

CHAPTER 11

Promoting Ownership through Joint Improvisation on Ephemeral Ideas: Lessons for the Field of Social Work from Exploring the Methods of Theater nonStop, a Professional Ensemble of Artists with Intellectual Disabilities

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Abstract: Teater nonStop is an ensemble of 15 professional actors with intellectual disabilities. Its original goal is political, stated to be societal change through advocacy of the actors' perspectives through art, as well as a learning arena for social educator students. To succeed, it has developed its own working methods to promote ownership of the artistic product. This is knowledge that can benefit the field of social work, based on documented challenges to fulfil similar objectives. This chapter seeks to explore what dimensions of Theatre nonStop's ways of working help to promote such ownership. The research material consists of a conversation between the artistic director and me, the author, articulated as a constructed narrative of our common understanding, built through our collaboration over time, describing both cross-sections and contrasts between the fields of art and social work. The core elements are understood and explained, utilising the author's previous research on residential care homes. This discussion reveals a contrast between Teater nonStop's methods and the institutionalised logic of the residences, rooted in a diametrically different philosophy in which creative work succeeds by offering empowering levels of openness and recognition.

Keywords: disability arts theatre, intellectual disability, improvisation, social work, human rights

Citation: Guddingsmo, H. (2024). Promoting Ownership through Joint Improvisation on Ephemeral Ideas: Lessons for the Field of Social Work from Exploring the Methods of Theater nonStop, a Professional Ensemble of Artists with Intellectual Disabilities. In V. Glørstad, T. P. Østern, T. McCaffrey, K. Chikongo & N. Chivandikwa (Eds.), *Theatre and Performing Arts, Disability Citizenship and Community Development – Perspectives from the Global South and North* (pp. 235–254). Cappelen Damm Akademisk. <https://doi.org/10.23865/noasp.226.ch11>

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Line: What did I say that time, then?

Me: You said something like: “I don’t know what we’re going to do, but there will be a Christmas show, and I have such an idea. I envision an image of a fur coat”.

Line: Yes! (Laughs).

The above quote refers to a conversation between Line, the manager and artistic director of Teater nonStop, and me, a social researcher exploring everyday life in group-homes for persons with intellectual disabilities. We have been collaborating through our institutions for 10 years, with me having follow-up responsibility for social educator students whose practice arena is the theatre. This conversation became crucial to my professional understanding by pointing out important differences between Teater non-Stop’s work-forms and the field of social work, with which I am connected through my research.

The fact that Line based something as important as an artistic production on something as ephemeral as envisioning a fur coat, represented a stark contrast to more purposeful and rule-bound ideals within social work. The contrast represented an anomaly: an undefined – but gradually redemptive – picture of the inherent possibilities in theatre’s working methods. It would therefore be interesting to let the anomaly become a contribution to knowledge, by exploring it and explaining it in light of theory (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This can help explain why one succeeds through disability arts, but not quite through social work, despite relatively similar intentions to realise social participation through self-determined and/or participatory processes, based on ownership of perspectives.

There has long existed a significant amount of professional artist ensembles within the field of disability arts, which focus on promoting the perspectives of people with intellectual disabilities. These ensembles have arisen on the basis of the problem that people with intellectual disabilities are not taken seriously as artists (Hargrave, 2015). However, in these ensembles people with intellectual disabilities have strong ownership of their own artistic expression from processes of co-production. Simultaneously, it is a well-known challenge within social work that the field’s own ideals of realising basic human rights, such as participation in society and self-determination, are not fulfilled (Mapp et al., 2019). These are values that must also be founded on the individual’s ownership of the perspective to be realised. Therefore, one has the potential to learn

through examining the working methods of the theatre, by seeing these in contrast to social work in order to build the foundation for new, improved practice. In this way, it will be interesting to use the experience-based knowledge Teater nonStop has developed over many years and write a chapter on what the field of social work can learn from disability arts to fulfil its actual mission.

