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Teaching theatre for development in Ghana: Reflections on practice, pedagogy, and participation

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ABSTRACT

Theatre for Development (TfD) is well established in Ghanaian theatre arts programmes, yet there is limited scholarship on how university pedagogy prepares student facilitators for the ethical and relational demands of community-based practice. Drawing on long-term experience as a TfD educator and supervisor in Ghanaian higher education, this article interrogates the gaps between institutional TfD training and the realities of facilitation in Ghanaian communities. It asks how current curricula, practicum structures, and theoretical framings shape students' capacities to work dialogically, ethically and reflexively with community participants. The paper adopts a reflective practitioner methodology, combining an interpretive review of TfD course outlines and practicum modules across major Ghanaian universities with critical analysis of supervisory records and facilitation experiences in multiple community settings. The analysis is informed by Freirean critical pedagogy, Theatre of the Oppressed, decolonial drama education scholarship, and indigenous performance epistemologies, particularly Ghanaian storytelling traditions such as Anansegoro. Four interrelated tensions are identified: the dominance of technique over ethical reflexivity in facilitator education; the marginalisation of indigenous performance knowledge in TfD curricula; the framing of participation around assessment and institutional timelines rather than communal accountability; and the structural constraints of short-term "community project" models. In response, the article proposes a set of pedagogical principles for TfD in African higher education, including re-conceiving practicum as apprenticeship in ethical practice and integrating indigenous performance epistemologies as core theoretical resources. It contributes to international applied theatre pedagogy by offering a situated, practice-led account of TfD teaching in Ghana and outlining how decolonial, community-embedded approaches can reorient facilitator education.

Keywords: Applied Theatre Education, Decolonial Practice, Ethical Facilitation, Ghana, Indigenous Performance Epistemology, Participatory Theatre, Practicum, Reflective Practice, TfD Pedagogy, Theatre for Development

I. INTRODUCTION: TEACHING TFD IN CONTEMPORARY GHANA

Teaching Theatre for Development is, in my experience, one of the most pedagogically demanding assignments in theatre arts education. It is not difficult in the way that teaching acting technique or directing is difficult, in that it demands technical mastery, precision, and craft. It is difficult because it demands something that cannot be transmitted through lecture, demonstrated through performance, or assessed through examination, namely the capacity to hold a community's trust, to read the ethical temperature of a participatory process in real time, and to make consequential decisions under conditions of irreducible uncertainty. These are not teachable in any conventional sense, and yet they are precisely the capacities that Theatre for Development practice requires, and that Theatre for Development pedagogy must find ways to cultivate.

I have been teaching TfD at the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Education, Winneba (UEW), for several years, and I have been practising it in community contexts across Ghana for considerably longer. My sustained engagement with communities in the Asebu Traditional Area in the Central Region, my involvement in participatory theatre interventions addressing community development challenges in rural coastal communities (Asante, 2018), and my supervision of student practicum projects across a range of community settings have given me an ongoing, sometimes uncomfortable education in the gap between what TfD pedagogy teaches and what TfD practice demands.

This essay is my attempt to examine that gap honestly, to understand its sources, and to argue for a more adequate approach to TfD education in Ghana and, I would suggest, across the West African sub region.

The argument I develop here is not that current TfD pedagogy lacks content, or techniques, or the right theoretical frameworks. In many respects, the theoretical foundations of TfD education in Ghanaian university departments are sound. Students encounter Freire (1970), Boal (1979), Grotowski (1968), and Prentki & Preston (2009). They learn about needs analysis, community entry, and devising methodologies, and they are required to undertake supervised

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practicum projects in which they apply these frameworks in real community settings. The problem is that the current structure of TfD education tends to treat these elements as an ensemble of techniques to be learned and applied, rather than as practices that require ethical reflexivity, cultural responsiveness, and the kind of relational intelligence that only develops through sustained, critically supervised encounter with the communities TfD is designed to serve. The result is a cohort of technically informed graduates who are often poorly prepared for the ethical and relational demands of actual community-based facilitation.

This essay proceeds by situating TfD pedagogy within its Ghanaian institutional context before examining in turn the dimensions that current training tends to underserve, including ethical reflexivity, indigenous performance epistemology, the pedagogy of participation, and the structural limitations of the community project (practicum). Throughout, I draw on my own experience as practitioner, teacher, and supervisor, as well as on the broader scholarly conversation about applied theatre education, decolonial practice, and participatory pedagogy. The essay is explicitly partial and positional, reflecting a perspective formed in particular institutional, geographical, and professional circumstances, and it makes no claim to comprehensiveness. What it does claim is that the questions it raises matter for the future of TfD education not only in Ghana but across the continent.

