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# The tyranny of emotional distance?: Emotion/al work and emotional labour in applied theatre projects

## **ABSTRACT**

*Taking as its theoretical starting point Sheila Preston's (2013) discussion of emotional labour and the applied theatre facilitator, we examine how emotional labour in the applied theatre space might manifest through the experiences of not only the facilitator, but the participants as well. Our investigation is based on the work of The Community Theatre (TCT) project, a drama-based group in Singapore that enlists youth volunteers from low- and middle-income backgrounds to co-create shows that reflect on the social challenges faced by children and families from low socio-economic backgrounds. Drawing on interviews, reflective journals and workshop notes, we identify two significant moments that emerged out of TCT's work, where the practice of emotional labour by the facilitator and participants became evident. We suggest that the implications of participants managing their emotions during the applied theatre process can offer some insight into the need for facilitators to create opportunities for suppressed feelings experienced by both facilitators and participants to be critically engaged with. We begin to articulate the importance of a*

## **KEYWORDS**

applied theatre  
community theatre  
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*critical emotional praxis (Chubbuck and Zembylas 2006) to navigate what we have termed the 'tyranny of emotional distance' in applied theatre work – the perceived negative effects caused by constant emotional management.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

*(Narrated by Izzaty)*

I had reached home after what I thought was a particularly successful drama session with the young people I work with, where we had been exploring issues of family and connectedness. As I was settling down to unwind after a long day of work, I received a message on my mobile. Anton, one of the participants who lived in a disadvantaged neighbourhood, asked if he could call me and I of course agreed, sensing that something might be wrong. When his number flashed on my phone, I answered. He sounded extremely upset, telling me that he could not stand being at home and that his parents had been pressuring him to buy a house even though he was only seventeen. He shared further how the session earlier got him thinking about how 'shitty' he felt his family life was. Earlier that evening, I had been telling the group about my family and how connected we were, which made Anton reflect on his own strained relationship with his family and how he envied the type of relationship I had with mine. I was taken by surprise when he told me that, because I had not picked up on any emotional clues from Anton; throughout the session, there had been no indication that betrayed his true emotions and it made me feel guilty that I had caused him to feel that way. We ended our conversation three hours later.

The excerpt narrated by Izzaty offers a glimpse into the kind of emotional work in which both applied theatre facilitators and participants engage. In her vignette, Izzaty considers how, as a facilitator, she had failed to be attentive to the sensitivities in the room, thereby inadvertently affecting one of her participants. This realization evoked a sense of self-blame, which is a common emotional challenge encountered by applied theatre facilitators – especially those who work in communities with high needs (Preston 2013). Anton's reaction also demonstrates how participants themselves can experience a conflict between what is felt and what is shown. This incident thus prompted us to consider more closely how emotion/al work and subsequently emotional labour (stemming from the influential work of Hochschild 2012), operates in an applied theatre context, and what its effect might be on both facilitators and participants.

This article considers the work of The Community Theatre (TCT) project, a drama-based group in Singapore led by Izzaty. TCT is a youth development program initiated by a voluntary welfare organization called Beyond Social Services; it enlists youth volunteers to co-create shows that engage audiences to reflect on the social challenges faced by children and families from low socio-economic backgrounds. These performances tour various rental flat communities, which are considered the social housing sector in Singapore. The performances offer the participants the opportunity to contribute to their own community despite their challenging circumstances, and they encourage community members to take responsibility for addressing the social issues affecting them. It is also worthwhile to note that Izzaty's work as a theatre

facilitator intersects with her role as a community worker, which means that she engages with the TCT participants in more than one capacity, and interacts with some of the young people outside of TCT's work.

In the following sections, we first draw on discussions into emotion/al work and emotional labour, particularly in relation to professional contexts where caring relationships are essential (Noddings 1984). This brief outline of the field is then followed by empirical examples that have emerged from our discoveries made into the experience of two TCT participants, which we elaborate as separate encounters. In sharing their experiences, we begin to articulate the need for a critical emotional praxis that serves to deal with what we have termed the 'tyranny of emotional distance', referring to the perceived negative effects caused by constant emotion management – a term used to describe how 'individuals control, manage their emotions to make sure that they are expressed in a way that is consistent with social norms or expectations' (Isenbarger and Zembylas 2006: 123), explained in more detail in this article. The data that inform our research into the effect of emotional labour on participants and facilitators involved in TCT come from workshop notes, interviews with participants and research conversations between the co-authors.