The wonder of the anomaly led to a new conversation between Line and me, which became the data basis for this chapter. Here she described the working methods of the theatre based on the last two productions of the ensemble, and we analysed and explored them in light of findings from my own research. The result is a text that seeks to describe the theatre's working methods, and to understand them in contrast to a somewhat darker picture: exploring the contrast between what Ellen Saur and Oddbjørn Johansen (2013a) refer to as the art discourse and the help discourse. My purpose is not necessarily to provide a direct representation of reality, but rather to use knowledge that has been developed over time in Teater nonStop to improve social work practice by exploring the question: What dimensions of Teater nonStop's methods of creative work with actors with intellectual disabilities help to promote ownership in ways the field of social work can learn from?

First, I describe Teater nonStop, accompanied by a contextual description of social work in the everyday lives of persons with intellectual disabilities. Then follows a section on methodological approach, followed by analysis, and finally, discussion.

Teater nonStop

Teater nonStop is a professional theatre ensemble of 15 actors with intellectual disabilities and six social educator students, started in 2008 by Ellen Saur and Oddbjørn Johansen, as a research project in the social education programme of Nord-Trøndelag University College, now Nord University. Teater nonStop's stated purpose was political, contributing to social change by being a voice for people with intellectual disabilities as a group (Johansen & Saur, 2010). This happens through conveying the actors' own experiences and stories (Saur et al., 2012), promoting their aims and interests artistically and politically (Saur & Johansen, 2013b), plus developing tools in working with artistic processes (Saur & Johansen, 2013a).

Early key productions were *The Story of Me*, describing the actors' own thoughts and experiences, *A Cup of Coffee, Perhaps?*, a documentary piece about the actress "Anne" who was sent to a special school far away from her family as a child, and *I-You, Us-Them, Inside-Outside*, which explored contradiction and belonging through jazz improvisation and dance (Saur & Johansen, 2013a).

Since 2013, Teater nonStop has been owned by Namsos municipality and led by Line Strøm, a professional dancer and choreographer. The descriptions in this chapter are based on Line's work and methods developed from 2013, building on an already established foundation by Saur and Johansen. The ensemble has always practiced an exploratory approach, evolved by testing a variety of methods. With improvisation as an important element, themes initiated by the actors have been worked on to become plots and sequences (Saur et al., 2012). The work has, however, been further developed in recent artistic productions, notably through collaboration between Line and jazz musician Stina Moltu, in the productions *When the World Is Quiet* and *Sparkling Stick*. These were created through working with smaller parts, and pilot screenings, where one develops and tests material for larger productions over several years.

Some of the actors have worked in the ensemble since its inception, while the social educator students change every year. Therefore, students and actors are not equal in terms of artistic experience. The actors become carriers of the ensemble's culture, and are given a training function vis-à-vis the students, through the transfer of work methods and learning expressions and productions (Saur & Johansen, 2013b). This was also the background for the establishment of Teater nonStop as an alternative practice arena for social education students, justified by Saur and Johansen (2013a), by referring to the difference between a theatre-discourse and a help-discourse. The help discourse will be elaborated on in the next section, and is the one that characterises most lives of people with intellectual disabilities. The theatre discourse can be understood through the disability arts tradition. This has emerged as a criticism of the fact that artistic processes for people with intellectual disabilities have mainly had a therapeutic or educational focus, which provoked a movement demanding recognition as professional artists on a par with others (Hargrave, 2015). Teater nonStop can be framed within this discourse, by focusing mainly on the artistic product and performance (Hargrave, 2015).