A note on method and positionality is appropriate here. This essay does not follow the conventions of an empirical research article. Its organising logic is reflective and interpretive, drawing on long-term practitioner experience, professional observation, institutional knowledge, and critical scholarly engagement rather than on a formally designed study. Where curricular evidence is cited, it derives from an informed professional review of available course documents, as described more fully in the first section below. Where student observations are referenced, they arise from the author's supervisory practice at UEW, accumulated across approximately a decade of TfD practicum supervision and drawn from the reflective records of roughly 40 student practitioners across multiple cohorts. These observations were not solicited specifically for this essay; they arise from the ordinary records of supervisory practice, including student reflective journals, practicum reports, and field supervision notes generated as part of assessed university programmes. Students whose observations are cited or paraphrased here were informed, in the course of that supervisory relationship, that their reflections might contribute to scholarly work, and their participation in this capacity was voluntary and subject to full anonymisation. No individual student can be identified from the material as presented. The author acknowledges that drawing on observations generated within a supervisory relationship in which the author held institutional authority involves an inherent asymmetry of power, and this positionality is held openly throughout the analysis rather than treated as resolved by procedural consent. This methodological positioning is consistent with the reflective scholarly essay as a genre, in which the practitioner-scholar's sustained and critical experience is itself a form of evidence (Schön, 1983; Conquergood, 1991).

II. TFD IN GHANAIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN INSTITUTIONAL PORTRAIT

Theatre for Development has occupied a distinctive and not entirely comfortable position in Ghanaian higher education since its formalisation as a curricular subject in the major Theatre Arts departments. Its discomfort has several dimensions. As a practice discipline, TfD sits uneasily within university structures organised around the transmission of established knowledge rather than the generation of practice-based wisdom. As a community-engaged practice, it resists the institutional tendency toward self-referential academic production and insists on the primacy of relationships, responsibilities, and accountabilities that extend beyond the university walls. As a discipline with deep roots in African popular theatre traditions and postcolonial development thought, it exists in a permanent productive tension with the inherited Eurocentric frameworks through which Ghanaian Theatre Arts departments were originally constituted (Kerr, 1995; Mda, 1993).

Within these departments, at the University of Education, Winneba, the University of Ghana, Legon, the University of Cape Coast, among others, TfD is now well-established as a core component of undergraduate and graduate programmes in Theatre Arts. Students at all levels encounter TfD methodology, undertake community practicum projects, and engage with the foundational scholarly and practice literature of the field. Faculty members bring to their teaching a range of practical backgrounds, from NGO-based community theatre work to academic research in applied performance, and the departments have produced generations of graduates who have gone on to work in community development, education, public health communication, and the arts.

In preparing the arguments of this essay, the author conducted an informed professional review of available TfD course outlines, syllabi, and module descriptors at the three major institutions offering TfD in Ghana, namely the University of Education, Winneba, the University of Ghana, Legon, and the University of Cape Coast, covering

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undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Across these three institutions the review encompassed approximately twelve discrete course documents, including undergraduate TfD methodology courses, postgraduate applied theatre and TfD seminars, and the community project or practicum modules at each level. Documents were gathered through institutional channels and professional networks over the period 2020 to 2025. The analytic approach was interpretive and professionally oriented rather than systematic in a formal coding sense. Course outlines and syllabi were examined for the presence or absence of content addressing ethical reflexivity, indigenous epistemologies, and the relational demands of facilitation, rather than coded against a predetermined schema. Observations should therefore be understood as an informed practitioner assessment rather than as empirical findings in a formal research design sense. The author acknowledges the potential for institutional bias, given that one of the institutions reviewed is the author's own; where the analysis draws specifically on UEW materials, this is noted, and the curricular patterns described are corroborated across all three institutions rather than attributed to any single one. Across all institutions and at both undergraduate and graduate levels, a broadly consistent curricular architecture emerged. Courses are structured around the foundational methodology of TfD, drawing primarily on Freire's (1970) popular education philosophy and Boal's (1979, 1992) participatory theatre methodology, supplemented by readings in applied theatre, development communication, and community facilitation. Community Project (practicum) is invariably included as a required component. What is conspicuously and consistently absent across all the outlines reviewed, at both undergraduate and graduate levels, is systematic attention to the ethical dimensions of facilitation, to indigenous performance epistemologies as legitimate theoretical resources, and to the reflective practice demands that community-based TfD work places on facilitators. Graduate programmes, where one might reasonably expect greater theoretical depth and critical engagement, tend to replicate rather than substantially deepen the curricular framework of their undergraduate counterparts. This curricular consistency is significant, and somewhat troubling. It suggests that the limitations of TfD education in Ghana are not institutional accidents or departmental oversights, but systemic features of how the discipline has been constituted across the sector.

There is, within these programmes, a persistent tension between TfD as academic subject and TfD as practice. This tension is not unique to Ghana, as it is a feature of applied theatre education globally, but it has particular characteristics in the Ghanaian context. The university curriculum, with its emphasis on assessable outcomes, timetabled activities, and measurable competencies, is structurally ill-suited to accommodating the open-ended, relational, and often unpredictable nature of community-based participatory practice. The community-based project (practicum), which is the most valuable component of TfD education precisely because it takes students out of the lecture hall and into contact with the communities they are being trained to serve, is frequently constrained by time pressures, logistical difficulties, and the institutional requirement that it produce a grade rather than a practitioner.

