

Community Engagement Programs, The Panacea For Self-Development And Local Level Conscientisation: The Department Of Theatre Arts, UEW Experience

Authors: Godfred Asare Yeboah¹; Divine Kyere Atta Kwabena Owusu; Sika Koomson³

Department of Theatre Arts, University of Education, Winneba^{1,2,3}

DOI: 10.26821/IJSRC.10.11.2022.101013

ABSTRACT

Community engagement programs are viable means of conscientising people in their local communities to take charge of their personal and community development. Many of such programs have been conducted by the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Education Winneba.

Community engagement programs offer the opportunity for community members to reflect on the development avenues and potentials in their local areas which have not been fully tapped and utilised. Behavioural change and local level conscientisation geared towards community development is a shared responsibility. This shared responsibility is achieved when community members engage with each other on a common platform to find solutions to their challenges.

Active participation process enables people to raise their own issues with outsiders and encourages them to take responsibility for their own development.

This paper examines the impact of such community engagement programs by the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Education Winneba on selected communities. The paper will further explore the currently available programs specially designed to cater for the community's need and how they are *being employed*.

Keywords: Community Engagements, Development, Department of Theatre Arts, University of Education, Winneba.

INTRODUCTION

The top-down approach to community development has not been favourable to several communities seeking to escape from the milieu of poverty. This is because community development practitioners and stakeholders often ignore the contribution of the indigenous people; community engagement which is central to community development is thus left unconsidered in the community development process.

When government and other development partners decide on what must be done, build markets, grow certain crops, build schools and many others without first taking into consideration the felt-needs of the people or meeting them to discuss their preferred projects, the consequence is that, the effort of the development agent is likely to fail, Simply because that project has not received the blessing of the entire community. As soon as logistics and financial assistance cease flowing from the “top” that project becomes stillborn.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

In recent years, it seems a good idea to let local communities plan their own development. It has become popular to argue that change must be initiated and carried through by those who will benefit from it with the support of development partners. When this happen, we will then be moving to the new definition of development which is development based on shared knowledge and participation. This shared process of development can be achieved through community engagement programmes.

(Prentki 1998) states that, if development is understood as a process in which people’s conditions-material, social, political or cultural are changed, and then theatre with its immense transformative potential seems to be an ideal form through which to explore a community’s developmental aspirations and possibilities.

Community engagement refers to the process by which community benefit organizations and individuals build ongoing, permanent relationships for the purpose of applying a collective vision for the benefit of a community. It can also be defined loosely as the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people. It is a powerful vehicle for bringing about environmental and behavioural changes that will improve the health of the community and its members. It often involves partnerships and coalitions that help mobilize resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners, and serve as catalysts for changing policies, programs, and practices (Fawcett et al., 1995). This community engagement relies on participation to realize its full potentials. Bhoose (2003) defines participation as the process wherein the people involve themselves in planning, decision making and carrying out activities, projects, movements or whatsoever towards betterment with or without external support and sustain the same as individuals, peoples and social institutions.

In practice, community engagement is a blend of social science and the arts. The science comes from sociology, political science, cultural anthropology, organizational development, psychology, social work, and other disciplines with organizing concepts drawn from the literature on community participation, community mobilization, constituency building, community psychology, cultural influences, and other sources. Several of these concepts from the social science literature are presented here. The equally important artistic element necessary to the process, however, involves using understanding, skill, and sensitivity to apply and adapt the science in ways that fit the community and purposes of specific engagement efforts. By this the performing artist plays a key role in achieving the necessary results of the indigenous practice.

Involving community stakeholders can also be a highly creative, energizing, and rewarding experience leading to significant improvements in program design and outcomes. Research has shown that in programs that involve high levels of community participation and control, there is greater participation and improvement in activities. Also Community engagement builds “social capital” i.e social ties, networks, and support which is associated with better community growth. Finally Participatory decision-making can uncover and mobilize community assets, strengths, and resources that would have been otherwise overlooked (Asante, 2022).

There are several ways of engaging with the community and that is why most often governments and other development partners argue on the fact that there were prior engagements with communities before a project was initiated. Most of the engagements methods are not participatory enough and still limits the level of community involvement. What this paper seeks to propose is a participatory community engagement programs. As performing artists, we see the arts as viable means of engaging with the community in order to achieve the expected level of involvement. The arts have often been utilized as a means of engagement of rural communities in civic activities, making a political statement or protest (Hanna, 2002), raising awareness of an issue, or

working towards collaborative solutions (Mills & Brown, 2004; Brennan-Horley, Connell & Gibson, 2007; Lea, 2009; Ruane, 2007; Cleveland, 2007).

For Indigenous communities, especially those based in rural areas, the arts can often be the most meaningful tool for engagement and expression around important issues. Cultural performance provides an opportunity for civic engagement for Indigenous communities, through providing space for representation and identity formation, political engagement, and critique of the dominant culture (Slater, 2007). This function is particularly prevalent at festivals primarily initiated and run by Indigenous individuals and organizations

THE ARTS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The Theatre Arts (Drama) is one branch of the performing arts that wields the power of community engagement. It is the branch of the arts which is no respecter of language. It therefore has the ability to engage all manner of people and wide range of issues. Drama is an expression of human feelings and activities to an audience, reader or observer. Drama draws inspiration from society and its follies so as to correct them or make a statement on them. The sole purpose of drama geared towards development is to arouse emotion within the audience and to compel him or her to reason deep about the issues it brings to fore.

