"**Bringing data to life**":

Encountering dilemmas within an applied

theatre multidisciplinary research project

by

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Introduction

As artists we seek to understand, interpret, reflect and represent our observations. As researchers/scientists we gather information, categorize, analyze and document findings. We can view artists and scientist/researchers as one and the same - methods and paradigms may vary yet commonality is revealed, as artist and scientist strive for a richer, crystallized understanding.

No Particular Place to Go is a play devised for a collaborative research project between social scientists and applied theatre artists. It is an example of "a recent trend in the social sciences – predominantly among researchers engaged with qualitative methodologies – to translate research findings into artistic and narrative forms" (Gray, Fitch, Labrecque, & Greenberg, 2003, p. 223). Such collaborations offer exciting potential for crossing disciplinary boundaries, transcending customary restrictions of traditional modes of dissemination and developing innovative, new types of research (Kontos & Naglie, 2006; Rossiter et al., 2008; Saldana, 2003).

The aforementioned performance explores the topic of older driver safety, utilizing performance and post-performance in-role audience engagement to raise awareness and foster dialogue on this topic. As noted by Tuokko (2007), the social issues involved are highly complex and emotionally charged. Many older adult drivers struggle with independence, personal identity and self-esteem issues (Coughlin, 2001; Horowitz, Boerner, & Reinhardt, 2002; Yassuda, Wilson, & von Mering, 1997). Driving cessation may result in less mobility, greater isolation and declining physical and mental health (Bonnel, 1999; Burkhardt, 2000; Johnson, 1999; Peel, Westmoreland, & Steinberg, 2002; Ragland, Satariano, & MacLeod, 2004). Addressing the topic is often avoided since the loss of one's driver's license can be profound, further compounding other losses in later life. It was hypothesized that audience engagement through applied theatre would enhance understanding of different perspectives through the processes of change as delineated in social cognitive theory.

Social Science and Performance

The current alliance between social science and performance stems from many sources (Gray &

Sinding, 2003). With regard to ethnography (as this study is loosely defined) Turner (1986) views

ethnography "as both a method of social science research and a genre of social science text" (Gray &

Sinding, 2003, p. 11), conceptualizing performance as shifting ethnography away from the traditional

assumptions of objective social science and initiating several movements in performance ethnography.

In social science engagement through improvisational ethnodrama, performance is embodied by

departures from naturalistic representations. While natural performance texts seem to capture an

objective reality presenting actual facts, from Denzin's perspective "the researcher's goal is not to put

forward something that 'looks like truth' but rather to contrast multiple verisimilitudes, multiple truths"

(p. 39). The performance must offer the audience a way "to enter into the parts and spaces of listener

and speaker" (p. 39). Denzin (1997) claims that improvisational performance texts are "the single most

powerful way for ethnography to recover yet interrogate the meanings of lived experience" (p. 95).

McCall (2000) distinguishes between the approaches of practitioners who come from a

background of ethnography and those who come from theatre or performance studies. Currently there

is a broadening of the range of ways in which ethnographers and social scientists conceptualize

performance. Gray & Sinding (2003) refer to the implications of a performance framework for doing

fieldwork, interpreting field work notes (Conquergood, 1991), and poetic writings about performance

(Pelias, 1999). With a focus on engaging real life stories (e.g., Gray & Sinding) and working from

translations of interviews (McCall & Becker, 2000), there may be performance of verbatim quotations

from field notes with only minimal interpretation, transmitting information about mood, emotion,

events and attitudes.

Denzin (1997) and McCall (2000) distinguish between two broad categories of social science engagement with performance: a performance science model and improvisational ethnodrama. In the performance science legacy, field notes and texts are translated in a literal way, with a deep commitment to the data gathering site and original meanings (e.g., Jackson, 1993; Stucky, 1993). In the theatre there are similar approaches to performance science (Smith, 1993, 1994; and most recently *The Laramie Project* – Kaufman, 2000). The difference, as clarified by Gray & Sinding (2003), is that theatre artists "often have an eye to the audience in ways that social scientists usually do not" (p. 15).