Social work in everyday life for persons with intellectual disabilities

The help discourse can best be understood through existing knowledge of the everyday lives of people with intellectual disabilities, and their position in society. Historically, people with intellectual disabilities have experienced severe oppression, and are also currently marginalised due to low levels of citizenship and advocacy (Witsø & Hauger, 2020; Østern et al., 2023). Therefore, the services offered to the group in the Norwegian context are based on strong political intentions, with an emphasis on normalisation and human rights. Norway underwent a deinstitutionalisation reform in the 1990s, in which people with intellectual disabilities moved to live in ordinary homes receiving help in their own municipality (Tøssebro, 2019). Norway has further, in 2013, ratified The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, CRPD, from 2006 that consolidates the human rights of people with intellectual disabilities, by shifting several key paradigms thus enabling the achievement of human rights for the group (Skarstad, 2018). One moves away from a medical definition of disability based on the individual's impairment or diagnosis, to a human rights/relational understanding, in which disability is seen as the gap between the individual's prerequisites and the demands of society along with its disabling barriers (Molden & Tøssebro, 2009). Thus, it is emphasised that the achievement of human rights should not be dependent on the individual's specific capacity, but something that can be realised through supporting relations (Skarstad, 2018). In this way, lack of facilitation is understood as discrimination (Skarstad, 2019), and the convention marks the transition to a feminist orientation, where people are understood to be mutually dependent on each other (Mackenzie, 2019).

Although the definition of social work varies between countries, the field is based on a relatively common purpose and values, focusing on assisting vulnerable groups and ensuring human rights, especially related to self-determination and participation in society (International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), 2018). For people with intellectual disabilities in a Norwegian context, these empowering relations are assigned to the social educator profession, a uniquely Norwegian hybrid between social worker and nurse.

These ideals were the background for my own research, focused on the human right to self-determination for persons with intellectual disabilities

living in group homes. What I found is in line with existing research in the field, across borders, when the contexts are otherwise comparable. The right to self-determination was not realised due to institutionalisation within group-homes (Björnsdóttir et al., 2015; Guddingsmo, 2019; Löve et al., 2018; Murphy & Bantry-White, 2020). This climaxed when the participants stated, ‘The House decides.’ We see here a system where one is subject to norms one has little or no control over, one just had to comply (Guddingsmo, 2019). By this logic, staff became gatekeepers, with the power to inhibit or promote the individual’s power in everyday life (Guddingsmo, 2020). This created a situation of resignation, where they felt there was little point in putting their own perspectives into words – both because they thought they would not be accepted, but also from a lack of facilitation on the part of the staff to help uncover these perspectives (Guddingsmo, 2019). From this, my study revealed a need to develop methods to facilitate processes in which persons with intellectual disabilities themselves deliver the premises (Guddingsmo, 2022).

Method

The story of this chapter is based on a conversation between me and Line in the spring of 2022, dealing with the core of the working methods of the theater. It consisted of an already adapted narrative, created to accommodate our shared understanding, and encompassed what we perceived as interesting in the meeting between our academic communities. The focus was initiated by me, based on my knowledge of being involved in the work of the theater’s processes via the students, through whom I have developed an experience of issues I felt should be described and further explored. Similarly, Line’s storytelling is based on her own experiences of her work as artistic director. It describes how she prefers to work as an artist, but also her experiences of the best approach to use upon in the theater. Thus, the description becomes a narrative, which is a constructivist synthesis of our common reflections and experiences, our core opinion of the current “best practice” artistic work form of the ensemble.

Our joint experiences are further based upon arts-based, action-oriented, experimental processes conducted over a long period of time. This implies conducting research through artistic processes based on the ontology and epistemology of action research, whose purpose is to help the world fulfil its unfinished business by developing knowledge for the benefit of the

research participants (Finlay, 2011; Gergen & Gergen, 2008; Laursen, 2014). This implies, on the one hand, that knowledge lies implicit in the event itself – representing a form of causal truth by actually happening (Laursen, 2014). At the same time, knowledge is also developed over time through a constant spiraling process of action and reflection (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010). Thus, knowledge production is something that takes place primarily through practical implementation (Laursen, 2014). This chapter describes the result of such a process in terms of an experiential model, developed over time in interaction with actors, students, and other professional artists since 2014. The presented knowledge must therefore be understood as being based on years of analytical work, from within the theatre's constant reflective development processes.