The creative artist, the director, the playwright, the actor, the musician, the painter, the event planner/ manager, the sculptor, the designer and the rest rely on his ardent skills and dexterity to always create something that is unique. He/she is dispensed with certain ingenuity that makes him/her stand out in all fields of endeavour. The creative artist must first form in his or her mind the image of an external object to which they attach an impression. It therefore presupposes the involvement and inclusion of an audience or spectator before the work of a creative artist will be complete.

The creative artist, through his work, has the power of arousing the emotions of a spectator (Dean and Cara, 1964). To convey this power through his artistic expression, the artist or creator must first have had within himself a highly developed gift of being deeply moved emotionally and intellectually by some objects in life. This object is what Pickard (2009) opines that in drama is usually man in relation to his environment or events and his reaction to these circumstances. Having the greatness to be moved, the artist, then has in turn to move the society. This means that any work (research or otherwise) embarked upon by the creative artist will need the final approval of his environment, thus, community, before the process can be deemed complete. Audience or spectators coming to see the creative artists' work cannot be overlooked. There is therefore the highest probability that the creative artist in the university is in a very good position to lead the path towards the university's quest to greatly affect its host community. The day to day activities of the creative artist includes looking for ways to reach out to the communities. His or her intuition, spontaneity and capacity to live truthfully is his/ her ability to empower the disadvantaged in the society which leads to total freedom from all forms of dependency. It also makes frantic effort to lay a platform for self-reliance which will, in turn, induce development in the host community.

THE DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE ARTS EXPERIENCE

The School of Creative Arts at the University of Education, Winneba is the home of creative artists at the University through its departments: Theatre Arts, Music Education, Art Education and the Graphics Department has impacted greatly by making the university relevant to the Winneba community. A creative artist from Theatre Arts or Music is mandated as part of his or her final year project to make the community members active participants of their entire projects. Theatrical performances are used to sensitize the community on some pertinent issues that need correction or improvement. Typical examples of such community engagement projects were done at Sankor and Ateitu, both indigenous communities in Winneba in 2010 by the first batch of Theatre Arts graduates. The people of Sankor since then had issues with sanitation in the area to an extent that Zoomlion, the waste management company in the area, blacklisted their community and so for many years were

not operating. Through a Theatre for Development course model, the creative artists at the Department of Theatre Arts, within three months of community engagement brought back the services of Zoomlion to this community. This is the reason why we will agree with (Baker, Collins and Leon 2008), who maintains that education is indeed a social vaccine, which has a prevention potential ranging from a major national economic mishap to the outbreak of a disease. The role and importance of education is widespread and cannot be overlooked. Awutu-Topiase a town located in the Awutu Senya district received a sensitization engagement which led to development. Topiase is a farming community which makes farming a major occupation. Some of the community members engage in petty trades like drinking sports; table top stalls as alternative source of income. The indigenes complain of poverty due to the nature of their annual farming system which is their source of income. The main crops grown in Topiase community are cassava, Tiger nuts, maize, Yam and coconut. Data collected during the transect walks by facilitators indicate that the abject poverty and no other booming source of income makes children to substitute schooling hours with other mini activities all in the name of supporting their families to cater for them. These factors consciously or unconsciously affects child education in Awutu Topiase community thus Teenage Pregnancy has become the first thing to see when you see teenagers aged between 12years and 18 years leading to school dropouts. This affects the class turnouts of upper primary and Junior High Schools. Based on the data collected by facilitators a theatre for development methodology was employed on the 20th of February 2020. A drama which had it themes drafted on how to bring to fore the role of education in the life of the children and the community at large.

The play served as an eye opener on the merits of education and how it can help one to be successful and also to help the community in developing the literacy level. It also informed the community on the child right to education. However, if a parent refuses to provide education for his or her children, he or she blurs the future of the child. Below is a brief pictorial view of the Awutu Topiase project.



Figure 1: School Children displaying placards with inscriptions on the need for education. (Source Bismark Agogo 20th February 2020)



Figure 2: Community actors and facilitators acting out the drama.(Source: Bismark Agogo 20,February 2020)



Figure 3: A girl child artistically performing to create awareness. (Source: Ernestina Appenteng 20th February 2020)



Figure 4: Resource person from Ghana Education Service giving this submission after the drama performance (Source Ernestina Appenteng 20th February 2020)



Figure 5: The chief of Awutu Topiase Nill Quarshie Fio giving his submission after the Drama performance (Source Ernestina Appenteng 20th February 2020)

Weeks later after the project facilitators visited the community. After a visit to the chief and his elders it was mentioned with confidence that indeed the project has impacted on the community because, few days after the project, Topiase community turns to a ghost town during school hours as compared to previous observation where children are seen moving about during school hours. The Chief therefore believes that the project has sent a strong message across the village. A visit to the school by facilitators indicated that the much empty class was now full to capacity.