## **EMOTION/AL WORK AND EMOTIONAL LABOUR IN CARING CONTEXTS**

As highlighted in the introduction, work in applied theatre contexts can require a high level of emotional input from facilitators and participants alike. In this section, we offer a brief discussion on caring and caring professions, and explore how emotion/al work operates within these contexts. We then outline some of the distinctions between emotion/al work and emotional labour, signalling the usefulness of examining its effects on those who are 'cared for'.

In the opening vignette, it is quite apparent how much Izzaty cares for her participants, as demonstrated by her willingness to spend three hours talking to Anton after the incident. Even though Isenbarger and Zembylas (2006: 123) write in the context of teaching, we see an alignment between the work of teachers and that of applied theatre facilitators in this regard when they state:

Taking the time to listen to students' problems or worries, giving advice or guidance to them, and showing warmth and love are all examples of emotional work in teaching. Thus, emotional work is clearly one of the ways caring is built in relationships between teachers and students.

Even more telling is O'Connor's (2008: 117) argument that this kind of caring extends beyond the classroom, and in our example beyond the site of the applied theatre work. Preston's (2013: 243) acknowledgement that applied theatre facilitators working in high-density urban settings provide care to vulnerable young people and build positive relationships with them further supports our view that the work of applied theatre facilitators needs to be considered alongside that of other caring professions, such as teaching and nursing.

Gkonou and Miller (2017) recognize the significant scholarship of Nel Noddings (1984) on the concept of caring, and articulate how in professions that are guided by an ethic of care, caring is seen not as a 'psychological state or innate tribute', but rather as 'a set of relational practices that foster mutual recognition and human community, culture, and possibility' (cited in Gkonou and Miller 2017: 2). This idea of the relational is at the centre of

caring professions, where there is an emphasis on 'receptivity, relatedness and responsiveness' (Isenbarger and Zembylas 2006: 122). Elaborating on the work of Noddings (1984), Isenbarger and Zembylas (2006: 122) point out that a caring relationship can only exist when both parties – that is, 'the "carer" and the "cared-for" – contribute appropriately'. They acknowledge, however, that the nature of certain contexts means that these relationships are unequal, with one person often having 'exclusive responsibility' as carer.

The emotional investment on the part of the 'carer' – teacher, nurse, or applied theatre worker – can consequently exert a toll on the carer's emotional reserves. It requires the carer to 'give of themselves', resulting in 'personal costs in terms of feeling drained or exhausted' (McQueen 2004: 104). In particularly challenging situations, it can be difficult to be 'warm and loving' – for example, 'towards a child who kicks, screams, and insults you [and this] requires *emotion work*' (Hochschild 2012: 47, emphasis added). Here we need to explain our shift from using the term 'emotional work' to 'emotion work'. While some studies appear to use them indiscriminately (see McQueen 2004; Näring, Vlerick and Van de Ven 2012; Zikhali and Perumal 2016), we understand the term 'emotion work' to mean:

Efforts made to understand others, to have empathy with their situation, to feel their feelings as part of one's own. [It] refers to the intention as well as actions to improve how others feel. This implies the development of 'emotional understanding'.

(Isenbarger and Zembylas 2006: 123)

On the other hand, emotion work – or emotion management (synonymous terms as proposed by Hochschild 2012: 29) – refers more closely to the need to alter one's emotional state to render it appropriate for a particular situation. It comprises the ways by which 'individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions' (Gross, cited in O'Toole 2017: 518). Even attempting to shift from a negative to a positive frame of mind can be considered emotion work (Preston 2013: 232). As suggested at the end of the introduction, having to control and express one's emotions according to the social norms is a form of emotion work. The level of emotional work that constitutes the caring professions can therefore require constant emotion management in order to 'produce the proper state of mind in others' (Hochschild 2012: 20).

When emotions are marketized and workers' emotions are dictated according to the feeling rules of an organization – that is, the professional and cultural boundaries of the setting (Preston 2009: 233) – emotion management becomes emotional labour. Informed by a Marxist framework, Hochschild's (2012) conceptualization of emotional labour proposes that emotions are a commodity to be sold in the workplace (see also Preston 2013). Emotions have commercial use, and are 'processed, standardized, and subjected to hierarchical control'; the feeling rules of a workplace or organization will outline what is 'rightly owed and owing in the currency of feeling' (Hochschild 2012: 27, 105). In a caring profession such as teaching, teachers perform emotional labour when they 'underplay, overplay, neutralize or change [their emotions] according to specific emotional rules ... in order to advance educational goals' (Isenbarger and Zembylas, 2006: 122).