What this creates, at worst, is a situation in which students learn to perform TfD facilitation for assessment purposes rather than to practise it for community development purposes. Research with student facilitators at different stages of professional formation has documented this tendency clearly. When asked about their reflective practices during practicum, student facilitators consistently describe reflection as an activity oriented toward the requirements of their supervisors rather than toward genuine professional or ethical deliberation. This pattern emerged consistently across the author's supervisory field records and student practicum submissions gathered over several years of TfD supervision, from which student observations are drawn in this essay with the informed consent of participants. One student put it plainly: we wrote our reflective report for the lecturer, not for the community. The form of professional reflection was present; its substance was not. This is not a criticism of individual students. It is a structural observation about the conditions under which TfD education currently takes place, and it raises fundamental questions about how those conditions might be changed.

III. BEYOND TECHNIQUE: ETHICAL REFLEXIVITY AS PEDAGOGICAL IMPERATIVE

The most persistent limitation of TfD pedagogy, in my experience, is its tendency to frame the facilitator's task in primarily technical terms. There is a defensible position to be made for technical competence as foundational: advocates would argue that a facilitator who cannot manage devising processes, hold theatrical form, or guide Forum Theatre methodology is unlikely to achieve the ethical attentiveness being argued for here, since competence is a precondition of community credibility (Boal, 1992; Mda, 1993). This position deserves acknowledgement. The argument of this essay is not that technique is irrelevant but that technique without ethical reflexivity is insufficient and, in the TfD context, potentially harmful. The question that structures most TfD curricula, namely how do we do this, is important but not the most important question. The more fundamental questions of why we are doing this, for whom,

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with what authority, and with what responsibility for the consequences are less systematically addressed, and their relative absence from the curriculum produces facilitators who are technically capable but ethically underprepared.

This matters particularly in the Ghanaian context because the communities in which TfD facilitators work are not neutral spaces. They are structured by specific histories of power, conflict, inequality, and authority. When a group of university-educated theatre practitioners arrives in a rural community in the Central Region or the Upper West Region to facilitate a participatory theatre process, they bring with them, whether they are aware of it or not, a set of assumptions, privileges, and structural advantages that shape every aspect of the encounter. The relative youth and formal education of many student facilitators, their class position, their location within the prestige economy of the university, and their reliance on community gatekeepers for access and logistical support all position them in relation to the communities they work with in ways that have ethical consequences. Facilitators who are not prepared to reflect on these dynamics risk reproducing, in their facilitation, the very hierarchies of knowledge and authority that TfD is designed to challenge.

This is not a new observation. The critique of developmental ventriloquism, meaning the risk that TfD interventions will project the facilitator's or funder's agenda onto community voices while claiming to give those voices expression, is well established in the critical literature on the practice. Mda's (1993) foundational critique of the conscientising TfD model, Plastow's (2014) examination of the politics of representation in African applied theatre, and Etherton and Prentki's (2006) interrogation of impact claims all circle around the same fundamental concern, which is that the good intentions of TfD practitioners are not sufficient protection against the reproduction of power asymmetries that structurally disadvantage the communities they work with. What has been less systematically addressed is what this means for TfD pedagogy and how to teach in such a way that students are not only aware of these risks but genuinely equipped to navigate them.

My argument is that this requires what might be termed the dual reflective demand, meaning the simultaneous cultivation of individual professional reflexivity and communal ethical accountability (Asante, 2026a). Individual reflexivity means teaching students to examine their own assumptions, privileges, and facilitative choices with rigour and honesty, not as a post-hoc exercise in self-congratulation but as an ongoing, practice-embedded process of critical interrogation. Communal ethical accountability means teaching students that their primary obligation in TfD practice is not to the quality of the performance, not to the requirements of the assessment, and not even to their own professional development, but to the communities whose lives, stories, and vulnerabilities are entrusted to their facilitative care.

In practical terms, this means reconceiving the practicum not as a supervised application of technique but as a supervised apprenticeship in ethical practice. It means introducing students to the ethics of community consent, not as a procedural formality involving a signed form and a community meeting at the start of the project, but as an ongoing, negotiated, and genuinely dialogical process that continues throughout the TfD intervention and extends beyond its formal conclusion. It means developing students' capacity to read community dynamics, to notice when a participatory process is generating responses that the facilitator did not anticipate and may not be equipped to handle, and to make ethical decisions about how to proceed in real time. It also means cultivating in students a quality of ethical attentiveness, a heightened awareness of the power implications of their facilitative choices, the representational stakes of the stories being theatricalised, and the potential consequences of performing those stories in front of the communities to which they belong.

None of this can be adequately addressed through lecture or reading alone. It requires practice, supervised reflection, and the kind of honest pedagogical dialogue that is only possible when teachers are willing to share their own facilitative failures as well as their successes. In my teaching at Department of Theatre Arts, UEW, I have found that the most productive learning moments are not those in which students successfully execute a community intervention, but those in which something goes wrong, when community members respond in unexpected ways, when a facilitator's authority is challenged, or when the performative frame breaks down under the weight of real emotion, and the subsequent reflection is able to hold that difficulty without collapsing into either self-recrimination or defensive rationalisation. These are the moments when genuine ethical learning occurs, and they are also the moments that current assessment frameworks are least equipped to value.

