A script for three voices:
“Undone business” in the academy

Shauna Butterwick
University of British Columbia, British Columbia
Jane Dawson
St. Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia
Jane Munro
Sooke, British Columbia

Abstract

Props required: 3 folding chair are placed in a slight semi circle a couple of feet apart facing the audience, one taller stool is placed on the left side of the stage near a flip chart with paper and felt pens and colored crayons. On the floor near the flip chart lies a large canvas bag. An old fashioned suitcase with a flip up lid lies on the floor in front of the 3 chairs; it is filled with 3 differently colored satin ribbons, 3 brightly colored scarves, 1 penny whistle, 3 half masks, 1 academic gown, monopoly money.

[Scene opens to 4 women. Three women are sitting on chairs in front of audience; a fourth woman, a graduate student, serves as the narrator and sits on a taller stool on the right side of the stage, holding a note book and pen. She is turned slightly towards the three women; all players are dressed in black.]

NARRATOR: Welcome everyone to a performance that examines the working conditions and stresses experienced by three female academics. As a PhD graduate student, I am anxious to hear these stories as I wonder about my own future prospects and what I can learn from these critical reflections.

[Turning to the three seated academics] Shauna, Jane, and Jane, speak to us, in story and poetry and theory about your troubles and cares.

JANE D: It is undone business
I speak of this morning,
with the sea
stretching out from my feet.

[Jane sits down.]

JANE M: So says Charles Olson[3], in the final lines of his poem, “Maximus, to himself.” The speaker in the poem is a sailor, reflecting on the “undone business” of self-understanding, in a life spent sliding around on a wet deck, always missing the important news to be read from wind and weather, having “to learn the simplest things last.”

SHAUNA: The idea of undone business—of learning the simplest things last, and missing the important news—makes me think about my experience of everyday life in the academy. The undone business I have in mind is how we don’t stand back and look at our conditions of work, even though that’s what we tell everyone else they should be doing. Jane Roland Martin points out how higher education too often, and I quote: “excludes itself from the categories it prescribes. Bidding those who come under its sway to go forth and understand, it teaches that just about everything is a legitimate object of understanding—except itself”[4].

NARRATOR: [nodding] Hmmm…. this should be good. Faculty often admonish grad students to engage in critical reflection, so it looks like we’re going to see the how this looks on the inside.

SHAUNA: There are floods of books about the negative effects of corporatization on the university.[5] Blah, blah, blah. Don’t we all know it. But in our daily experience as workers in “the knowledge factory,”[6] there are few opportunities or inducements to actually engage in sustained examination of the conditions in which we are immersed—what it looks and feels like to be living and coping with those negative effects.

ALL: [Shauna, Jane and Jane lean together and sway from left to right; speaking in unison] PITCHING OURSELVES AGAINST THESE PREVAILING CURRENTS …

JANE D: Our purpose in speaking now is to turn a reflective and reflexive gaze on our own practice and the experience of our working lives as women adult educators situated in (and out of) different higher education institutions. This writing arises from countless conversations, as we have navigated the ups and downs of academic life. It began many years ago, when we were graduate students together, struggling to make sense of the strange culture of academia.

JANE M: Its gestation took place over the subsequent years when we moved on into academic or administrative positions, and got busy with the things required of us—the excitement and drudgeries of higher education in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

SHAUNA: Over the years, we would keep in touch by email and occasionally encounter each other at conferences talking in fugitive moments about the victories and defeats we were experiencing.

ALL: [speaking in unison] WE OFTEN SAID THAT WE SHOULD ONE DAY WRITE ABOUT THESE EXPERIENCES …

SHAUNA: and perhaps through writing make better sense of what drew us here, what kept us, and what to make of the perplexities that beset us along the way.