Study Overview

This SSHRC-funded (Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council) multidisciplinary project involved collaboration between quantitative and qualitative education and health sciences researchers from the University of Victoria Centre on Aging, University of Victoria Phoenix Theatre department and applied theatre professionals in the community.

Phases of the Study

This research was conducted in 3 distinct sequential phases that integrated quantitative and qualitative methodologies. **Phase 1** was aimed at knowledge development and issue identification. Representation was from seniors, their families, caregivers and various stakeholder groups through focus groups. Group discussions were transcribed verbatim, analyzed and coded into themes. In **Phase 2**, a theatre company was formed and devised a performance piece from Phase 1 data. The playwright further developed the script for performance and touring. For **Phase 3**, the play *No Particular Place to Go*, was toured to the Vancouver Island communities' original focus groups. Performances included post-production conversation with actors in and out of role, moderated by Dr. Prendergast, and audio-taped and transcribed. Pre- and post-production research questionnaires were circulated with additional follow-up interviews to further explore the effects of the performance on the audience.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The study was rooted in the findings of previous older adult driving research literature, the theory underlying the transtheoretical model of change (Prochaska, & DiClemente, 1983; Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992; Prochaska, Norcross, & DiClemente, 1994) and the applied theatre model of devising dramatic performance from research. The literature on the topic of older adult driving supports the need to create contexts wherein older adults, their families and community agencies can continue discourse and explore the topic further. Tuokko (2007) cites a literature review of studies pertaining to older drivers with focus groups or interviews utilized as an inquiry of their experiences and concerns (Gardezi, Wilson, Man-Son-Hing, Marshall, Molnar, Dobbs, & Tuokko, 2006).

Transtheoretical Model (TTM)

The TTM delineates the progression of change in attitude, beliefs and behavior through stages. Prochaska's research on the transtheoretical model (e.g., Prochaska et al., 1994) posits that behavioral patterns occur repeatedly in specified stages. The first TTM stage is *precontemplation*, in which the person has no intention to change the behavior. *Contemplation* is the second stage - awareness of having a problem, thinking about making changes in behavior. The third stage, *preparation*, is readiness to change a given behavioral pattern. The fourth stage, *action*, is actively making efforts to change. A fifth stage is *maintenance*. People move through change stages over time, often cycling back and forth through the contemplation, preparation and action stages.

Applied Theatre as a Change Agent

The term *applied theatre* has been "defined and debated as to its specifics but for practical purposes it can be considered to be the use of theatre for extra-theatrical purposes, where 'extra-theatrical' can

refer to education, social change and community-building" (Neelands & Dobson, 2008, p. 185). Similarly, Prendergast & Saxton (2009) view applied theatre as "an umbrella term" (citing Taylor, 2006, p. 93) that covers a range of alternative theatre practices outside mainstream theatre.

Applied theatre offers an innovative approach that is well suited for addressing complex topics. The inherent benefits of participation in applied theatre include raised awareness, shifts in perceptions and beliefs, and understanding of the topic from new perspectives. It is known that applied theatre can generate change by transforming passive audience members into engaged participants (Ackroyd, 2000). Miller & Saxton (2004) assert that the very nature of dramatic engagement forms the basis of experiential learning. Applied theatre has contributed to fostering positive attitude change in diverse contexts (e.g., with respect to racial or ethnic groups, Gimmestad & DeChiara, 1982, McLaughlin, 1990; views of the elderly, Bramwell, 1992; conceptions of disease, Gray, Fitch, Labrecque, & Greenberg, 2003).

In our study, it was proposed that the play devising process would greatly enhance the research study. Giving voice to multiple perspectives by reshaping focus group stories through metaphor and narrative would bring the data to life. At the same time, identity would be protected and the emotional and psychological delicateness of the material defused. It was thought that this would then prepare the audience to hear, interpret and thus understand the various beliefs and attitudes regarding older adult driving safety – and that attitudes would shift as a direct result of viewing the performance.