The ethical dimensions of TfD facilitation that most frequently surfaced in my supervisory work with student practitioners concern two recurring dilemmas. The first is the inadequacy of consent procedures in the face of what community participation actually entails. Student facilitators are generally prepared to obtain consent in the procedural sense, to explain the project to community leaders, to secure permission for the intervention, and to document that permission in a manner that satisfies institutional ethics requirements. What they are rarely prepared for is the realisation that procedural consent and substantive informed participation are fundamentally different things, and that the gap between them is where the most significant ethical failures in TfD practice occur. A community leader's consent to a

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TfD process does not mean that the women whose experiences of domestic violence will be performed have agreed to be represented, or that the young men whose unemployment situation will be dramatised have chosen to have their circumstances made the subject of public performance. This distinction is critical, and it must be foregrounded much earlier and much more insistently in TfD pedagogy than it currently is.

The second recurring dilemma concerns what happens when participatory performance generates consequences its facilitators did not anticipate and are not equipped to manage. Forum Theatre is designed to be unpredictable, as its methodology of inviting audience members to intervene in the dramatic action in order to propose alternative responses to oppression is premised on the generative potential of the unexpected (Boal, 1992). But the same unpredictability that makes Forum Theatre a powerful instrument of conscientisation also makes it an instrument of potential harm in the hands of facilitators who have not developed the ethical attentiveness to recognise when the performative frame is breaking down and a community member's pain is making itself present in ways that require the facilitator to prioritise care over theatrical process. The capacity to make that recognition and act on it cannot be taught in the abstract form. It must be cultivated through practice and, crucially, through reflection on practice that is genuinely oriented toward the community's wellbeing rather than toward the facilitator's professional self-development.

A technique-first advocate might respond to these arguments by pointing out that the two dilemmas described above, the inadequacy of consent and the unmanaged collapse of the performative frame, are themselves problems that a more technically accomplished facilitator would be better equipped to handle. There is something more to this. A facilitator with greater command of Forum Theatre's internal logic, a deeper familiarity with its transitions, its safety mechanisms, and its capacity to contain difficult material within theatrical form, will in some circumstances be better positioned to protect community members from harm than one who combines ethical sensitivity with technical hesitancy. This concession is important, and it is not one the argument of this essay seeks to evade. What it does dispute, however, is the inference that technical competence is therefore sufficient and that ethical formation is properly a later concern, attainable once the techniques are secure. The evidence from supervisory practice consistently points in the opposite direction: technically proficient student facilitators who have not been taught to ask the prior questions of authority, representation, and consequence regularly produce interventions that are formally impressive and ethically problematic. Ethical reflexivity is not a supplement to technical competence. It is the condition under which technical competence can be exercised responsibly, and its cultivation must begin at the same moment as, and not after, the teaching of technique.

IV. INDIGENOUS PERFORMANCE EPISTEMOLOGIES AND THE DECOLONIAL IMPERATIVE

One of the most significant and under-examined dimensions of TfD pedagogy in Ghana is the question of indigenous performance epistemologies, meaning the forms of theatrical, performative, and participatory knowledge that are embedded in Ghanaian cultural traditions, and their relationship to the Western-derived frameworks through which TfD is primarily theorized and taught. This is not merely a question of cultural relevance or contextual adaptation. It is a question about the epistemological foundations of TfD practice, and about whose ways of knowing are granted theoretical authority in the training of facilitators.

The dominant theoretical framework of TfD education, rooted in Freire's (1970) popular education philosophy and Boal's (1979) participatory theatre methodology, was developed in Latin American contexts and reflects particular assumptions about the nature of community, dialogue, consciousness, and social change that do not map straightforwardly onto Ghanaian cultural realities (Mlama, 1991). Boal's Forum Theatre, with its explicit invitation to audience members to interrupt the performance and propose alternative solutions to the dramatic situation, presupposes a relationship between performance and social action, between the theatrical and the political, and between individual agency and collective transformation, that has specific historical and cultural roots in Latin American popular movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Translated into typical Ghanaian village contexts, where the relationship between performance and community, performer and spectator, and private and public is structured by entirely different cultural logics, these frameworks require not straightforward application but careful epistemological negotiation.