Therefore, the research must also be recognised to include some autoethnographic aspects, being based on the lived experiences of myself as well as Line, making us both researchers and participants at the same time (Anderson, 2006). However, the material has been split in its further presentation. A description of the theatre work methods has been subjected to further analysis, while the perspectives from counter-descriptions of the field of social work form the basis for the framing and discussion part.

The conversation lasted one hour and 45 minutes, and was audio recorded and transcribed. Descriptions of the working methods of the theatre were further analysed by a narrative approach inspired by Catherine Riessman (2008), with the intention of keeping the story about the form of the work as intact as possible. The text was divided into sequences, which were each given a name and description, based on the theme they represented in the narrative. The content of these was further condensed, based on what could be interpreted to constitute the core of each theme. Thereby, the analysis distilled characteristic elements into a condensed narrative of Line's work. To tie this more closely to her voice, all quotes reproduced in this chapter are based solely on her statements.

Ethical considerations

Persons with intellectual disabilities may constitute a vulnerable group in research by being subject to the stigma of their diagnosis. Research on the group must therefore take special care not to exacerbate their position in any way, either personally or on the societal level. Therefore, the analyses in this chapter are based on technical descriptions of the actual working

methods, which are further understood on a general level, based on already published research that deals with the group per se, not the individual actors. Because of this, the strength that could have come from including the actors' own perceptions is missing. Simultaneously, the uncertainty embedded in the current description allows us to address issues that would be problematic if they had been linked to recognisable, employed actors.

The guiding principle of Teater nonStop is that students and actors participate equally in the artistic processes. However, there is a need for students to take on both helper and leadership roles in the daily running of the ensemble. Thereby a power imbalance may arise. That is why I use the terms "actor" and "student", respectively, even though they work together artistically.

Opening up the practice of leading Teater nonStop

In this sub-chapter I conduct a thematic analysis of the research material, the recorded conversation between me (the author) and Line. The main themes examined through the analysis are: *a process for ownership; interacting with abstract impulses; structured improvisation; individual diversity; and, a professional artist mindset.*

A process for ownership

I have always been fascinated by getting things out of individuals. ... That everything should be owned and personal, before it comes out in some expression.

Line describes this as her personal orientation, but also as an overarching goal of the theatre: to promote empowerment in the creative process, and ownership of the artistic product by the individual.

That's the way I like to work. And then of course it has to do with things I've done in the past as well, as a performing dancer, that it's sort of the way of working ... you get something personal from those you're working with.

The work is described as a process, starting with a basic idea initiated by Line as the artistic manager. This idea is focused on a main goal: That it will be a performance, but is otherwise very little bound by form. The process is open-ended:

A process that goes on, all the way until we finish the product. We don't know what happens through the process, right.

In this way, Line describes emphasising the promotion of ownership of the artistic product by the actors, by means of offering both an idea to hold on to, and an openness for actual involvement.

Interacting with abstract impulses

The performance is further built around developing expression based on input from abstract impulses, that sometimes appear ephemeral even to Line herself.

I do envision lots of images, all the time. It's like a... I don't know, it's like a dream often, or it becomes sort of fleeting, fragments like. Who gets meaning anyway and fits together in the end. ... It could be objects we're working on. Or clothes. Or costumes. Umbrellas. Anything.

The forms of expression are varied. Words do not have to be performed as text, but conveyed through song, as writing, or played as a soundtrack. Thus, the working method consists of working with fragments, images, and detached pieces, which become sequences that make sense and fit together in the end, in a holistic expression. The elaboration process is facilitated through active co-creation, where Line leads the processes interacting with the actors.

I'm open to anything they come up with ... some nuggets or something that we can work on. Or we get a new idea based on what they create. ... The production or what we're working on is constantly in that kind of flow, where one thing leads to something else, based on what they come up with. ... It could be a sentence in a text they've prepared. And somehow, then, where some symbolism emerges, for example, then ... I imagine something in the form of movement then, or physical theater, something that we can work specifically with, and explore.

The individual's personal quality of movement could be an impulse to base the work upon.