The Project: Devising *No Particular Place to Go*

The Challenges of Translating Data into Performance

Interest in research based performance has been growing at a rapid rate. As noted by Rossiter et al. (2008), interdisciplinary collaboration in research over the past decade has received increased

recognition and support from the academic community (Hearn & Salter, 1996; Palmer, 2001; Rowe, 2003; Stehr & Weingart, 2000), an encouraging development in the creation of new kinds of knowledge and forms of knowledge transfer (Rowe, 2003). However, Rossiter et al. comment that "working across disciplines can be difficult, complicated and harder than anticipated" (p. 278).   They refer to instances of interdisciplinary miscommunication as among the most challenging issues that emerge from collaborative research. The following journal entry reflects my dilemmas and choices, as co-director, during the devising process of *No Particular Place to Go*.

The Task at Hand

There… centre stage… it rests, white with traces of color, eyes fixated, echoes of prolific essence permeate our empty space. We draw near, near to those vibrating, one thousand and more pages of carefully coded text, people's stories from focus groups. We draw near, nearer to those categorized, theme-ized, prioritized, scrutinized, nearer to those white traces of color. We draw our breath, glances abound, a gentle sigh transplants the white traces to its stately home with promises to revisit.

We vow to search out the relative "truths." We research, we observe, we reflect, we create extensions of our interpretations. We aim to open the window of opportunity for increased understanding by provoking divergent dialogue. We strive to bring the research data to life, to reflect the multiple stories through the eyes of one family mirroring the dilemmas of older adult driving safety.

We begin – open, curious, eagerly committed introductions of selves and our task ahead. We ask tough questions. How will we integrate the sometimes opposing paradigms of qualitative and quantitative research? How will we best reflect the authentic essence of the research and maintain our artistic autonomy? By doing what artists do – by reflecting humanity through telling the story, by discovering a "container" (Dobson & Goode, 2002) to hold people's lived experiences, by finding ways to hold our attention, care deeply for the characters, by exploring diverse perspectives. We do what artists

do! We raise the stakes. We tell the story.

We move forward, committed, not knowing the final content or shape of the play yet cognizant that the process of applied theatre will reframe and shape the multi-layered complicated codes, themes and categories into a meaningful play. (Pauluth-Penner, 2009, n.p.)

Devising Process

We decided to work organically with the material, allowing the shape and content of the play to evolve naturally over time through our drama workshop sessions, rather than devise the play as a series of verbatim realism scenarios with transitions as often seen in playbuilt productions. Each devising session revealed new content which influenced the next. We worked with a framework exploring the topics through drama strategies and conventions, yet remained open-ended in our process. We knew our goals and objectives, had a sense of the data, and realized that ultimately we would create this play although the framework of the final script was unknown. This unknown, ironically, is what ensures that we as artists/researchers remain true to the authenticity of the material. We chose to conclude the play with no particular answers or easy, magical didactic solutions to the dilemmas posed.

As a company we decided to represent the data by creating a set of fictitious characters facing dilemmas within a family context. It was our hypothesis that if our audiences connected with the characters they would care and thereby engage in the content in a significant manner. Once we understood the key themes of the study, we decided to embed these issues within the behavior of our characters, revealing their held attitudes and beliefs (as in the data). Herein we strived to create an aesthetic where the "real" was fictionalized, thereby creating "a buffer zone between the *real* people and their *fictional* counterparts so that the Seniors felt sufficiently protected" (Dobson & Goode, in Warren, 2002, p. 183), and enabling the audience to identify and reflect on their own experiences with some distance.

Our fictitious characters were placed into a family dealing with the daily challenges of living with a stubborn grandfather with declining driving ability. It is important to recognize that this family's behavior, dynamics and scenarios occurring within the production of *No Particular Place to Go* were not random. The director intentionally planted the themes most repeatedly prevalent from the research findings into the plot – that driving was important, that it represented freedom and independence, flexibility and spontaneity, connection to the larger community and a sense of control over one's life – and that the loss of driving sometimes is equated with imprisonment or death (Coughlin, 2001; Eisenhandler, 1990; Horowitz et al., 2002; Lister, 1999; Ralston et al., 2001; Rothe, 1990).

