



**EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF
THEATRE ON LITERACY AND
UPGRADING STUDENTS:
"MARKS ON PAPER"**

PURPOSE

This paper examines the impact of performing in *Marks on Paper* (1987), a type of popular theatre, on 22 learner/actors (15 women and 7 men), from the province of British Columbia, Canada, between 1989-1992. This study also documents transformation in perceptions and actions of 14 literacy (11 women and 3 men) and 18 upgrading students (4 men and women), focusing especially on women.

THE PLAY

The following vignette introduces John Lazarus' play, *Marks on Paper*, based on life experiences of adult illiterates. The play depicts how they attempt to function in a print, world. It is particularly relevant to women as it mirrors reality by showing how mothers cope with anger and shame while pretending to read bedtime stories to their children and the frustrations of grocery shopping. The play further shows the fear illiterates suffer on the job.

"WHAT IT'S LIKE"

Adapted from *Marks on Paper*

(The literacy and upgrading students are sitting on tall stools in a semi-circle shaping their feelings and discussing their coping strategies for functioning in a print world.)

Lisa: I'm always afraid somebody's gonna find out I live in fear all the time. When I go into town, I never know what will happen. Somebody might expect me to read something.

Chris: With me its signs. I hate signs! It's amazing that people take them for granted. To me they're a mystery. And people will stop you and point to the sign, and say, 'Look what you're doing! Whatsa matter, can't you read?' And you don't even know what you did wrong.

Mitch: For me, the worst is when the guys at work are passing around a joke or a cartoon. Each guy reads it and laughs, and then it gets around to me.....

Lisa: The worst was school. The worst was being told to stand up in the middle of the class and read out loud.

(All nod in agreement indicating that they endured the same experience.)

Mitch: The worst experience I ever had was walking into the Ladies' Room (Saying in disbelief) Four times (putting up four fingers of his hand) - that I know off!!

Chris: I've been at the same job for a long time, but I'm always taking precautions. I spend my whole working day memorizing. People come in and order cakes.... fancy squares, or even 100 doughnuts, and I commit it all to memory. I rush home and recite it all to my husband at the end of the day, and he writes it down. That's because I can only memorize one day's worth of stuff at a time. But even that's starting to slip! The memory's going; its getting harder! I can't phone him because the phone's in a public area, and people will hear me. I spent a hundred and sixty dollars on a tiny (*motioning with her fingers that it is small enough to put in her blouse pocket*) tape recorder I could hide, but I felt like an idiot running to the women's washroom to talk to myself!

Marg: So, what do you do?

Chris: Well, over the years, I've worked out a sort of private alphabet. With little pictures and things. As long as nobody sees my notes, I'll be safe and sound!

Lisa: Yeah, the ways people cover up! Everybody becomes a genius at covering up. (*says with a bit of a laugh*)

Mitch: In a restaurant, I look at the menu and then ask for what the guy at the next table is having. "Oh.... that looks good, I'll have that."

Chris: At one time, I used to bandage one hand for the whole day, in case I'd be asked to write something.

Marg: I used to "write," by writing the first letter of the word clearly and then scribbling all the rest. I'd say I'd learned how to write like a doctor!

Mitch: Sometimes, if I have to fill out an application form, I'll just say that I've forgotten my glasses, and I'll bring it back later.

Marg: Yeh, you just plain lie.

(They all nod in agreement.)

MARKS ON PAPER AS POPULAR THEATRE

Marks on Paper illustrates popular theatre, for "...it attempts to involve more than just a small elite, to reach out across the class divisions and beyond the major urban centres to a large number of people, many of whom have had no previous involvement with theatre" (Brookes, 1974, p. 7). It speaks to people in their "...language and idiom and deals with problems of direct relevance to... their situation" (p.7). *Marks on Paper*... deals with the people's own reality -their issues, their problems and from their perspective - and this makes it their theatre rather than an imposition of someone else's culture" (Kidd, 1979, p. 4). This explains, in part, *Marks on Paper's* popularity throughout British Columbia.