Quality of movement fascinates me. You move, that is, if you are out dancing, freely, then you have such peculiarity. ... And then, just to sort of, grab, exactly, your quality of movement. What can we make from it?

Concurrently, such important impulses can be anything, and appear at any time.

It happens in every rehearsal. These things. Something appears, either from something done, or a comment towards what we're doing. Something we can address somehow!

Thus, Line describes how artistic expression is created from the juxtaposition of a synthesis based on smaller components developed from what emerges in an abstract, impulsive landscape.

Structured improvisation

Further, the expression is created through improvisational processes, based on the individual qualities of the participation they have there and then. Working through such improvisation helps ensure ownership.

If it's short pieces of planned choreography, it is theirs too, because first it was made from improvisation. Where everyone participated, and we took care to include everyone's moves. And then maybe I can work on it afterwards, right, giving it a different quality or dynamic. Work on such things afterwards.

The improvisational approach is also included in the performances, which expand the possibilities for expression.

There is something about that space and that openness ... Something like that creates less stress, I think, for the actors. And there's another nerve in it too, because they have to constantly research what they're performing.

From this, the expression is perceived as more genuine, through being immediate. Simultaneously, the expression is held together through co-created processes, similar to the preparation phase, but now between actors and musicians.

Interaction is alternate. Sometimes it's the actors who get a cue from the music. And then other times, in the same scene, it's the actors who give a cue to the musicians.

So, the work is bound by what Line calls structured improvisation, as there are frameworks and/or a concrete focus to work upon.

... when we worked with tranquillity, a part of this water theme, then we worked on focusing on breath, and sort of feeling if the body is ever completely at rest. There's always something moving. And then they explored it sort of from the core of their bodies. And then the movements have evolved and increased, but all the movements come from breath and from the core. ... like water running in the body, or like insects. That's the starting point But you're standing in a space in the room, and then you can start moving on it. This is where the structured comes in, by researching different ways of getting movement out from the core.

Thus, structured improvisation promotes the actor's voice in the expression, by offering a framework for interactive collaboration, emphasising immediacy and genuineness.

Individual diversity

Line also bases the creation processes on adaptation to the individual preferences and needs of the actors.

Because they like different things. ... Some lean more towards instruments. Yes, some actors love to dance. Some would like to speak.

These preferences are likely interpreted from how the actors relate in the situation.

If we're working on something, and that person might not have been so into exactly that, but then suddenly that person pulls towards the band.

Concurrently, varied ways of working help to maintain concentration and interest among the actors.

It's something they've expressed themselves too Yes, it's cool that we work on this and that part before lunch, and then there's text work afterwards, or vice versa.

The individual's unique involvement can further become impulses for expression in the performance:

One day, an actor is working really well on what we're doing right then. Then this might become a solo.

Thus, individuals have room, while collaboration requires adaptation:

One has to learn to not lose what you're doing, but rather make what one is doing become part of what the others are doing.

However, this requires a special involvement on the part of the actors in terms of concentration and openness. In this way, the working form is described as flexible, offering space for individual diversity, to make the work inclusive and motivating. This same flexibility is simultaneously demanded from the actors, craving them to work professionally.

A professional artist mindset

That's what's so cool about the actors in the theater, that they're open to trying everything out. ... If you work with other professionals or in other arenas, schools and such, you can get a different attitude. You can't work well enough with what you want, because they might think things are a bit like... weird or lame, or 'I don't want to do this', but... Well, it's such a safe environment in the group, that they can go along, trying anything out. New things. ... So, there is such good focus and calm in the group, when we're working. Once we've finished talking, of course.

Thereby work in the theater is described as demanding for the actors, something that must be considered.

It can be demanding for anyone, to work physically and creatively. You have to think and come up with things during a whole working day. So, yes. ... Artists don't need breaks, right, but you have to have some breaks. A variety, who keep their focus and desire to contribute.