We wanted our characters' actions to reflect the multi-layered complexities and challenge stereotypes about this sensitive topic. We wanted our audiences to be in an environment where it was safe to feel their true emotions, to explore the full emotional range that the performance evoked. We wanted audiences to connect affect with cognition, hypothesizing that, as implied by research (e.g., Ainley, 2006), connecting feeling with knowledge enhances knowledge transfer into life long learning. What we did not want was to create a purely didactic piece that told people what to do or to simply regurgitate the research findings. We wanted our audiences to do more than 'read' the data – to provide an engaging quality production to both entertain and provoke debate, opening the door for diverse voices to be heard, better understood and respected.

We also felt that it was important to explore humor (e.g., mock driving test to demonstrate the difficulty and intimidation for seniors taking examinations), music as an engaging container (*Maybellene, No Particular Place to Go*), and utilize role reversals (youth losing license) as a distancing device. We believed this would facilitate the absorption of delicate material for our audiences, and provide cathartic release from the uncomfortable tensions the scenarios revealed.

The Specifics – What We Did

We explored the topic by reviewing resource materials and observations. Rough scenes were created through drama workshops (role drama, image theatre, tableaux, writing in role, music, dance and improvisations), integrating data, key words and phrases. Workshop notes were transcribed and utilized for collective script development. Themes from data were drawn into the arc of the play. Our playwright, Dr. Dobson, wrote the first draft of the script. The script was further workshopped and refined, checking details with the data through intermittent visits from the Centre on Aging research team. Full rehearsals occurred with theatrical elements added, culminating in toured performances with facilitated in-role post-production discussions with audiences. The production was remounted to create a DVD for educational purposes.

No Particular Place to Go **Play Synopsis: How data was woven into the play**

This play explores the issues surrounding older adult driving safety as impacting an ordinary family, a close knit family of three – a hard working single mother (Joanne), a young adult son (MJ) and an older adult (Grandpa, MJ's grandfather/Joanne's father). As the family resides outside a mid-size city, pressing questions are raised about grandpa's driving. The family struggles to deal with a number of multifaceted challenges and the underlying issues begin to surface.

In the first three scenes of the one-act play, Grandpa and MJ share their reminiscences of the car, how they learned to drive, and convey the car's significance – pride, its symbol of independence, power. Joanne navigates the bureaucratic systems when talking on her cell phone (themes of hazards and distractions) and internally grapples with themes of responsibility challenges and social pressures. At the end of an intermediate scene, when Grandpa confides to his deceased wife, the impact of adjusting to driving cessation is highlighted. The implication of the loss of driving is about much more than the driving – it is what driving symbolizes across generations. For many older adults its loss may

ultimately represent adjusting and managing all that goes with later life losses.

<u>Concluding Reflections</u>

In *No Particular Place to Go*, we created a context within which artist and researcher successfully came together to create a meaningful representation of data. The play reflected true collaborations and revealed parallel processes on several levels. As research, both quantitative and qualitative methods informed each other while maintaining independent integrity. Findings from analyzed focus groups data paralleled the content from our organic devising process. Devisers learned that the within the Big White Code of Color (data binder from focus groups), with its categorized analyzed data, is the essence of the stories theatre artists crave to represent.

In this paper we have seen that collaborative research based performance theatre provides new forms of knowledge generation and translation, transcending boundaries between the arts and sciences; "However, while the benefits can be great, this new interdisciplinary enterprise brings its own challenges" (Rossiter et al., 2008, p. 284).

The devising of *No Particular Place to Go*, although successful on many fronts, certainly had its challenges, primarily balancing artistic and research integrity within the context of the interdisciplinary team. Research team members held distinct roles – running focus groups, and analyzing and coding the data. Researchers were primarily focused on converting data into a play in a linear fashion, while the theatre company members were exploring the topic aesthetically through drama exercises to represent people's stories in an enriched, theatrically engaging and non-verbatim manner.