JANE D: The impetus for finally getting started came at a time when we were all, for various
JANE M: put in a dossier, but that matter most. tarnished, and covert about the ephemeral moments and the risks taken, the things you never as little as possible about your truest aspirations and accomplishments. I end up feeling guilty, requires you to report in detail just what you've been doing these past few years but to reveal brutal, but nothing seems to change. There is also great paradox in that this process that nerve-wracking experience. I don't think I'm alone because many others groan when I talk reasonable requirement, but for me it has become a time-consuming, paper-wasting, process has grown into a kind of bureaucratic nightmare. The dossier! It seems like a valued and this becomes very clear when it comes to being evaluated. But the evaluation thought, reading, writing. As you've said Shauna, teaching and publishing are what is most most valued is not given much space in our day to day academic lives. Teaching and publishing. But in many ways this is the least structured part of our work. It seems that what is top of the pyramid—what is really valued more than anything else—is research and knowledge, anger—all in one day! As I learn how to do this job, I see now what I know and don’t know. Our work involves the well-known triumvirate: service, teaching, and research. At the top of the pyramid—what is really valued more than anything else—is research and publishing. But in many ways this is the least structured part of our work. It seems that what is most valued is not given much space in our day to day academic lives. Teaching and supervising grad students and service work all have clear structure. But our research and publishing is left up to chance or at least it’s work that ends up being positioned in opposition to teaching and service. Isn’t it interesting that when (or should I say if) we get support from our institution for our research, it comes in the form of buyouts of our teaching. I suppose it is to teaching and service. Isn’t it interesting that when (or should I say if) we get support from our institution for our research, it comes in the form of buyouts of our teaching. I suppose it is a good thing that we are not forced to fit our research and publishing into specific boxes of time; we have a lot of freedom to shape what we want to explore and that's important and that’s important and foundational for academic freedom. But on the other hand, the outline of our other reasons, feeling particularly beleaguered.

[JANE D: Informed by other works of autobiographical reflection on academic life, our aim is to engage in a critically reflective process about our own contexts of practice. Dorothy Smith’s feminist methodology[22] helps to frame our process. As she outlines, this approach begins with women’s everyday lived experience, speaking to and shedding light on what may seem trivial and ‘natural.’ But, the research doesn’t stop there. What is brilliant about Smith’s approach is in her notion of “the everyday as problematic.” By that means how it is shaped by social and institutional relations that are difficult to see (hence problematic) but hugely present, indeed giving everyday life much of its character and shape.

SHAUNA: So taking a cue from Dorothy Smith, our performance unfolds in three acts. The first act relates some of our experiences. [Shauna links her arm with Jane M.]

JANE M: The second act looks at theory about academic culture. [Jane M. links her arm with Jane D.]

JANE D: The third act turns to the theme of what to do with this critical look at our embodied and troubled experiences in the academy. Once we have considered the experience of sliding around on the wet deck of academia—then what? And so, in that act, we turn to notions of resistance and practices of renewal.

NARRATOR: [rubbing her hands together and nodding] I love how theatre can be used as part of research. But I must admit I'm a little anxious to hear what they have to say …. I’d love to get an academic position but I’ve seen the long hours and stress of many of my professors…. Maybe I don’t want to know the gory details….

ALL: [speaking loudly and in unison] ACT ONE. TALES OF EXPERIENCE.

[The performers unlink their arms and approach props arrayed at the front of the room, taking scarves, ribbons etc. with them as they return to their seat. Once seated, all three performers put masks over their faces and wrap scarf around their necks.]

SHAUNA: [Stands and steps forward and lays a ribbon on the floor then returns to her seat.] In the academy I feel frustrated, energized, fearful, courageous, full of shame, guilt, love, anger—all in one day! As I learn how to do this job, I see now what I know and don’t know. Our work involves the well-known triumvirate: service, teaching, and research. At the top of the pyramid—what is really valued more than anything else—is research and publishing. But in many ways this is the least structured part of our work. It seems that what is most valued is not given much space in our day to day academic lives. Teaching and supervising grad students and service work all have clear structure. But our research and publishing is left up to chance or at least it’s work that ends up being positioned in opposition to teaching and service. Isn’t it interesting that when (or should I say if) we get support from our institution for our research, it comes in the form of buyouts of our teaching. I suppose it is a good thing that we are not forced to fit our research and publishing into specific boxes of time; we have a lot of freedom to shape what we want to explore and that’s important and foundational for academic freedom. But on the other hand, the outline of our other work—teaching and service—seems much clearer.