LITERACY IN BRITISH COLUMBIA AND CANADA

Over the years, Canada had shown interest in international literacy. However, it did not formally acknowledge its populace's problems until 1987 when Southam News released Peter Calamai's survey: [*Broken Words: Why 5 Five Million Canadians Are Illiterate.*](#) The findings created a national furore by documenting five million or 24 percent of Canadians (46.5 percent women and 53.5 percent men) eighteen or older could not read, write, or use numbers well enough to meet functional demands of today's technological society. The startling results motivated business, labor, community, and government to focus fully on Canadian illiteracy and Statistics Canada to initiate a nation-wide survey.

Statistics Canada's 1991 report, *Adult Literacy in Canada: Results of A National Study*, revealed 32 percent of native-born Canadian women and 35 percent men had problems (p. 86) while 16 percent of Canadians ages 16-69 have reading skills "...top limited to allow them to deal with the majority of written material encountered in everyday life" (p. 9). An additional 22 percent can only "...use reading materials to carry out simple reading tasks within familiar contexts with materials clearly laid out" (p. 9). Thus, 38 percent of Canadians do not possess "the information processing skills necessary to use the printed material commonly encountered at work, at home, and in the community" (p. 14).

IMPACT

Meanwhile, educators and grassroots literacy organizers continued their advocacy for marginalized adult illiterates by using novel techniques such as *Marks on Paper*. Since popular theatre is a relatively new medium for awareness raising, I investigated its impact on learner/actors. Although significant, *Marks on Paper* was not the sole influential factor on women. With self-motivation, returning to school, instructors, new peer friendships, and commitment, the play served as a catalyst, creating positive, reflective, transformative, and theatrical experience for women while they established networks and implemented strategies for addressing illiteracy.

PERSONAL BELIEFS ABOUT SELF

Labelled as "stupid, no-good, slow, dumb, and lazy" by family and significant others, literacy learners often possess very low self-image. Through interaction with peers and self-reflection, these images began changing.

SELF-ESTEEM

"It Increased My Self-Esteem! I Feel Good about Myself.": Learner/actors maintained they felt more positive and their self-esteem improved. As one woman stated:

"I realized I wasn't the only one... scared,... the rest were... It felt really good. It was like what's that feeling? It's like having a baby. Oh, so much work and... and then after that feeling is such an overwhelming feeling and... (the audience) stood up... they clapped; they were really impressed with it."

PRIDE

"I Look, Feel, and Act Differently!": Often learner/actors spoke of self-esteem and pride simultaneously while describing their physical appearance, body language, and clothing. Another woman expressed how she had changed:

"I just noticed my attitude and my self-esteem has really gone up, and my body language has changed a lot now..... before, I'm kind of slouching,.... I was always depressed... because I didn't feel good about myself (Now)... I'm feeling better... so my body language has gone up too... I have a straight back, and my shoulders are back, I'm walking proud like '.....I'm not embarrassed anymore. I feel good about myself, and I don't care what you think of me..."

BELONGINGNESS

As well as positive self-image, *Marks on Paper* generated a sense of belongingness. People identify with others through overt similarities: speech, job, family and education. However, for illiterates, characteristics are disclosed through unusual physical or visual associations and unspoken codes obvious only to illiterates.

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

"We're Like a Family": Generally, literacy/learner share difficulty with inter-personal relationships. However *Marks on Paper* forced learner/actors to initiate and maintain intimate, personal relationships. Women often described the casts as families.

"Well I enjoyed being together with the group from the beginning. It was fun... Getting out, being involved in something like that. It's something that I've never done before in my life..... We're like a family."

VERBAL KNOWING

"I Forgot My Glasses": Learners indicated *Marks on Paper* highlighted exact verbal cues and socially acceptable excuses they had used as children to cover up and circumvent reading or writing. One woman said:

"....Grade Five, Six, Seven, teachers.... asked me to stand and read, and... I always faked it, 'Oh, I can't read it, I forgot my glasses,' or 'I have a real sore hand, I can't turn the page.' Anything. Or, 'I have to go to the bathroom real bad; I can't read '....I'd do almost anything to get out of it."

NON-VERBAL KNOWING THROUGH BODY LANGUAGE

"I'd Bandage a Hand": Not only did literacy students use verbal cues, they were quick to spot and relate to "cover up" signs and codes portrayed in the play's vignettes. A common ploy is bandaging a healthy hand. Literate people take a bandaged hand at face value; illiterates do not, for they too have used this apparently socially acceptable guise.