It is beyond the scope of this article to offer an extensive review of emotional labour in the caring professions, but Sheila Preston's (2013) article offers critical

insight into the emotional labour of the applied theatre worker. In particular, she highlights the emotional costs of applied theatre facilitators having to navigate between their personal feelings and beliefs, and their professional roles. She raises how ‘competing priorities’ make this even more challenging – especially when applied theatre facilitators are aware that their decisions and actions can affect those who commission and oversee the work (2013: 239). Moreover, there is ‘the constant surveillance by partners and funders, all potentially viewing the work with different agendas’ (Preston 2013: 241).

The focus on workers and providers of care in the literature on emotional labour prompted us to consider whether or not emotional labour has any effect on the ‘recipients’ of these caring relationships. In our case, ‘recipients’ refers to the participants involved in applied theatre work. We acknowledge that the emotional cost of managing one’s feelings as a participant differs from that experienced by the facilitator, and that participants coming into an applied theatre space are not bound in the same way as facilitators might be by market-led agendas. Nonetheless, participants in applied theatre projects – particularly in the case of TCT – create work as a form of service to their communities, and likewise can be impacted by wider organizational structures. The implications of participants managing their emotions can thus offer some insight into the need for applied theatre facilitators to create opportunities for reflection, where suppressed feelings experienced by both facilitators and participants can be critically engaged with.

#### **‘EVEN THOUGH I FELT TRIGGERED, I JUST KEPT QUIET’: PARTICIPANTS’ EXPERIENCES OF EMOTION MANAGEMENT**

After the inciting incident involving Anton’s phone call to Izzaty, we wanted to investigate whether other participants in the group were similarly feeling the need to regulate their emotions during TCT workshops. In our interviews with the young people, however, their responses often seemed to suggest they felt they could be honest with their feelings. Even when there were glimpses into possible emotion management, these appeared relatively minor. For instance, Eddie, a 15-year-old participant, shared how he did not agree with another participant’s reactions to her father’s upcoming release from prison. Eddie’s own father had been incarcerated and he talked about his feelings during the workshop:

I couldn’t believe that [participant] didn’t know how to handle her situation. If it were me, I would know how to handle it. If my father comes out, I will be happy to see him. I didn’t want to say how I felt because I didn’t want to cause any drama. It’s between her and her family.  
(Interview, 11 January 2018)

Another participant, Farhana, said that at times she had felt

slightly annoyed because everyone wouldn’t take [the workshops] seriously. I didn’t want to shout. If I had shouted, the entire night I would be pissed off. So I’m just like, *I’m fine*. That’s it.  
(Interview, 6 January 2018)

Based on our awareness of the high level of emotional stakes involved in the work of TCT, it seemed curious to us that the participants were responding

in this way. We wondered whether the constant emphasis on respecting one another during the workshops had any influence on the feedback offered by the participants. It was not until we interviewed two of the more senior members of TCT, Dre and Anton himself, that we began to develop a greater understanding of the experience of emotion management by participants.

## ENCOUNTER 1

The group had been devising a scene involving a young child who had refused to go to school since his mother's death. Izzaty wanted the participants to explore potential reasons that would further contribute to the protagonist's unwillingness to go to school and asked them to adopt a role and speak lines that would intensify the protagonist's oppression. When Izzaty attempted to get the participants to create a soundscape made up of those oppressive statements, the participants could not commit to the activity and kept giggling throughout. Izzaty felt that the group was not emotionally connecting with the scene, but had a gut feeling that some of the young people might have adults in their lives who have faced incarceration and was curious to know whether they had absent parents. Izzaty spontaneously asked the young people whether they knew anyone who had been or was in jail. More than half the participants in the room put their hands up in response.

In that moment, Izzaty felt overwhelmed, as if she had 'opened up a can of worms' (personal communication). It can be said that Izzaty had a 'triggered reaction', where she experienced an 'unexpected, intense emotional reaction that seems disproportionate to the original stimulus' (Obear 2013: 152). Instead of displaying these feelings, she maintained a countenance of being in control because she needed to promptly address the situation. In our research conversation, Izzaty acknowledged that one of the rules in her line of work was the need to be empathetic, but felt that in this situation she simply did not know how to empathize. She also explained that 'there are so many ways to *act* empathetic' (personal conversation); however, she could not bring herself to be disingenuous by faking her emotions. Instead, she deferred to Dre, a 19-year old participant who had been involved in TCT for almost three years. Izzaty believed that Dre would be better able to facilitate the group as she had the lived experience and was emotionally close to the issue of incarcerated parents. Dre, being put in charge, then spoke earnestly and kindly to the group about her personal story and ended with strong words of encouragement, which she directed especially to the younger children.