Simultaneously, Line acknowledges the challenge of resisting the impulse to keep going when in a productive state. There are proper artistic processes going on, with all that hard work entails. Thus, the students' function in the theatre depends on their being able to adopt an attitude as equal actors in a co-creative process and perceive themselves as artists. This can be demanding, since at the same time they are social educator students in the process of being socialised into a slightly different professional role.

I think, probably, at the start of the theatre practice, they suppose they're there as... helpers. When working creatively, it could be like: 'I'm not doing this movement,

I'm only here to make sure that she gets off the floor'. But they're not, right. ... They're there to be creative together. They don't always get that right away.

Line observes that the actors have high standards for their input, due to their openness towards explorative processes. This brings an artistic professionalism to their work, demanding that the social educator students follow up by interrelating on equal terms and perceiving themselves as artists. This shift, however, reveals conflicting definitions of the students' perception of being 'helpers' versus co-creators of art.

Providing space for creativity – a discussion bringing in theory

The analysis reveals a working method that is open-ended, process-oriented, and based on collaborative interaction between the actors, students, musicians and Line herself. As artistic director, she constantly retains some form of control of the process but bases it on focusing on promoting the voice of the actors through the work. This is resolved by beginning with fragmented inputs, and providing structured improvisations where actors explore based on their own impulses. Thus, the final product emerges from a collaboratively constructed framework, offering containment to further expression, which is improvised and immediate, while being jointly owned by all the performing artists. The working method thus consists of a synthesis of improvisational dance, music and theatre – because these are the approaches the instructors in Teater nonStop have used. Thus, principles of improvisation underlie the work form as a fundament. Line describes the method as being based on how she prefers and has learned to work, as an artist and through her education. From this, what is described is not specific to this ensemble, but represents common ways of working in similar artistic fields (Sommerro & Steinsholt, 2006).

The data material for this text, originates, as stated, from a conversation between Line and me, founded on a joint exploration of the differences between our fields of work: the methods in the theatre opposed to findings from my research. In the conversation, the contrast was described through 'The House', a theoretical construction based on the research participants' reference to the group-home as a living organism with overarching power in everyday life (Guddingsmo, 2019). These narratives correlate with other research, stating that despite political intentions of normalisation,

group-homes for persons with intellectual disabilities tend to develop institutional features (Murphy & Bantry-White, 2020; Witsø & Hauger, 2020). According to Goffman (1968) existence within such institutions is subject to formal administration, since life is regulated by rigid structures where the inmates are completely subject to the staff's control. When pronounced control is carried out through rules and restrictions in areas where one would otherwise act freely, the result is conditions completely destructive to the autonomy of residents (Goffman, 1968). My study participants said they needed to ask The House for permission (Guddingsmo, 2019). On closer inspection, however, it was the staff who were in power, whereby the participants defined their own self-determination to be what they were permitted to decide, when the staff had decided they were allowed to decide something themselves (Guddingsmo, 2020). The criterion for being granted self-determination, was whether they were going to make the decision the staff perceived as right (Guddingsmo, 2020). Thus, they had few other options than to be 'good' by adapting to the norms of The House (Guddingsmo, 2020). This put the residents in an unfortunate position, because they needed to perform as well-functioning and well-adjusted to be recognised as autonomous persons (Guddingsmo, 2020). Because of this they were excluded from gaining a positive identity as intellectually disabled, since they had to adapt and appear to be a person without intellectual disabilities to be allowed to decide for themselves. In this way, a real opportunity to convey one's own perspectives disappeared along with an opportunity for ownership (Guddingsmo, 2020, 2022).

From this, it becomes clear how work in the theatre represents a completely different openness, by offering a different space to create on behalf of oneself. The openness is embedded in the very basic philosophy of Line's work, described as being oriented towards "whatever the actors can come up with". The individual's input does not have to be expressed in any particular way, but emerges from an active search for the actor's perspectives through involvement on Line's part. The search occurs through several means, including emphasising explicit statements, and improvising based on an individual's authentic qualities and presence, with a focus on their core expressed through breathing and movement. This means that perspectives that would otherwise be tacit are conveyed. Simultaneously, openness exists in improvisation itself, from the obvious premise that expression will become somewhat different every time. Thus, a framework is offered that both opens perspectives, but also becomes something to hold on to – a

point of reference that ties everything together. Such structured formats can thus conceivably offer extra potential for artists with cognitive disabilities, because they are offered a tool that both helps staying focused and expands the space of possibilities.