"I kind of related to it... (the scene where a person's hand was bandaged) because I did it in school. My parents didn't know it. I'd go home fine, and I left the house with no wrapped hands, but by the time I got to school my hand was wrapped . 'Oh yeah, I've got really bad arthritis in my hand, and I can't write today.'"

BREAKING OUT OF ISOLATION THROUGH RAISED AWARENESS

Marks on Paper served as a catalyst for critical reflection and transformation. Self-reflection generally began when learners no longer blamed bad teachers, unaware parents, or the education system for their illiteracy. Although past school memories were not entirely eradicated, learner/actors did begin to change.

"Thousands of people that are illiterate and embarrassed about it, and they're thinking it's all their fault or they're blaming the school systems or something else. They're.... never blaming it on themselves, and in a way, it is a little bit of their own self because they never admitted it in school."

"I had to hit rock bottom with no job, no money, move back home.... and then.... I decided 'Well, this is it. I'm going to do it (take a course). I'm happy I did it now."

SELF-PERCEPTION

"What Its Like": Due to name-calling by family and others, learners' self-perception was very poor. They felt alone and even believed they were sick or abnormal people. One young woman described her feelings as:

"I'm sure a lot of people (who) have this problem kind of feel like the Elephant Man... they feel they can't tell anybody because they're different. They feel really different; they're like the Elephant Man."

BREAKING ISOLATION

Isolation diminished gradually with self-realization and reflection while learners experienced the play.

SELF-REALIZATION

"That's My Reflection in the Mirror!": Analogous to looking at ourselves in a mirror from different angles, *Marks on Paper* reflects different perceptions of illiteracy. The play provided a safe medium for learner/actors to observe, explore, and alter negative self-perceptions they had "bought into," as one woman described:

"It brought a lot of memories back. I see a lot of my childhood problems there too. By seeing the play."

"It was like a way of looking at myself - kind of a mirror image of myself. It was a really weird feeling."

"...the one role I think really got me the most, and it seemed to get a lot of people... was the standing up to read, being ridiculed by the rest of the class, by the teacher... that used to happen to me constantly in school, and I just quit reading altogether because of it."

AWARENESS OF OTHERS

"You're Not Alone!": As well, learners were surprised to discover: "You're Not Alone!" Before experiencing the play and enrolling in literacy classes, learners had become accustomed to living in isolation, fear and secrecy. One woman explained the message of *Marks on Paper*.

"...when I seen the play, it said to me, 'Look, there are other people who have the same problem you do. You're not alone in this, so it made me more encouraged to step forward and talk, speak to people."

TRANSFORMATION THROUGH EMPOWERMENT

The more aware and reflective learners became, the more they felt a sense of empowerment and a breaking of their silent isolation.

GAVE VOICE

"It Gave Me a Way to Speak Out and Express Myself": Literacy/learners used the play to give voice to their lives by altering words to reflect their vocabulary and experiences. It gave them control over dialogue and provided a creative vehicle for communicating hidden words and bottled up emotions.

"(The play)... gave them wider vocabulary. How they could express themselves. Most of us express ourselves by getting angry, and you don't get anything across when your angry because people get their back up..."

"Because... in the play it's already written down for you, you don't have to really... think about it. For you to think about things and put them into words and saying what you want to get across, a lot of times it gets mixed up half-way in between. You lose the point. Whereas in the play, it got straight to the point..."

CATHARSIS

"It Hit Close to Home!": For learners, watching or performing *Marks on Paper*, maintaining composure was a feat, for the play reawakened floods of old, negative, tumultuous memories never disclosed.

"(The play) makes them feel good: a way of getting out their aggressions through the play... it's a way of getting those inner feelings that are inside out."

"...I thought that was really neat. To be able to yell back at somebody else after being yelled at for so many years that you're dumb or stupid - a way of getting it out of their own systems, and letting themselves know that I'm not that person they said I am. I'm a worth while person."

TRANSFORMATION THROUGH ACTION

Overcoming isolation often translated into new activities. Women who had been silent and accepting began standing up for their rights and became more assertive particularly about the welfare of their children. Women also became involved in community activities for promoting literacy awareness by sitting at information tables in shopping centres, fund-raising, or attending learner events in other communities.