JANE D: I too feel often burdened by the minutia of daily tasks with little room left for thought, reading, writing. As you’ve said Shauna, teaching and publishing are what is most valued and this becomes very clear when it comes to being evaluated. But the evaluation process has grown into a kind of bureaucratic nightmare. The dossier! It seems like a reasonable requirement, but for me it has become a time-consuming, paper-wasting, nerve-wracking experience. I don't think I'm alone because many others groan when I talk about it. Those who have survived the tenure process nod in sympathy, and many agree it’s brutal, but nothing seems to change. There is also great paradox in that this process that requires you to report in detail just what you’ve been doing these past few years but to reveal as little as possible about your truest aspirations and accomplishments. I end up feeling guilty, tarnished, and covert about the ephemeral moments and the risks taken, the things you never put in a dossier, but that matter most.

JANE M: I feel a bit odd here, since I’m not in an institution any more… but I have worked for
over 20 years in the university, college, and educational agency sector. I’ve also raised three children and am the author of four books of poetry. This characterizes me as emotional—a woman who loves and weeps and listens. Perhaps this shouldn’t make a difference in how I’m regarded as an academic, but I feel it has. I feel it’s made me easy to overlook (well, I am short!). And, it’s also kept me rather busy. Though I’ve spent much of my adult life in and around universities, I’ve been wary of the academy, and critical of its value system. I didn’t write my five books, or teach and work for all those years, in pursuit of tenure. As I held more and more demanding positions, it became clear to me that my organization and leadership skills could fill a need, but creativity, collaboration and candor were “frills.”

JANE D & SHAUNA: [throwing their arms up and heads back] Aarghhhhh!!!
ALL: [speaking in unison] AND MAYBE THE WOMAN ACADEMIC AS WELL.

SHAUNA B: People tell me to...

JANE M. AND JANE D: [both turn to face Shauna, raise their arms & demonstrably shake their fingers at her] JUST SAY NO!

SHAUNA: But who [stated emphatically, raising arms and shoulders in a questioning shrug] do I say no to? My dean? My students? Who or what do I say yes to?

[The other two performers begin chanting in a low voice, “yes, no, yes, no, yes, no, yes, no, yes, no....”]

NARRATOR: Now I am feeling anxious about wanting an academic position... Sounds like a lot of struggle. As a feminist researcher I can’t help but wonder about gender. Do women more easily respond to the demands of students and colleagues and committees and reports to be written, while the time and energy for research and publishing is what gets done ‘after work’? Do women get overlooked in the business culture of academia? Are women more likely to feel selfish if they actively resist the constancy of needs declared by students, colleagues, and institutions? Some faculty seem to not be caught up in this struggle—we should talk to them! It seems like teaching and service are the housekeeping of the academy. Are women more than men are taking this on? Because, from my perspective, it seems that women are keeping the place running. In my own doctoral research, I encountered the term ‘greedy institution,’ and a book of that name by Lewis Coser. He describes such environments as places where “the demands on the person are omnivorous” [10] Geez.... Doesn’t sound appealing to me!

ALL: [speaking in unison] ACT TWO: TALES OF THEORY [Shauna takes another ribbon & lays it on the floor in front of the chairs, overtop the first ribbon.]

SHAUNA: I have used Raymond Williams’ writing in my research about how certain ideas have such staying power. I think he can also help us look at our own experiences of academic culture. For Williams, “culture is a signifying system through which...a social order is communicated ... signifying a "whole way of life"” [11]. [Narrator asks 'who as that again? And Shauna replies 'Raymond Williams.' Narrator responds 'better write that down—sounds like someone I should read.' She opens her note pad and scribbles down the name muttering, 'Raymond Williams.' ]

http://ccfi.educ.abc.ca/publication/insights/v11n03/articles/butterwick/butterwick.html
SHAUNA: He goes on to say that often, in such a system, personal experience is not recognized as legitimate, and is taken as private and idiosyncratic when it differs from the norm. This is what Milosz [Narrator interrupts saying ‘how do you spell that’ and scribbles the name down on her pad.] [Shauna continues] what Milosz, spelled M I L O S Z, calls the silent pact.