In an interview with Dre after the encounter, she revealed that she had initially felt very angry when she saw how many of the younger children in the group had parents who had been or were incarcerated:

These kids, they don't deserve this! They deserve so much better – parents who give them whatever they need, and they don't have to worry about how much pocket money they have, or how they live their daily life. I feel it's unfair. Why do we have to go through this? Just – why? Like, their parents had a choice whether or not to do [the crime], and they chose to do it – you *know* you have children! And now your children are here with us sharing this, and there you are serving your sentence because of your own stupidity (clicks tongue).

(Interview, 29 December 2017)

When asked why she felt she had to suppress her anger, Dre responded:

I kept them in and was just questioning why these people have to make the lives of their children, their wives so hard ... I kept it in because I didn't want to hear things I didn't want to hear. I didn't want to hear people saying to me stuff like, 'You should be more forgiving, you should be more understanding' ... It's just unfair. The kids *know* it's happening, but they don't have any answers. Why do they have to question that? It's not fair.

(Interview, 15 January 2018)

Instead of voicing these feelings to the group, she redirected her inner thoughts outwardly as words of wisdom to the participants:

Never blame your parents. If you know this is not the life you want your future kids to have, then study hard. People always say it will get better, but I know it won't. Prove everyone wrong. Stay in school. Make the right choice in life.

(Workshop notes, 26 July 2017)

In Dre's case, she had to engage in emotional labour in order to manage her deep-seated feelings of injustice at the situation the younger participants in the group were going through. Her own personal experience allowed her to empathize with the younger children; however, she felt she could not outwardly express her anger for fear of having her negative emotions trivialized – in this case, she was concerned about being told that she should be understanding towards her father. There was also a sense that an outburst of anger would disrupt the feelings of safety for the younger participants, and Dre's strategy for navigating these strong feelings was to help the children feel that 'there is a light at the end of the road' (Dre, interview, 15 January 2018). Dre was in a position where she took on the responsibility for providing a caring relationship for the group. In this context, it appears that the emotional dissonance actually yielded a positive outcome and made Dre's emotional labour worthwhile, thereby affirming previous studies that argued how emotional labour can be rewarding and joyful (Humphrey, Ashforth and Diefendorff 2015; Isenbarger and Zembylas 2006).

## ENCOUNTER 2

This second example emerged from a recent collaboration between TCT and a group of students from a post-secondary educational institution (referred to hereafter as the partnering group). The aims of this collaboration were to engage the young people from both TCT and the partnering group to create awareness about social issues occurring in rental flat communities through an interactive performance. In addition, the project sought to educate the partnering group on how theatre could be used for social action, rather than just a form of entertainment.

Preston (2013: 231) explains how applied theatre facilitators engage in emotional labour in spaces of dilemma, where 'market-led agendas' can come into conflict with one's personal moral objectives. During this collaboration, Izzaty encountered numerous instances of having to contend with this tension. For instance, the teacher from the partnering

group wanted the interactive section of the performance removed for fear that it would be waste of time for the audience. Additionally, any feedback that the teacher provided to the young people was done in a way that Izzaty felt was humiliating and disparaging. There was a sense of false individual ownership of the project that the teacher was displaying, which seemed to be related to protecting her reputation. These attitudes were in direct opposition to the moral obligations of TCT, which seek to engage audiences in active reflection as well as supporting community spirit and ownership.

It is also important to acknowledge that participants can experience similar struggles, especially when they have a strong moral obligation to the work. When interviewed, Anton reflected that:

They [the majority of the partnering group] weren't really doing it for the community. I had the urge to tell them, 'This is not working out because you guys are thinking a different way, you guys are not putting your heart and soul into the show.' But I controlled myself.

(Interview, 19 December 2017)

During one of the sessions, Izzaty noticed that Anton had calmly walked out of the room when the teacher from the educational institution was addressing the group. We later learnt that Anton had had to excuse himself because he was fuming:

*Anton:* Even though I felt triggered, I just kept quiet ... she [the teacher] kept talking to us like the play belonged to her! Obviously not! I felt like I was her student. She kept talking about her own image, like (imitates the teacher), 'Is this the play I want? If people talk about this play, I will feel so embarrassed.' And I was just like [sighs], 'If I had the guts to rage, I would have. I would have said, "Shut the F\*\*\* up and go away!"'

*Natalie:* So what happened when you walked off? Did you just calm down?

*Anton:* Yeah, I just calmed down. I didn't say anything. It's so unnecessary, it's not important at all, being a good actor. As long as you have a message, people will understand. The teacher and some of those students didn't care about the community.

(Interview, 14 January 2018)

Anton's emotional investment in the work meant that he felt responsible for creating a performance that would serve the members of his community. He was also conscious of possible undesirable consequences if he failed to manage his emotions:

I didn't want spoil anything ... I didn't want to disappoint Izzaty, make her look bad. And I didn't want people to be affected by [my reaction].