My extensive fieldwork particularly in the Asebu Traditional Area and other neighbouring communities in the Central Region of Ghana brought this into sharp relief. The Asebu communities have their own rich performance traditions, including storytelling forms related to the Anansegoro tradition that Efua Sutherland so productively explored and theorised (Sutherland, 1975), as well as ritual performances, communal festival theatre, and oratorical traditions that embody sophisticated understandings of the relationships between performance, knowledge, community, and social change. These traditions are not merely colourful local variations on a universal theatrical impulse. They are

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epistemological systems in which forms of knowing, speaking, and acting are institutionalised through performance practice. When TfD arrives in such a context armed with imported frameworks of participatory theatre, the encounter is not simply between a development methodology and a community, but between two epistemological systems with different histories, different authorities, and different claims to legitimacy.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986) foundational argument about the decolonisation of the mind, namely that the most insidious form of colonial legacy is the internalisation of European frameworks as universal norms, is directly relevant here, not only in relation to the communities TfD serves but in relation to the TfD practitioners themselves. Ghanaian TfD educators who have been trained within Western academic frameworks risk transmitting to their students an implicit hierarchy of knowledge in which Freire and Boal are authoritative theorists and indigenous performance traditions are local colour, contextual decoration applied to an imported conceptual framework rather than epistemological resources in their own right. This is precisely the dynamic that the decolonial project in applied theatre seeks to disrupt (Prentki & Preston, 2009; Bharucha, 1993), and it is a dynamic that TfD pedagogy in Ghana has not yet fully confronted (Asante, 2026b). This essay argues at length that Efua Sutherland's Anansegoro provides one of the most generative Ghanaian models for thinking through this challenge. Sutherland's recovery and theoretical elaboration of the Anansegoro tradition, the storytelling performance form in which the Anansesemwura (owner of the story) mediates between performers and audience in a participatory, dialogically open theatrical encounter, offered a distinctively African methodology for participatory theatre that predates and, in many respects, anticipates the concerns of Boal's Forum Theatre without depending on its theoretical apparatus (Sutherland, 1975). The Anansesemwura as facilitator figure embodies a form of communal relational authority, grounded in indigenous epistemology, that is in important respects more adequate to the cultural realities of Ghanaian community-based practice than the joker role Boal (1992) derived from the Latin American popular theatre tradition. The Anansesemwura does not stand outside the community as a catalytic agent of conscientisation; they are embedded within it as a recognised custodian of communal storytelling, whose authority to facilitate dialogue is inseparable from their relational standing within the community's social fabric (Yankah, 1995).

In the Nigerian TfD context, Abah (1997) has similarly shown how deep cultural embeddedness transforms the facilitator from an external interventionist into a community co-author of the developmental process. Abah's documentation of practice across northern Nigerian communities demonstrates that facilitative authority in African settings derives not from methodological training alone but from earned relational presence within the community's existing social and cultural structures, a finding that resonates directly with the Ghanaian experience described in this essay.

This difference matters for pedagogy. When we teach students to facilitate TfD interventions using Forum Theatre methodology, we are implicitly teaching them to occupy a particular kind of relational position in the community, one that is externally constituted, theoretically authorised, and institutionally legitimated. When we teach them to understand the Anansesemwura (owner of the story) as a facilitation model, we are teaching them something quite different, namely that facilitative authority is earned through relational embeddedness, that it is granted by the community rather than conferred by the institution, and that its exercise is governed by norms of communal accountability that are not reducible to methodological technique. This is a more demanding and a more culturally adequate understanding of what TfD facilitation requires, and it is one that Ghanaian TfD pedagogy has the resources to cultivate if it chooses to take its indigenous performance traditions seriously as theoretical resources.

Teaching students to think with these indigenous frameworks, not as replacements for Boal and Freire but as epistemological interlocutors, requires teachers who are themselves fluent in the performance traditions of the communities in which their students will work. It requires curriculum development that integrates African performance scholarship and African communitarian philosophy into the theoretical framework of TfD education, drawing on the work of scholars such as Wiredu (1996) and Gyekye (1997) on communal consensus and shared ethical responsibility, Yankah (1995) on the ethics of Ghanaian oral performance, and the growing body of African applied theatre scholarship that insists on the theoretical productivity of indigenous performance practice, including recent work by African scholars on community-based pedagogy and decolonial facilitation (Dalrymple, 2006; Odhiambo, 2008). It also requires pedagogical spaces in which students are genuinely invited to question the epistemological hierarchy that places Western theoretical frameworks above indigenous knowledge systems, and to develop the cultural literacy necessary to facilitate responsively in communities whose ways of knowing are different from those institutionalised in the university.

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V. THE PEDAGOGY OF PARTICIPATION: TEACHING STUDENTS TO ENTER COMMUNITIES

The word participation is so central to the vocabulary of TfD that it has become almost invisible, a taken-for-granted ideal rather than a practically and ethically complex achievement that requires specific skills and sustained reflexivity to realise. Teaching students to facilitate participation, to create conditions for genuine participatory engagement, is one of the most demanding tasks in TfD education, and one of the least adequately theorised.

The challenge begins before the community is entered. The very act of approaching a community as a TfD practitioner involves a set of decisions that are simultaneously logistical, relational, and ethical. Which gatekeepers do you approach? In what order? With what kind of explanation of the project? With what kind of agreement about its terms? The standard answer in TfD methodology, which is to approach community leaders, obtain their consent, and negotiate access through established channels, reproduces a structure of authority that is not always aligned with the distribution of voice and agency that TfD is designed to support. When a student facilitator obtains consent from a chief or a headteacher or an NGO programme officer, they have secured access to the community, but they have not necessarily secured a participatory relationship with its members.