JANE M: In our experiences of academic culture, there is a constant struggle around naming what happens to us. It feels like whining and is relegated to the margins. Williams can help us again with his notion of “Structures of feeling.”[12] He uses this term to define the way “normal” interactions and all forms of thought and being are structured to influence the meanings that are made of everyday events. Culture is a determining influence in deciding what is to be done or not done, what is expressed or not said. Structures of feeling dictate what is expressed and learned. I like the notion of “structures of feeling” because it resonates with our experiences of academic culture as “the way things are” and our own emotional responses as problematic, reflective of something being “wrong”—usually, something wrong with us.

ALL: [each performer takes left hand and presses it into belly, speaking unison] WE ARE FEELING SOMETHING IN OUR BODIES—SOMETHING IS NOT FITTING, NOT QUITE RIGHT.

JANE D: But the spaces where we can legitimately name these things are non-existent or difficult to find and create. To speak of feelings is lacking in tact. It is not what the Angel of the House would do.

JANE M: There is an interesting link between Williams’ idea of structures of feeling and another theoretical construct I find helpful. Organizational theorist James McNiven[13] talks about how important it is to identify what he refers to as the “dominant currency” of a given institutional or occupational setting. [Narrator mutters ‘James McNiven’ and writes that in her notebook.]

SHAUNA: The currency of government is power. [raises her fist.]

JANE D: The currency of business is money [raises her hand with monopoly money in it.]

JANE M: And the currency of academia is status. [puts on academic gown.]

[All performers pause for a beat with three images of raised fist, money and gown, then relax, hands are lowered. Then all performers put their masks back on.]

ALL: [speaking in unison] IT IS RISKY TO SPEAK OF TROUBLES, UNCERTAINTIES, OR EMOTIONS IN A STATUS CULTURE .

[Performers remove masks.]

JANE M: [stands with her feet apart, arms folded] Status is about accomplishments and any sign of tentativeness works against the status-building ethos. The lack of space for collective self-inquiry may be part of the façade a culture is trying to maintain. In the specific context of academic culture, I think the notion of status has become so entrenched that its heresy to challenge it. [sits and takes gown off.]

JANE D: I like the concept of institutional currency—it helps to illuminate the conflict of currencies, and the conflict of values that makes the academic workplace a particularly troublesome environment to inhabit.
SHAUNA: But the traditional academic currency of status has been substantially challenged in recent decades by the other two currencies mentioned by McNiven.

ALL: [speaking in unison] POWER [all performers raise left fist] AND MONEY [all performers raise right hand holding money.]

[NARRATOR: I’m still stuck on the issue of gender and how it’s playing out in these currencies of status, money, and power. Isn’t there an important link here between structures of feeling, institutional currency, and gender? Are women more prone to comply? Are they feeling as though they need to work harder because they are women, be more careful, take fewer risks? Is the corporate orientation a masculine arena where certain performances are valued and others rendered suspect? Hmm, this would make for a great dissertation topic!]

JANE M: [turning to Shauna] The corporatization of the university is well-established and is reflected in each of our struggles. It also explains your comment about the academic legitimacy pyramid …

SHAUNA: [turning to face Jane]… and your view of the university in late bureaucracy. As academic culture changes, the structures of feeling become frayed and confused, and the nature of the dominant currency less clear.

JANE D: [raises hands and shrugs shoulders] With no official space to speak of these changes.

JANE M: Like bell hooks,[14] who said that theory saved her, feminist theory really helps me understand these struggles. With competing power, money, and status currencies, the “shadow currency” of feeling is pushed to the margins. Jane Roland Martin notes that while the ranks of women academics have increased, “the academy charges an exorbitant admission fee to those women who wish to belong.”[15]

SHAUNA: The language and judgments of academic life create a climate where emotions are a liability. A recent survey of male and female faculty in the United States shows that while both men and women were drawn to an academic career because of the intellectual challenge and freedom that it offered, “women were more influenced by the possibility of balanced lives and service to others.”[16]

JANE D: However, this was not reflected in the reward structure of most universities, which still “affirm ‘male’ values at women’s expense. Prestige and status still earn more and reach tenure faster. More women report feelings of extreme stress”[17].