Thereby, openness in the theatre can be understood to be based on a completely different recognition of the individual's rationality and individuality than *The House*. According to Axel Honneth (2007) recognition is always based on reciprocity, founded on the expectation of respect for each other's honour, dignity, and integrity. It is described on three levels where: *love* is about being met by others by virtue of one's needs; *legal recognition* is about being perceived as a rational person; and *solidarity* is about being recognised by virtue of one's uniqueness – not by your contribution, but by who you are (Honneth, 2008). For people with intellectual disabilities, however, the challenge is often like in *The House*. Here recognition is threatened when the individual's rationality, opportunities, and value are measured on the basis of the individual's specific capacity, since disability is understood within a medicalised, individual model (Guddingsmo, 2022). This oppressive situation is often reinforced by the stigma that accompanies the diagnosis, in which the perspectives of people with intellectual disabilities can be given less value or labelled as irrational, regardless of their actual quality (Kittelsaa, 2011).

However, in debates on participation and ownership, independence must be regarded as both an ideal and a challenge. It is, to a certain extent, a stated ideal within both disability arts and disability research, that leading functions should be held by persons who themselves have disabilities (Hargrave, 2015; Oliver, 1997). This attitude is based somewhat on the premise that genuine liberation takes place from the bottom up, on the oppressed person's own terms (Freire, 1970). Despite good intentions, one simply cannot trust that those who are not in the same situation can know the exact problems or represent the group's genuine attitudes. Therefore, the highest levels of participation precisely describe processes that are managed independently of other helpers or facilitators (Arnstein, 1969).

However, this ideal of independence to attain rights and advocacy becomes problematic, given that one needs help from someone. Having intellectual disability entails, for example, having challenges with learning or remembering things, and denying this would also be discriminatory (Tøssebro, 2010). Therefore, requiring independence as a basis for understanding an expression as authentic will provide a capability-oriented

approach, where the individual's recognition on the level of solidarity is not linked to the individuality of the individual, but rather to the individual's contribution (Honneth, 2008). This is why CRPD is moving to use a relational understanding of disability: The need for support shall not be an obstacle to human rights achievement. In this feminist, relational paradigm, all people are understood to constantly live, and function, interconnected with each other (Mackenzie, 2019; Skarstad, 2018).

In this way, the working methods of Teater nonStop also represent extended recognition through facilitation itself, by offering empowering relations through an active search for the actors' perspectives. When Line grabs the inputs that comes along and processes them towards a stronger and more expressive artistic product, she offers a facilitative interaction. In this way, the work becomes a common interactive matter, where the individual artist makes an impact through their unique contribution. This thus reflects a relational understanding of disability, similar to that used in CRPD, where problems and solutions are understood in relation to both the individual and the structural level (Tøssebro, 2010). At the same time, Line also takes an affirmative position, through treating disability as a natural part of the human being, as well as of artistic expression (Stober & García Iriarte, 2023). This opens the door to being a creator of one's own norm, and the tool becomes liberating through dialogue based on recognition (Freire, 1970). However, such relationships can become inhibiting through helpers taking on a gatekeeper position where you are deprived of the power to define, if you do not say or do the *right* things, or express yourself in the *right* way (Guddingsmo, 2020). However, Line uses a broad understanding of what should be understood as expression in her facilitation. Everything becomes language, not just the verbally spoken. Ellen Saur and Alexander Sidorkin (2018) argue for precisely such an understanding of language, by showing the need to switch to a posthumanistic approach to dialogue, because this expands recognition of the human to encompass more than a traditional understanding equating rationality with verbal expression.