TAUGHT TEAMWORK

"We Worked as a Team!": Stemming from past emotions and experiences, literacy students prefer solitary learning or working styles. Thus, bonding and seeing themselves as a team working for a common cause, *Marks on Paper*, was a significant impact the play had. One woman related her group's success:

"I think the one thing that made it successful is that everybody was pulling together and working together as a team. Which is pretty rare, to get these people work as a team... they stayed a knit group, and they worked for each other and not against each other, which is a big plus."

NETWORKING

"We Got to Know Each Other!": As learners became more confident, teamwork translated into networking. Personal networking included fun: going for coffee or having picnics. Community networking took on a provincial flavor through learner events for sharing and exchanging information and performing *Marks on Paper*. One woman described her feelings:

"...I felt good because they did really good."

"...the actors mostly came and talked to us about the play. We talked about how long it took them and what they used, and they said we should still have the play,... and we could in get contact with them if we need something about the play..."

"I like travelling... I was really excited to see the Marks on Paper."

OUTREACH

Through newfound self-confidence, self-esteem, voice, and empowerment, women began to take on the role of modelling and helping other students.

MODELLING FOR OTHER LEARNERS

"You Can Do It Too!": Women sought to reach out to teenagers to prevent teen dropout from school. Some spoke to classes about literacy skills necessary in today's technological world. One woman explained her meeting with sixth grade students:

"And I told them the problem (illiteracy), and a lot of them they couldn't believe here I am an adult, and I am supposed to read and write. I'm not supposed to have this problem. It really surprised them.... I asked them, ... 'Well, what do you want to do when you grow up?' They didn't realize that even to pump gas you need to read. People think, ... what's that? If you don't know how to read, ... some cars have leaded and some have unleaded, some have diesel. If you don't know those words, you're going to damage someone's car, and you'll probably go to court for it... So it's important that... kids know about it."

HELPING OTHER LEARNERS

"I Don't Want Others to Feel Like I Did!": Often, learners wanted to help others like themselves experience empowerment. Women began sharing textbooks or tutoring friends who were too shy or embarrassed to attend literacy classes. One woman described how she began teaching her friend:

"I found out... I got one girlfriend who has a reading disability, and her reading must be about maybe Grade Two.... she quit school really young, got all lousy little jobs and stuff like that... she doesn't want to come into... class at all because she's really embarrassed about it. Now, since the play, ... she came up to me and asked me if I would teach her to read... my reading skills are not that good, but I told Lorrie, and Lorrie's trying to give me all the information and all the papers to help her, so I can help her in her reading skills. And it makes me feel better to help her... I know how she feels... (I got) satisfaction from.... helping somebody else."

IMPLICATIONS

As a catalyst, *Marks on Paper* adds another dimension to literacy pushing learners through a multi-faceted, dynamic, and interactive process far beyond their present skills and competencies creating a transformative experience. The theatrical experience creates art by transforming and mirroring mundane realities of life through learner/actors' voices. It illustrates how women become proactive and take responsibility in a number of ways. First they raised awareness about illiteracy for themselves, their peers, and the community. Second, through critical reflection, they solved problems. Similarly, they experienced empowerment by voicing their views. Third they altered their self-image and experienced a sense of belongingness to a community of adult learner/actors by networking with them throughout the province of British Columbia. Fourth, for many learner/actors this provided a transformative, cathartic, and emancipatory experience from years of feeling isolated, stupid, and marginalized. Fifth, by taking responsibility for altering their personal beliefs and attitudes, they assisted individuals in seeking new paths to combat their illiteracy by tutoring them, helping them return to school, or encouraging them to make *"their own"* *Marks on Paper* through performance.

Since I began working with *Marks on Paper* in 1989, theatre has been used more frequently to create awareness about social issues of marginalized adults; however, research is needed. These findings confirm theatre can be used by learners themselves to raise awareness through critical reflection and problem-solving so that we may all understand we are part of the greater universe of humanity. As Dorothy Heathcote says, "*The universal is the wellspring, the source; however, drama, like all art starts with a very carefully selected, precise and particular, unrepeatable instance -- one that then acquires significance as it reverberates in the chamber of the universal.*" of humanity (Wagner, 1976, p. 76).