[NARRATOR: OK, now I'm feeling depressed….Are women the canaries in the mines of academia? Are their symptoms of fatigue, even illness, something to be taken very seriously as evidence of a poisonous environment? Isn’t it crucial that we undertake a critical gender analysis of the conditions of academic labour and whether women are bearing an unequal burden as academic work intensifies?]
ALL: [speaking in unison] ACT THREE: WHAT SHALL WE THEN DO?
[Shauna takes a third ribbon & lays it on the floor on top of the other two ribbons.]

ALL: [speaking in unison] AND SO WE TURN TO POETRY AND RESISTANCE.

JANE D: Audre Lorde asks:

What are the words you do not yet have?
What do you need to say?
What are the tyrannies you swallow
day by day
and attempt to make your own,
until you will sicken and die of them,
still in silence. \[18\]

ALL: [speaking in unison] POETRY IS NOT A LUXURY.

JANE D: I find writing poetry is a space where I can be in touch with these dilemmas. It gives form to experience often held in silence. “It is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—

ALL: [speaking in unison] NAMELESS AND FORMLESS, ABOUT TO BE BIRTHED BUT ALREADY FELT.”\[19\]

JANE M: Poetry is part of my practice and identity. I like what Jane Hirschfield says about the “liminality” of poetry:

The writer can become a person
in whom both individuality
and community
may ripen...
What lies beyond the conventional “authorized” versions
… can find voice. \[20\]

SHAUNA: In the words of Don McKay:

A poem, or poem-in-waiting,
contemplates what language can’t do:
then it does something with language
— in homage, or grief, or anger, or praise \[21\]

Poetry provides a language of …

ALL: [speaking in unison] BLOOD AND BONE.

SHAUNA: rather than “aerial distance.”\[22\] Poetry provides a way of …

ALL: [speaking in unison] BRINGING IT BACK.

JANE D: But let’s be careful here… poetry does not necessarily do this. It can be trivialized or canonized—as inconsequential as wallpaper. It affirms life only when we ask it to, or allow it to.
No matter how perfectly a poem is built, its vitality depends on its …

ALL: …[speaking in unison] INHABITANTS.

JANE D: When we enter a poem, like those lines we started with from “Maximus, to himself,” we are seafarers on board a craft. When we leave the poem in that moment

ALL: “WITH THE SEA/STRETCHING OUT/FROM MY FEET”

JANE D: we step again onto a threshold.

ALL: [speaking in unison] SOMETIMES OUR OWN WORDS SURFACE.

JANE M: But poetry is marginal in the academy. Our efforts are individual. Shauna and Jane
D use poetry in their teaching and research and encourage students to explore alternate modes of inquiry.

SHAUNA: [turning to Jane M] You are a poet who has published, taught Creative Writing and poetry and you are also an adult educator. I’ve seen you struggle to bring your poetic self to academia, feeling pulled back and forth.

JANE M: [holds her head and moves it side to side, the gesture of a bad headache. Then she drops hands from head.] It’s a pleasure when there is no divide when my mind runs on tracks that connects poetry and practice.

ALL: [speaking in unison] PRACTICING ACADEMIC DISOBEDIENCE.

[All stand and form a small circle, facing each other hands pressing together.]

JANE D: It is no accident that Olson’s Maximus tells us …

ALL: “THE SEA WAS NOT, FINALLY, MY TRADE.”

JANE D: as if we might take him for a seafarer who had no doubts or questions.

SHAUNA: Perhaps we need to make a similar clarification.

JANE M: The trade that brings us here is academia, not poetry.

JANE D: Like Maximus, we see our trade as …

ALL: [speaking in unison] “UNDONE BUSINESS.”

[The three women stand and begin to pack up their props, chatting quietly among themselves.]

NARRATOR: [stands up, calls to the three women] Hang on a minute, where are you going? You can’t end here, leave me hanging and wondering about my future….You can’t just name the problem—yeah, it’s important and a crucial first step, but there’s more to be said. What actions can be taken? What about small everyday resistances and structural transformation, all that stuff you teach us about? I think you’ve got more stories to tell, well at least I hope so, stories about strategies for resistance, practices of renewal, ways to break the complicity. So get back to your seats [speaking emphatically], Okay, I mean, please sit down and let’s brainstorm some ideas—I’ll write them down on this flip chart…

[Narrator pulls the flip chart from the side of the stage so that it stands between her and the three actors, the three actors put the props in the suitcase, nod to each other and sit down.]