Similar projects have since then taken place in different areas all with the participation of the community folks. One of such project was themed under maintenance culture and enhancing proper management in Awutu Ofaso. The people of Awutu Ofaso belong to the AWUTU AMANSA group of States comprising Winneba (Effutu Beraku/Simpa), Awutu Beraku (Obutu Beraku) and Awutu Senya (Senya Beraku) who occupy the same geographical area in the Central Region on the coast. They speak the same language or related Guan dialects which are more or less mutually intelligible. The area is a farming community.

Access to water had over the years had been a major issue of concern as residents of Awutu Ofaso relied on a stream far away from the community. Two wells were dug out by an NGO, PLAN Ghana that intervened years later. Years on, government and other NGOs came into to drill boreholes. However, these water facilities have not seen any maintenance for several years and this has led to the deterioration of some, while others have completely broken down and had been abandoned. One borehole had been abandoned in the bush since the cost of repairs was high, way beyond the community's treasury for the rehabilitation of water facilities



Figure 6: A well at Ofaso in a delapetated state.(**Source:** Lovia Ama Sam 2020)



Figure 7: A borehole abandoned in the bush (Source: Esther Tuakwa Mensah, 2020)

The two pictures above captured in the community exposed the attitude towards the maintenance culture of the people. A Theatre for Development approach was needed to create awareness on the need to maintain this source of drinking water. Data gathered from the community by facilitators were considered in creating a story to inform the community on the need to develop a positive attitude towards maintenance. Narrations from community members were the ingredients that formed the storyline. The story sought to work on the minds of community members and the society as a whole portraying their exact behaviour and various contributions towards the menace.



Figure 8: Kojo Manhyia carrying injured Kwamena away (Source : Amir Gbankulso Year : 2020)



Figure 9: Teenagers in the drama cited at the borehole(**Source;** Amir Gbankulso **Year :** 2020)



Figure 10 : Scene 3, Opanyin Mensah discussing with the chief and elders, matters arising (**Source;** Amir Gbankulso.**Year :** 2020)



Figure 11: Scene 6. Chief addressing the people of Asempakrom in the presence of the engineer (Source; Amir Gbankulso Year : 2020)



Figure 12: Introduction and presentation of items to the community to assist in the maintenance drive on the project.(Source; Amir Gbankulso Year : 2020)

These projects contribute to the sensitization and making the community participation a panacea for development. Follow ups and evaluation suggests that a reconstruction of the well has commenced and also the old one under maintained has seen a facelift during clean-up exercises.



Figure 13:

Clean up exercise at the borehole 1 (Source: Josephine Mintah Year : 2020)



Figure

14: Borehole after clean up exercise (Source : Josephine Mintah Year : 2020)



15:

Figure
Top of
well
under

construction (Source; Lovia Ama Sam Year : 2020)

The emotional agitation must not be merely a passing effect; instead, the force of passion on the individual must be so profound that when he leaves the immediate stimulus there will remain a lasting impression conducive to thought. Unless thought and emotions are aroused, the work cannot be classified as work of art. (Dean & Carra 1964)

The above statement clearly shows that, drama is geared towards provoking thought and emotions in its audience therefore making an impact on them. Participatory drama engages the active involvement of the people whose lives are affected by the issue or program being addressed. These issues are raised in the drama and the people are able to identify with the issues. Participatory theatre provides communities the platform to share ideas, including problem formulation, selecting methodologies that can help them solve create their own development agenda. It is an approach that engages community members in a joint process that mobilizes and enhances community strengths and problem-solving abilities.

In theory, participatory theatre is led by the community, yet in reality it is often initiated by outside agencies with their own agendas of how and what they want the theatre projects to achieve. This, in turn has the potential to impact on the ability of the project to be participatory and for communities to bring about their own sustainable change (Malamah, 1986).

Sayye (2004) argues that participatory theatre is a powerful tool for both education and entertainment and more so, for influencing the people's way of life. It promotes opportunities for positive dialogue. Adams and Goldbard (2001, p. 29) found that when communities are split over contentious issues raised through theatre performances, an opportunity for dialogue is created rather than the type of debate that leads to polarization. The performance allows other community members to be free to interact with the performance. All the projects cited allowed post dramatic discussions where community members begin to open up on the real issues associated with them.

CONCLUSION

It is not for nothing that despite the presence of the sea in Winneba and heavy fishing activities, Winneba town has been sold well both in Ghana and abroad because of two major reasons, thus The Winneba Youth Choir and Aboakyer Festival. These two major assets of Winneba, the host community of UEW, lie mainly in the domain of creative artistes, thus Music and Performance. The university therefore in a bid to highlight its visibility among the host community, should well resource the school of Creative Arts, which is naturally inclined to directly impact the community so that the number one relevance of the university, which is education, that is

supposed to transform the social, economic as well as spiritual well being of an individual will be felt within the community

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