This distinction between access and participation is one of the most important lessons TfD education needs to communicate, and one of the hardest to teach. Even experienced facilitators struggle with it. Community members who are present at a TfD process are not automatically participants in the sense that Freire (1970) and Boal (1979) intend. They may be present as observers, as deference to authority, as curiosity, or as a form of social obligation. The challenge here is structural rather than merely procedural; entry through community leaders, chiefs, or institutional gatekeepers reproduces existing hierarchies of authority in ways that can determine, before a single workshop session has begun, whose voices will be heard and whose will remain in the background. The community leader who grants permission for a TfD process thereby shapes its social architecture. Facilitators who do not recognise this are not navigating community entry; they are being navigated by it. The facilitator's task is to create conditions in which genuine participation, voluntary, critical, and transformative, becomes possible despite and across these inherited power arrangements. This requires reading the community's emotional and social dynamics with a degree of sensitivity that no curriculum can directly produce, but that pedagogy can and should actively cultivate.

I have developed a practice in my teaching that I call community reading, a structured observational exercise in which students spend time in a community before attempting any facilitation, attending to the patterns of social interaction, the distributions of authority and deference, the rhythms of daily life, and the existing performance traditions and communicative practices that structure communal expression. This exercise is deliberately non-interventionist. Students are not problem-solvers at this stage. They are learners, and their task is to develop the kind of cultural attentiveness that genuine participatory facilitation requires. In communities where I have supervised practicum projects, this preliminary phase has consistently produced more ethically responsive and practically effective facilitation than approaches that move directly from consent to devising.

Community reading is not a novel idea. Its intellectual foundations are traceable through the action research tradition (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Lewin, 1946), through ethnographic practice and its reflection in applied theatre (Conquergood, 1991), and through Freirean thematic investigation as the necessary precursor to genuinely participatory development work (Freire, 1970). What is novel, or at least insufficiently practised, is its systematic incorporation into the practicum structure of university TfD programmes in Ghana. At present, the emphasis on producing an intervention within a limited time frame means that students frequently enter communities with a methodology already in hand, looking for issues to which it can be applied rather than allowing the community's own dynamics, needs, and communicative practices to shape the form and content of the work. This inversion of the proper sequence of TfD practice, in which the community's reality should determine the methodology and not the other way around, is one of the most consequential structural failures of current TfD pedagogy.

The pedagogy of participation also requires honest engagement with the limits of participation itself. The TfD literature, particularly in its more optimistic registers, sometimes implies that participatory theatre can create conditions of democratic equality that transcend the social hierarchies in which communities are embedded. This is not, in my experience, what actually happens on the field. Participation in TfD interventions in Ghanaian communities is always structured by existing social relations, by gender hierarchies that constrain women's and girls' voices, by generational hierarchies that position youth as learners rather than speakers, by political hierarchies that shape what can be said publicly about local power arrangements, and by religious and cultural norms that determine what issues can be theatricalised and in what ways. Teaching students to facilitate within and against these constraints, rather than

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pretending the theatrical frame dissolves them, is one of the most honest and most necessary contributions that TfD pedagogy can make.

I have encountered this most vividly in working with communities on issues that implicate existing structures of traditional authority. The question of who has the right to tell a story, in what form, and in whose presence, is not a neutral methodological question in such a context. It is a question about the distribution of cultural and political authority, and its answer has consequences for every aspect of the TfD process. Student facilitators who arrive in such communities without an understanding of these dynamics, who treat community permission as a formality rather than a negotiated social process, risk not only ineffective facilitation but a form of cultural violation that is all the more troubling for being unintended.

VI. THE PRACTICUM AS SITE OF PEDAGOGICAL TENSION

The community project (practicum) occupies a paradoxical position in TfD education. It is simultaneously the most valuable component of TfD training, the only place where students encounter the irreducible complexity of actual community-based practice. It is also the most structurally compromised, shaped by institutional constraints that frequently work against the kind of sustained, ethically reflective community engagement that genuine TfD practice requires.

The constraints are multiple and familiar to anyone who has supervised practicum projects in a Ghanaian university context. Time is perhaps the most fundamental. Students are typically allocated a fixed practicum period that is rarely sufficient to build the community relationships on which ethical and effective TfD facilitation depends. Community entry itself, meaning the process of building trust, understanding social dynamics, and negotiating the terms of the intervention, takes time that the academic calendar does not always allow. The result is that students frequently arrive in communities with insufficient relational groundwork, move through the process at a pace driven by assessment deadlines rather than by community readiness, and depart before the intervention has had time to generate the kind of reflective community dialogue that constitutes its most significant potential contribution.

Assessment frameworks present a related set of difficulties. The requirement that practicum work be assessed, and assessed fairly, against criteria that can be applied consistently across multiple student projects in multiple community contexts, pushes toward a standardisation of form that is fundamentally at odds with the context-specificity that TfD practice demands. Students learn to produce a TfD intervention that is legible to the assessment process, one that demonstrates awareness of the theoretical framework, includes the expected methodological stages, generates a performance event that can be reported on, and produces a reflective account that addresses the stated learning outcomes. What they produce for assessment purposes may or may not be the same as what the community needed or found useful. These are not always incompatible, but the pressures of assessment consistently privilege the former.