(Interview, 14 January 2018)

Another insightful discovery was made when Anton further shared the following in his interview:

After one of the sessions, I was heading home with Izzaty, and she suddenly talked about one of the guys in the group who didn't really care about the community. I was so shocked when she said that, because she doesn't show any emotion at all – she was so happy all the time that it got me thinking, 'Izzaty, don't you feel this is way different to what TCT is about?'

(Interview, 14 January 2018)

In an earlier conversation between Izzaty and Anton, they discussed this realization:

*Anton:* I was so surprised that you [Izzaty] felt the same way. I was so scared to tell you, because I thought you were so 'on' with them, that you were so excited to work with them! I thought you were so happy all the time to work with them! I thought in your mind, you were thinking, 'They're really doing a good job, I love them so much!'

*Izzaty:* I felt the same way. It was very draining. For the wrong reasons, it was draining. But I don't know ... sometimes I find myself not wanting to influence you guys to feel how I feel about this. I want you guys to have your own thoughts – I think that's why I didn't show you how I felt because I was trying to be fair, but I couldn't *tahan* [deal with] it.

(Interview, 19 December 2017)

This confession highlights how the emotional labour of the facilitator can inadvertently affect the participants, who read the facilitator's displayed emotions as a cue for the way they should perform their own emotions. As a result, participants can begin to engage in their own forms of emotional labour, potentially causing them to struggle with having to manage their real feelings.

### **CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: FROM A TYRANNY OF EMOTIONAL DISTANCE TO A CRITICAL EMOTIONAL PRACTICE**

It is clear that through the provision of caring relationships, applied theatre facilitators engage in emotional labour. Their emotional resources can, however, become strained when their commitment to the work comes into conflict with marketized expectations of the workplace, such as proving results (Preston 2013). In Izzaty's case, one strong experience of emotional labour was having to express a jovial exterior despite being emotionally drained. She had to navigate between her deep moral commitment to the work and her care for her participants, and the collegial relationship expected of her as a professional.

Our research suggests that it is equally important to see how emotion management and emotional labour affect applied theatre participants. This is especially important in a context that is informed by social justice, where participants have high degree of emotional investment in creating awareness about social inequalities and are acting as agents of change. In both the encounters examined, the applied theatre facilitator and the participants could be considered to have undergone parallel journeys of emotional labour, even though the types of emotions being regulated and the reasons for regulating

them might have differed. Preston (2013: 243) comments on the need for a political pedagogy to allow for a more 'complex awareness of how emotion is utilized by wider structures of power'; these structures frame the 'rules for how we should both see and feel reality'. She extends the discussion by asking how we can enact a pedagogy that 'enables distinctions to be made between emotions arising from or driven by defensive, moral and/or political positions'.

In response, we suggest that a space needs to be created where both facilitators and participants can engage in what Chubbuck and Zembylas (2008) refer to as 'critical emotional praxis', where emotional resistance to what we perceive as unjust systems and practices informs and supports socially just work/practice. In the context of Dre's experience, this would mean that 'unsavoury' emotions such as anger need not necessarily be distanced or suppressed in order to maintain the notion of 'safety'; rather, it would entail a careful and critical unpacking of 'comfort zones to deconstruct the ways in which [we] have learned to see, feel, and act' (2008: 307). Facilitators will need to consider how to approach feelings such as anger and indignation, and how to frame discussions around them to create a deeper understanding that such emotions are actually central to those who 'yearn for social justice' (Freire 2004: xi). Admittedly, this is not an easy task – especially in the context of TCT, with its participants' varying levels of emotional maturity. Perhaps future research may seek out more practical approaches to address this complex issue.

Through our discoveries, we have also learnt that facilitators do not need to engage in emotional labour as a solitary journey, and that a community of coping can be created with participants who share the same obligations, thereby finding an 'associational solidarity within the labour process' (Korczynski 2003: 58). It is crucial, though, that this approach does not become an opportunity to simply vent these 'undesirable' emotions, as Fineman and Sturdy (cited in Korczynski 2003: 58) suggest. Rather, a shared emotional understanding of the importance of the work can strengthen relationships between facilitators and participants. A critical emotional praxis can thus be useful for examining and hopefully resisting the power relations exerted on the moral and political objectives of facilitators and participants creating work for disadvantaged communities, sustaining them in their 'fight' for the betterment of society.

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## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

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Natalie and Izzaty are collaboratively exploring the possibilities of research and practice through friendship as method and narrative inquiry.

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