

## Creative Exchange Peer Leadership Network

### PRODUCT 3: A DOCUMENT TO ILLUSTRATE OUR ETHICS & PURPOSE

**TASK 1: INDIVIDUAL FEEDBACK ON QUESTIONS** (extracted from the work prepared by Janna, Jennifer & Emily from the Working Group on Ethics & Purpose)

---

- What is ethical practice with/in refugees and the Arts?
- Where does use of stories play a part of cause difficulties?
- What is the purpose of the work that we do?
- Who is it for?

*The WK on E & P decided that there were two useful strands of ethical practice and purpose to discuss:*

- *Use of personal stories and traumatic/past experiences as inspiration for work*
- *The question of sharing cultural and multi cultural art forms*

*Within this, three pointed questions help us to challenge these strands:*

- *Who is the work for?*
- *When is it right to draw on personal experience? Is it ever right?*
- *Linguistic definitions and uses, in particular definition and self-definition of 'refugee'*

---

### Personal stories/past experiences

#### **Why do we ask people to tell stories?**

Oval House does not **ask** people to tell stories, we create fiction with people, and this fiction may be resonant for them or may be the 'truth' disguised through fiction.

Theatre is our main tool and the beauty of theatre is that it is fiction –characters not real people, universal truths rather than the truth.

#### **Why do we make the professional decision to tell/avoid telling stories?**

Oval House does not exactly avoid the telling of stories, it is just that we do not make it a requirement of participation; we do not expect it or signal that that is what the work is about. If a participant chooses to tell a personal story we respect that choice while considering the emotional safety of all the participants. I think that often artists

are curious about people's stories, they know that something has 'happened' to them and they wonder .... I actually prefer not to know about people's past because I am concerned that it will make me see them differently. I don't want to pigeon-hole people or see them as their past. I feel deeply uncomfortable when a teacher in a school tells me about the young people – 'He was a child soldier, she was raped'. I think people should have the right to define themselves as who they are now. There was some research, I think with Holocaust survivors, that showed that people who can move beyond their past and fully embrace their present situation are more successful in their life – happier perhaps, better integrated – someone might know more about it than me.

### **What purpose do artistic recreations of true stories have?**

I question whether true stories are necessary in raising awareness. Does a story have to be 'the truth' to be true? I worry that using true stories of suffering can be de-humanising of refugees and focus on them as victims rather than people, they become their story. I am also interested in what David Mamet called emotional pornography – the moral accomplishment an audience feels when they watch an enactment of suffering and feel empathy – it makes people feel good. (This was in relation to *Shindler's List*) The question is - does it make them feel responsible?

### **When does someone have the responsibility to decide when and how stories are told?**

As a facilitator one of my responsibilities is to protect participants from harm, including emotional and psychological harm. This responsibility underpins any decision or action I take with regards to the telling of stories. I do not decide when and how stories are told but I do try to create a place of safety for the young people I work with and develop a framework of respect in the groups. This means that if a participant chooses to tell a story the groups will hopefully give them respect.

### **Is there ever justification for telling stories as release/political statements/social justice tools. Who should make this decision?**

This is a difficult issue because people do not always know what they are getting into when they agree to give a story to someone else to be used for whatever purpose. The decision is often influenced by the relationship between the story giver and receiver. For instance, if I have worked with a group of young people for several years and one particular individual has benefited a great deal from the work they may feel a moral obligation to allow me to use their story, not wishing to say no and let me down. Not all participants are empowered enough to make this decision.

Some other research – that I can't remember the details of – showed that the use of traumatic stories as tool for awareness-raising only worked on people who were already sympathetic, it had the opposite affect on people who were initially unsympathetic. I have seen this in action in my own early work in schools attempting to raise awareness of the concerns on refugees.

The most comfortable approach for me would be to allow participants to define the agenda and lead on any initiative. They could be asked the participants if there are any issues they would like to communicate and allowed to define the method for themselves.

**Are there different rules for work with young people?**

Clearly there are legal and policy frameworks that apply to children – Every Child Matters for instance - that particularly requires that children's safety be assured. However I believe that adults have a right to have their safety assured too. Not all adults are empowered and confident enough to protect themselves from harm.