In my experience of supervising these projects, the most important learning rarely occurs during the visible, assessable stages of the process, during the workshops, the devising sessions, the performance. It occurs in the margins, in the conversation between students on the way back from a community visit, in the moment when a planned exercise fails and the facilitators must improvise, and in the post-performance period when community members are willing to say what they could not say during the formal session. These marginal moments are precisely what current assessment frameworks are least equipped to capture, which means that the most educationally significant aspects of practicum experience are systematically undervalued.

VII. THE SUPERVISION CRISIS: WORKLOAD, RESOURCES, AND THE COST TO QUALITY

A particularly pressing and under-acknowledged institutional constraint is the workload imposed on practicum supervisors. In current practice across Ghanaian university TfD programmes, a single lecturer routinely carries supervisory responsibility for five or more concurrent practicum projects, each located in a different community setting. Each project demands regular site visits, sustained engagement with community hosts, review of student reflective journals, formative and summative assessment, and ongoing facilitative guidance at critical junctures of the intervention. This supervisory load is carried alongside full teaching responsibilities in other courses, administrative duties, and frequently one's own research and community practice commitments. The cumulative drain on the supervisor's time, energy, and personal financial resources is considerable and largely invisible to institutional planning.

The consequences for supervision quality are direct and serious. A supervisor who would ideally visit each practicum community five or more times over the course of the project, tracking the evolution of community

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relationships, observing facilitation in progress, and intervening where ethical or methodological difficulties arise, may in reality manage two or three visits per project, not from lack of professional commitment but from the simple arithmetic of institutional overload. Reduced visit frequency means that critical moments in the facilitation process go unobserved and unguided. Ethical problems that an experienced supervisor might identify and address in the field are instead encountered by students alone, without the reflective scaffolding that supervisory presence can provide. The result, across multiple simultaneous projects, is a systematic unevenness of supervision quality, in which some student groups receive adequate oversight and others do not, through no fault of either supervisor or student.

There is also a resource dimension that deserves frank acknowledgement. Community visits in Ghanaian contexts frequently require travel to rural or peri-urban areas, fuel costs, and sometimes overnight accommodation. These costs are rarely fully reimbursed by institutions, and supervisors carrying five projects absorb the burden of five sets of travel expenses rather than one. The financial pressure this creates is not incidental to the quality of supervision. It directly determines how often a supervisor can realistically visit a community, and it means that institutional parsimony about supervisory resources is translated, invisibly, into reduced quality of student learning and community protection.

There is a further dimension to this problem that merits direct acknowledgement, namely the ethical risk that inadequately supervised practicum projects pose to the communities in which they take place. When student facilitators enter communities as part of their university training, the communities concerned are not merely pedagogical settings. They are real places with real social dynamics, real vulnerabilities, and real stakes in the outcomes of the interventions they host. The presence of student facilitators who are still developing their craft, who may make mistakes, misjudge community dynamics, or fail to manage the emotional consequences of participatory performance, represents a potential source of harm to communities that are expected to serve as learning environments for institutional educational purposes. When supervision is inadequate, the likelihood of such harm is substantially increased. This is a structural ethical problem that TfD education in Ghana has not yet adequately confronted.

VIII. TOWARD A PRACTICE-CENTRED PEDAGOGY FOR TFD TRAINING

Drawing together the arguments of the preceding sections, I want to close by outlining the broad contours of a more adequate TfD pedagogy. This is not a prescriptive blueprint, as the diversity of institutional contexts, community environments, and student populations within Ghana alone is too great to permit such a prescription, but an attempt to articulate the principles that should govern TfD education if it is to be genuinely adequate to the demands of the practice.

The first and most fundamental principle is that TfD pedagogy must be organised around the formation of ethical practitioners, not merely technically competent ones. This means treating the ethical dimensions of TfD facilitation, including community consent, power relations, representation, and the management of unintended consequences, not as supplementary concerns addressed in a unit on ethics but as central, structuring preoccupations that permeate every aspect of the curriculum. It means teaching students to ask, before and during every facilitative decision, who benefits from this, who bears the risk, whose voice is being amplified, and whose is being silenced. It also means creating pedagogical spaces in which these questions can be honestly and rigorously engaged, without the pressure to produce the right answer for assessment purposes.

The second principle is that TfD pedagogy must take indigenous performance epistemologies seriously as theoretical resources rather than local colour. This means integrating African performance traditions, including Anansegoro, community festival theatre, storytelling forms, and indigenous oratorical practices, into the theoretical framework of TfD education, not as contextual supplements to a dominant Western curriculum but as legitimate and sophisticated epistemological systems with much to teach about the relationships between performance, community, knowledge, and social change. It means engaging with African philosophical traditions, the communitarian ethics of Wiredu (1996) and Gyekye (1997), the cultural criticism of Yankah (1995), and the decolonial thought of Fanon (1963) and Ngũgĩ (1986), as living intellectual resources rather than historical references. It also means developing in students the cultural literacy necessary to engage respectfully and responsively with the performance traditions of the communities they work with.