JANE D: Okay, you’re right, we can’t stop here, then it really is just a bunch of theoretical whining.

SHAUNA: Hmm, so what are ways to resist, to push back….I get so caught up in the problem, I haven’t spent the time thinking about the alternative. We need data, so what about doing a time a motion study where we all document all the tasks we do for a month. I did that once, saw how many meetings I was going to and went on a ‘meeting diet.’ Maybe we should have a moratorium on meetings!
[laughter]

[The narrator stands up from her stool and she writes on the flip chart: ‘take time and motion inventory’ and ‘value our time’ and ‘go on meeting diet’.

JANE M: I know a colleague who keeps a daily inventory of what she says ‘yes’ to and what she says ‘no’ to. And when she gets asked to do something, she also practices saying, “let me think about that for a day and get back to you.” She says it really helps her stop and consider how she tends to over-commit and ends up feeling frustrated and annoyed and guilty because she can’t do a good job of anything. It also made her reflect on why she says yes and no and to whom. She says it helps her have a kind of mindfulness about the fact that she doesn’t have limitless time or resources. She also realizes that the world doesn’t fall apart when she says no.

ALL: [speaking in unison and using sing song voices] LET ME THINK ABOUT THAT—I’LL GET BACK TO YOU.

[Narrator stands and adds this point to the flip chart: ‘keep a yes and no inventory’ and ‘I’ll get back to you,’ pauses a beat and then adds ‘kill the angel.’]

[All three women nod their heads vigorously when the narrator adds the last point.]

JANE D: I have learned something that seems so trivial but it feels quite revolutionary. I block off time, during the working week to read. [The three other women gasp in horror] It feels almost illegal to take the time to read things like students’ work, books and articles that I need for my research or classes. Before I filled up my days with other things—meetings, email, god knows what, and then reading and writing were for my evenings and weekends. Now I know that if I have a thesis to read or marking to do, I block off the time, include it in my schedule instead of letting work spill into my life 24-7. But what amazes me about this very simple thing is how awkward it felt when I first started, how guilty I could sometimes feel.

[Narrator stands and writes on flip chart: ‘time to read, time to write.’]

NARRATOR: Okay, these are all good ideas and they can help but they seem to focus on changing at the individual level. What about the structures of the academy, what about changing these rules that become internalized and acted out through structures of feeling?

SHAUNA: You’re right, there is something bigger we need to think about—we need to return to what it is that we value. We need to ask that question of the academy because from my experience we’ve lost our way. Jacob Needleman who wrote Time and the Soul talks about this and says what we’ve lost is not just time, but meaningful time. He says people are ‘hungry ghosts’ running around doing things, and obsessed with doing things right. This obsession is what keeps us hungry and ghostlike because it cannot feed us because as he says, “the right way is the opposite of now—the opposite of the lived present moment in which the passing of time no longer tyrannizes us.”

JANE D: It seems that we need a kind of revolution of our consciousness. [Three women raise their fists and say ‘yes!’] In my own study of the meaning of work I have examined how work has become a narrow idea that is only about our attachment to the paid work force. I am
interested, like Jacob Needleman, to explore the notion of meaningful work and what that means to people. Here is where we need to challenge what’s happening in the academy in relation to status. There is a rhetoric of how universities should be helping communities, working on issues of social justice, but the dominant evaluation measures are still all about counting up the number of refereed journal articles.

SHAUNA: We do have some power in the academy and we need to interrupt these discussions so that other activities, like community activism and social responsibility are recognized, not as extras but as valuable, central work. We need to change the rules about tenure and promotion; that’s a site of value and power if there every was one….we need to move these private discussions into more public conversations about what is happening in the tenure and promotion process. Call a town hall meeting or something….