Returning to the beginning of this chapter, the quote by Line helps substantiate the sole importance of using ephemeral ideas: The vagueness in imagining, for example, a fur coat, seems to secure the bottom-up perspective. When the goal first and foremost is conveying *something*, this opens the possibility for not conforming to perform on other people's terms, by not requiring specific levels of achievement or understanding to facilitate communication. The ephemeral and diffuse ideas provide

space for the individual to give them content based on their assumptions. Thereby, the improvised and abstract ensure an experience coming from the stage expression, however unique to each performer and audience member, because nothing is required to be told or experienced in a specific way. This makes the format more inclusive for both performers and audiences.

This necessarily also provides space for authenticity. To clarify, this is a different understanding of authenticity than the anthropological cultivation of *the original*. People with intellectual disabilities can hardly be understood to be more 'real' than others, since they, as mentioned, must often put strong restraints on what they express and do, to be recognised by their surroundings in everyday life. Rather, this refers to the authenticity required to ensure real ownership within an empowerment-oriented understanding, which is the very prerequisite for the oppressed to be able to own definitions of themselves, their own oppression, and liberation (Freire, 1970). There is always a danger that oppressed people would rather take on other people's definitions to avoid stigma. This is what Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (2000) refer to as the socialisation problem: How can one know that a perspective is one's own, if you live in an oppressive environment? Carl Rogers (1961) points out that an open attitude in therapeutic relationships, built on basic respect for the other, will lead to the self-actualisation tendency to kick in, and will allow the individual's own wishes, wills, and perspectives to emerge in the consciousness, together with a more positive view of oneself and one's own identity. And even if the purpose here is not therapeutic, one must realise that participation in society requires that the voice one should contribute to the context vocals the person's or group's actual, not token, perspectives (Arnstein, 1969). As I see it, the story of Teater nonStop's work form contributes important knowledge of how to create just such a space. At the same time, it shows that much of what has traditionally been framed by cognitive impairment is the result of oppressive structures in the environment. In this way, the working method can be understood to curb both social and biological barriers to creativity. On the one hand, it is not really so strange that work in theatre facilitates this in a good way, since you need to be able to be authentic, to be truly creative (Thomson & Jaque, 2017). At the same time, it is also important to point out that art has its limitations. There is an assumption that it is redemptive to be involved in creative processes. However, one must realise that not all artistic involvement is either liberating or based on

authentic expression (Hughes & Nicholson, 2016). This implies that underlying attitudes, rather than art itself, holds the power of securing ownership.

Concluding remarks

The anomaly of imagining a fur coat pinpoints how the theater's work form provides completely different spaces for expression than what is presented within social work, through allowing ownership and empowerment. The work forms inhibit appreciative attitudes towards the actors, which both enables free creativity, and also empowers through facilitative relations in open-ended, collaborative processes, creating a dynamic space for expression. This prevents the risk of the actors adapting to perceived expectations, which is often the case in everyday lives in the group homes, characterised by a completely different conformity hindering the conveyance of personal perspectives. The theater's commitment to openness and creativity provides an alternative model for social work to learn from – one that values individual input, and actively seeks diverse expression. There is reason to assume that this model also affects the students' learning outcomes in practical training. However, their participation in the ensemble is multidimensional. It includes both participation on an equal footing in the joint artistic work processes, and professional responsibility for facilitation in the same arena. The role of the student has not been elucidated at this point, but the results from this discussion provide a basis for further exploration of theatre as a learning context for social work students.

Author biography

Hilde Guddingsmo has a PhD in social work from NTNU Norwegian University of Science and Technology, and works as an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Nursing and Health Sciences, Nord University. Her research delves into the realms of pedagogy, theatre- and drama methodology, creativity, human rights, social work, inclusive methods, participatory processes and disability arts. She is particularly focused on self-determination for persons with intellectual disabilities living in group-homes, exploring the use of creative methods in research to enhance empowerment and participation. Her work seeks to amplify the voices of this marginalized group, often overlooked in mainstream discourse.

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