks back on it has positive, acknowledges the challenges, and most importantly, she recognizes that the experience is at once individual and collective. Remembering that Esposito’s definition of community, “it is gift and obligation, benefit and service rendered, joining and threat”, we can see that the balancing act of inter-subjectivity extends beyond art and education to the individual and the collective. As Greene (1995) instructs, creating and engaging with community is about “reaching towards some common world (39)” by finding ways of being together. The Edge Project offers one such way.

As we mourn the end of the Project, and witness the slow dissolution of the community discovered and nurtured, the Creature reminds me that the learning is taking place across planes of both individual and shared experiences, in a temporal expanse that is not limited to the “Edge Project”, its spaces, community, or its carefully delineated goals. Even in her own memory, that which was once hard and frustrating has become something that she celebrates. The shifting and overlapping interludes of relational engagement, ways of seeing, perceptions, moments of
engaging with the unseen, make it difficult to assign any sense of permanence when reflecting on outcomes for the individual or immediate community.

The reimagined community that Green Thumb sought to create in the Edge Project, and all those that we are trying to make in collective creation projects, may be temporary but what one may come to learn can echo through our other social configurations, interactions, and connections. *The value exists in creating these spaces of vulnerability even if the community is temporary; the creative experience of co-creating through theatre offers new learning, new understanding of theatre, new understanding of oneself and others, new ways of engaging in the world.*

Being and becoming ethical is a social project, not an individual journey. Values are not acquired from outside us, but rather, they are forged in dialogue among people and texts. (Edmiston, 2000, 64)

**Changing the World.**

In honour of the naive, idealistic, younger me sitting in an acting class on a sweltering New York summer day, I want the lessons of the Edge Project to contribute to, support, and challenge, the theatre/theatre-makers, especially in Theatre for Young Audiences, to indeed "make the world a better place". I want to imagine a world where TYA seizes the opportunity to co-create spaces of vulnerability with young people so that they, through openness to risk and failure, compassion and reciprocal care, may learn how to access authenticity, empathy, trust, and respect in their inter-personal exchanges and encounters.

In their mutual ambition to investigate what it means to be human, practitioners of Professional Theatre and Education both need to learn how to cultivate co-created
spaces of vulnerability, no matter how temporary, to serve their individual (and overlapping) purposes: the theatre to produce actors, playwrights, and plays, able to connect to/engage with/inspire/challenge an audience; Education to create opportunities for engagement, learning, and development of an empathic/compassionate/ethical citizenry.

While it may seem that they are coming to the Edge Project from different sides, with different expectations, at their heart, Education and Theatre both seek a vital enlivening space for social and ethical engagement, to speak to and enact the humanity that dwells within and between us.

True, gut-level drama has to do with what you at your deepest level want to know about what it is to be human. (Wagner on Heathcote's philosophy 1976, 76)

Be a human being who works off what exists under imaginary circumstances. Don’t give a performance. Let performance give you. (Meisner, 1987, 125)

From the ‘Heathcotes’ of drama and education, and the ‘Meisners’ engaged in training actors—we are all trying to access and enact what it is to be human. If we learn more about what it is to be human, within the educational theatrical space of TYA, we may come to create a longer lasting shared ethical commitment to each other and all that is not yet known. The gift of TYA is its potential to offer that possibility to students, teachers, and artists who are willing to occupy the space between.

In the garden.

I: Do you think this is a good place to stop?
He: Do you?
I: I don’t know.
He: Are you finished?
I: I don’t know.
He: What do you still want to say?
I: Do you think it mattered?
He: Yes. Do you?
I: I hope so.
He: Did it matter to the Creature who had her first positive experience with drama?
I: Yes.
He: Did it matter to you?
I: Yes.
He: Isn’t that the point?
I: What?
He: To share what matters to you?
I: I hope so. Otherwise this is a very long and futile exercise.
He: What happens next?
I: I don’t know.
He: Are you scared?
I: Terrified.
He: Good.
I: Why?
He: Because. “He who desires nothing, hopes for nothing, and is afraid of nothing cannot be an artist” – Chekov
I: I can’t believe it’s over.
He: It isn’t.
I: I know.

Maybe it is impossible to find a graceful exit because I am looking for an ending where there isn’t one. The White Rabbit still has a long way to go to get to the “end” of my story in theatre and in education—there is no time for stopping... it is all about
starting something. The participants of the Edge Project will carry forward in their learning, and I in mine, Masters, Creatures, and Artists all. Like the garden, the stairs of the acting school, and the long nights of cross-country driving, the Edge Project is only a marker on my journey-map: A rest-stop with a beautiful view. A place to sit, reflect, cry, laugh, and wonder, before picking up the pieces I need and stepping forward, although afraid, although vulnerable, on to the next stage.

Exit.

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39 See Ricketts (2011) for her discussion on arrival as opportunity for new departure.
References