JANE D: We need to look at this beyond the individual and recognize that many others are also struggling—we need a survey of academics—I think that the Canadian Association of University Teachers did something like that last year—we should find the results. But bringing about these kinds of structural changes makes me think about the problem of marginalization. I agree that we do need to interrupt and offer alternative ways of evaluating our work. But to get to positions where we are successful at pushing alternatives to the current status currency, it seems like we need to play at the very game we want to dismantle. Many times, I’ve been told, keep your head down, publish, publish, publish and then when you get tenure you can change things. There’s something wrong here…

JANE M: I agree, we can’t do this alone. It needs to be more than one individual, it has to be a collective effort. Let’s make a pact, write down our goals, take one step and a time. Talk to others about their strategies, how they are pushing back and creating meaningful time and work, how they are changing what gets valued, keep track of their ideas and share them.

SHAUNA: and let’s bring the arts into this…. By singing. Painting our ideas.[The others vigorously nod their heads saying ‘yes, yes.’] and using theatre to investigate others’ experiences, not just our own. It’s a powerful way to get at issues, as many popular educators know. I developed a deep respect for its potential, learning a lot from a colleague and community theatre expert Jan Selman.[23] A few years ago, she and I used popular theatre with a group of women in the community to explore their experiences of feminist organizing. As Jan notes, popular theatre is a way of using theatre processes with communities to: [Shauna counts on her fingers as she lists the points.] identify problems, analyze the conditions and causes, and to note places where change can happen … and to rehearse those changes. It’s a form of community-based action research that uses theatre processes all along the way. It’s very embodied, interactive, and honors emotions. I’m always amazed at the kinds of stories and insights that emerge when I use or witness others using the arts because they tap into a different level of knowledge.

JANE M: It’s also about being playful and serious at the same time. Sometimes research into problems can leave you feeling depressed and immobilized but this approach is invigorating and generative.

JANE D: I’m all for having more fun as we figure out some solutions, what a concept to consider in academia!

SHAUNA B: Great, let’s brainstorm about that but I should get going—need to check my email [The others groan and shake their heads.]—just kidding!
[The three women stand, collect their props and put them in the suitcase, fold the chairs…Shauna’s cell phone rings and she answers it looking sheepish. Jane D. begins to play on her penny whistle, slowly walking towards the audience. Shauna says ‘gotta go’ to whoever she’s talking to and joins Jane D. and Jane M as they walk down the middle between the audience chairs. Shauna and Jane M are humming along as Jane plays her whistle. Shauna turns to the narrator and waves at her to join them.]

NARRATOR: [hurriedly grabs her supplies and joins the three women as they walk up the centre aisle; as they reach the door she stops and turns to the audience] Well, are you coming?

[1] The following script grew out of a paper “Undone Business: Critically Reflective Practice in the Academy” that was written by the co-authors for the 2003 Annual Conference of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education, held at Dalhousie University, Halifax, May 28-31, 2003. The paper was published in the conference proceedings. We decided, however, not to present our paper in the traditional fashion. As it was based on email and face to face discussions that had occurred in the year prior to the conference, we wanted to evoke for the audience as much as possible a sense of the dialogic process. We then performed this paper in front of an audience of about 25 participants. In the spirit of performative inquiry, we offer this script to the readers of Educational Insights.

[2] These images were created by Doreen MacLean, graphic artist and web designer.


[17] Ibid.


A script for three voices: “Undone business” in the academy

Resources


McNiven, James (personal communication, March 26, 2003).


About the Authors

Jane Munro's fourth book of poetry, “Point No Point,” was published last year by McClelland & Stewart. After completing her doctorate in Adult Education at University of British Columbia, Jane worked in British Columbia’s college and agency sector. She now lives and writes on Vancouver Island.

Jane Dawson is Associate Professor and Chair in the Department of Adult Education at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. Her areas of research interest include arts-based research, creative and critical inquiry, and the changing nature of academic work.

Shauna Butterwick is Associate Professor of Adult Education and Graduate Advisor for the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. Her research interests are generally in the area of adult education and include women’s learning and life history, welfare policy analysis, arts-based pedagogy and research, and the political economy of academic labour.
About the Artist

Doreen MacLean is a Vancouver based Web designer specializing in Flash animation and interactive web tools. Currently, she is working in the literacy field.