As a director/researcher, I was cognizant of needing to balance artistic expression and freedom with the research needs of disseminating accurate data. During the devising process I made intuitive

decisions as to what content to include and how to best represent it. At times I was subliminally influencing the cast; an example of what Jerome Bruner (1971) calls, paradoxically, *disciplined intuition*, a way of balancing the contradiction between conscious and unconscious processes. Our creative process stored information in our subconscious, to be retrieved as we devised the play. As subconscious material surfaced for our cast, my own intuition was greatly influenced by previous research engagement, accrued knowledge of what needed to be represented, and by the conscious recognition of parallel correlations and themes emerging from the cast of actors.

Although at times a challenge, my duality of roles as both researcher and artist was guided by knowledge acquired from engagement across the whole research project. Having participated in the research design, in the focus groups and sections of the data analysis, I brought to rehearsals an understanding of the data and of the seniors, their families, caregivers and the various stakeholders. Having been privy to people's stories, their expressions, body language and their tone gave me an empathy that provided an opportunity as director to hone an understanding of the multilayered complexity of the study along with a sense of the variety of perspectives. I was intrigued by how our cast's organic parallel process of storytelling, dramatic theatrical exercises, reflections, discussions and observations mirrored the data findings of our earlier research focus groups.

Upon reflection, definitive directorial moments of choice occurred when actors' discoveries paralleled the themes and content of the research data. I found that the theatrical devising process validated the significance of the data, thus enabling my management of dual roles. I was helping to balance artistic autonomy with loyalty to our research collaborators' expectations; in essence, two approaches coming to the same conclusion.

With regard to the study's theoretical underpinnings, a case could be made that the devising process paralleled the study's transtheoretical model of behaviour change. In essence, each cast

member worked through phases of readiness and understanding towards change. As our cast devised the play on older adult drivers, each came to their own understanding on the topic at hand, their beliefs, attitudes and perceptions towards driving. Grandpa begins at the *pre-contemplation* stage, not even wanting to consider taking any examinations and refusing to open mail from the insurance company. He eventually moves to *contemplation*, evidenced in the scene where he talks to his diseased wife about the possibility of ceasing to drive. By the end of the play, Grandpa is moving into the *preparation* stage when he shows he is willing to consider exploring transportation alternatives.

At the beginning of the play, with Grandpa at *pre-contemplation* Joanne is at *contemplation* as she is insistent about him opening the mail and responding accordingly by taking the requested examinations. When Joanne learns through her son of some close calls about Grandpa's driving, she then moves into the *preparation* stage, making efforts to restrict her father from driving. This further increases the gap in their TTM stages regarding his driving, with Grandpa still in *pre-contemplation* while Joanne has moved into *preparation*. At the end of the play, tension eases between Grandpa and Joanne as they are by then roughly in the preparation stage although he is not yet close to the *action* stage (insistent that <u>he</u> will be the one who decides when to stop driving). As for the role of MJ, the son/grandson, he is not really considering Grandpa ceasing to drive, but is focused on his own driving charge and how he is going to get around. His role, through the mock driving exam, is to explore sensitive issues through humor: the challenges of driving faced by the older adult, navigating bureaucracy, ageism, complexities posed by new technology.

The play concludes by leaving us wondering what Grandpa decides. We sense that he is transitioning, shifting his attitudes towards driving. We know that he knows he will need to make some difficult decisions affecting his quality of life. What we don't know is what he decides in the end. The play is left open ended, leaving the question for the audience to ponder.

Just as the characters shifted in attitudes during the play, the same can be said for our devising company. We too experienced shifts, as reflected in a cast member's reflective commentary from which we quote in conclusion: "Since being part of the process and the performances, I have become acutely aware of the problems concerning driving skills and how generally poor they are – not just for seniors but of all ages. I am constantly assessing my own driving habits" (John Krich, *Grandpa*).

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