The third principle is that TfD pedagogy must privilege the quality of reflective practice over the quality of performance product. This is perhaps the most counterintuitive of the principles, particularly in a theatre arts context where the performance event naturally occupies the centre of pedagogical attention. But the evidence from sustained engagement with TfD facilitators at different stages of professional formation is clear. The quality of facilitation is determined not primarily by technical skill but by the quality of the ethical and relational reflection that surrounds and informs it (Asante, 2026a). Facilitators who reflect well, who are genuinely attentive to the community's needs, honestly

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critical of their own assumptions, and willing to interrogate the ethical implications of their choices, produce more responsible outcomes than technically skilled facilitators who do not. TfD pedagogy must therefore assess and cultivate reflective capacity as rigorously as it assesses and cultivates facilitative technique, and it must create the institutional conditions under which genuine reflection rather than assessed simulation of reflection becomes possible.

The fourth principle is that the practicum must be reconceived as a sustained community engagement rather than a time-limited project. This means advocating for institutional arrangements that allow students to build genuine long-term relationships with the communities they work with, returning across multiple semesters if necessary to follow up on the consequences of their interventions, to repair what went wrong, and to continue learning from communities that are no longer merely settings for assessed projects but genuine partners in a shared educational process. Admittedly, such an arrangement is more demanding for students, more administratively complex for institutions, and more difficult to assess by conventional means. But it is far more likely to produce facilitators who are genuinely equipped for the ethical demands of community-based TfD work, and far more honest in its acknowledgement of the obligations that university TfD programmes incur when they involve communities in the training of their students.

The final principle and the one that underlies all the others, is that TfD pedagogy must be practised as well as taught. TfD educators must themselves be active community practitioners, not merely in the sense of having done fieldwork in the past, but in the sense of maintaining ongoing community relationships, continuing to facilitate TfD processes, and continuing to reflect on those processes with the same rigour they expect of their students. The gap between TfD pedagogy and TfD practice is not just a structural problem. It is also a problem of practitioner formation among the educators themselves. Lecturers who are no longer practitioners, who have retreated into the institutional safety of the lecture hall, cannot credibly cultivate the ethical attentiveness, cultural literacy, and relational intelligence that genuine TfD facilitation demands. The modelling of reflective facilitation practice, including its failures and its uncertainties, is one of the most powerful pedagogical resources a TfD educator has.

The practicum supervision crisis in Theatre for Development requires deliberate institutional reform across four fronts. Based on the professional experience informing this essay and on comparable applied professional education contexts, universities should cap individual supervisory loads at no more than two concurrent practicum projects per semester, with supervisory hours formally counted in workload allocation policies. Dedicated budgetary provision for field travel and related expenses must replace the current arrangement in which supervisors absorb these costs personally. Structured co-supervision models drawing on graduate students, NGO practitioners, and community-based TfD professionals should be formalised within the supervisory framework, strengthening the practitioner-educator continuum that the discipline needs. Most fundamentally, supervision must be reconceived as mentorship rather than monitoring, its purpose being not the completion of assessment tasks but the formation of ethical, reflective, and community-accountable facilitators. Institutions unwilling to invest in these reforms should seriously question whether they are equipped to offer TfD training responsibly at all.

IX. CONCLUSION

Teaching Theatre for Development is a form of practice. It cannot be separated from doing TfD; from being in communities, from making difficult decisions under conditions of ethical uncertainty, and from living with the consequences of those decisions over time. The most honest thing I can say about my own experience as a TfD educator is that my teaching has been shaped, above all, by my failures: by the interventions that did not go as planned, by the community relationships that I did not adequately honour, and by the moments when I realised, sometimes too late, that I had prioritised the process over the people who were living through it. These failures are not anomalies to be concealed from students. They are the curriculum they must learn from.

This essay has argued for a TfD pedagogy organised around five principles: ethical practitioner formation as foundational rather than supplementary; indigenous performance epistemologies as legitimate theoretical resources; reflective capacity as a pedagogical priority; the practicum as sustained community engagement rather than a time-limited assessed project; and TfD educators as active practitioners who model the reflective practice they seek to cultivate. These demands are not modest. They require institutional will, faculty commitment, curricular reform, and a willingness to measure the success of TfD education by the quality of community relationships and the depth of reflective practice rather than by assessed performance outcomes alone.

What I am confident of, after many years of both practising and teaching TfD in Ghana, is that the communities that participate in TfD practice deserve more than technically competent facilitators. They deserve facilitators who understand that when they enter a community with a Forum Theatre process or a participatory devising methodology,

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they are entering into a relationship of mutual accountability whose implications extend far beyond the duration of the intervention itself. Preparing such facilitators is the most important challenge facing TfD pedagogy in Ghana and across the West African sub-region. It is also, in the end, the most important contribution that Theatre for Development education can make to the communities that have always been both its subjects and its teachers.

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