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EXAMEN DE L'IMPACT DU THÉÂTRE SUR LES ÉTUDIANTS EN ALPHABÉTISATION ET PERFECTIONNEMENT: «MARQUES SUR PAPIER»

CYNTHIA LEE ANDRUSKE

Des étudiants adultes suivant des cours d'alphabétisation et de perfectionnement ont joué dans la pièce «Marques sur papier», présentée à travers la Colombie-Britannique au Canada, entre 1989 et 1992. Dans son article, l'auteur examine l'impact qu'a eu cette activité sur les étudiants.

La pièce a eu un impact psycho-social sur les apprenants/acteurs, ce qui est démontré par 1) une image de soi plus positive se traduisant par un plus grand respect de soi, une confiance en soi et un sens de fierté, et 2) des relations personnelles issues d'un sens d'appartenance, une plus grande «fraternité», un savoir verbal et non verbal.

L'impact socio-politique sur les apprenants a pris la forme de 1) une plus grande conscience de la perception de soi, de l'épanouissement personnel, de la réalité des autres, des perceptions sociétales et de la sensibilisation des autres, 2) l'habilitation on a donné un moyen d'expression, a créé un sens de propriété du rôle joué et de la pièce et a enseigné le travail d'équipe, 3) une transformation a pris place dans la signification, la catharsis, les émotions, les croyances et les attitudes, et 4) l'entreprise a eu pour résultat l'entraide, un impact sur l'auditoire elle a constitué un modèle pour les apprenants et a aidé les apprenants.

Les apprenants/acteurs ont discuté de l'impact socio-éducatif en tant que 1) perceptions des apprenants et de l'apprentissage et 2) perceptions des enseignants et de l'enseignement. De façon générale, la pièce a donné aux apprenants le sens «qu'ils ne sont pas seuls» et aux autres une notion des difficultés quotidiennes qui se sont le lot de analphabètes.

Le pièce «Marques sur papier» a servi à démontrer que les apprenants pouvaient assumer la responsabilité de l'analphabétisme tout en recherchant des solutions communautaires et en sensibilisant le public aux problèmes de l'analphabétisme. De plus, «Marques sur papier» a repris le théâtre des professionnels et l'a rendu au secteur populaire.

EXPLORACIÓN DEL IMPACTO DEL TEATRO EN LA ALFABETIZACIÓN Y EN EL PROGRESO DE LOS ESTUDIANTES: "NOTAS EN PAPEL"

CYNTHIA LEE ANDRUSKE

Este artículo exploró el impacto de actuación que la obra de alfabetización «Notas en papel» tuvo en la alfabetización de adultos y en el progreso de los estudiantes en todo British Columbia, Canadá desde 1989 hasta 1992.

La obra tuvo un impacto psicosocial sobre los actores/alumnos que se demostró 1) en una positiva imagen de sí mismos que se fue aumentando poco a poco en propia confianza y 2) en un sentido de pertenencia que logró relaciones personales, «hermandades» y conocimiento verbal y no verbal.

El impacto socio-político en los alumnos emergió 1) como conciencia en la percepción de sí mismos, auto-comprensión, conciencia sobre los otros, percepciones sociales, promoción de concientización en otros; 2) dando poder, que significó dar voz creó sentido de pertenencia y propiedad de un papel y de una obra y enseñó a trabajar en grupos; 3) la transformación que ocurrió en significados, catarsis, emociones, creencias y disposiciones y 4) la acción que resultó en la interconexión, el impacto en la audiencia, y la formación y ayuda a los educandos.

Actores y alumnos discutieron el impacto socio-educacional de la siguiente manera: 1) percepción de los alumnos y aprendizaje 2) percepción de los instructores y enseñanza. La obra, sobre todo, ayudó a crear por un lado mayor conciencia en cuanto a analfabetismo y alumnos, «que no están solos» y por otro, conciencia sobre las agonías diarias que sufren los analfabetos.

«Notas en papel» ilustró que los alumnos pueden tomar la responsabilidad en cuanto al analfabetismo mientras buscan soluciones comunitarias y se concientizan acerca del analfabetismo. Más aún, la obra ha contribuido a liberar el teatro de los profesionales, recuperándolo para las bases -- la gente y el teatro popular.