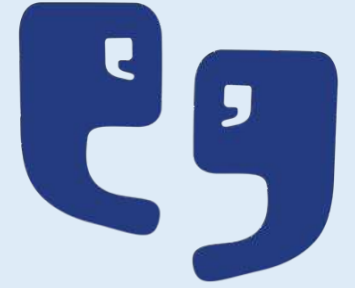# Documenting 'Otherness': The Tyrannical Construction of Knowledge about Theatre for Development?

Chris Blois-Brooke
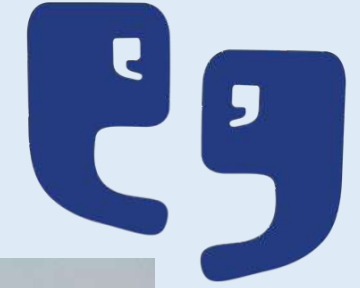**Founder & Director**

IDIERI: 7th July 2018

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Dialogue

- Non-profit Knowledge Sharing Network

- Building capacity of practitioners

- Curate knowledge by:
  - Archiving materials
  - Documentation training
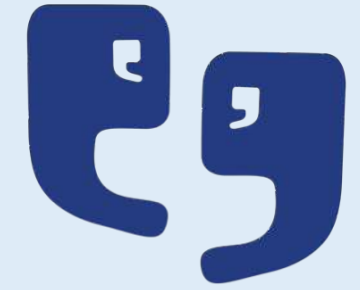 - Documentation consultancy

Why do we document?

- Advocacy
- Education & Training
- Funding
- Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning (MEL)
- Networking
- Research
- Avoid working in silo
- **…allowing ideas to travel and be exchanged across borders!**

A Technical Exercise?

- Many practitioners have postcolonial intentions
- Few extend this 'duty of care' when documenting
- When you document, do you <u>just</u> press record?
  - Objective?
  - Or subjective and constructed, bound to context?
- Critique of documentation process left unexamined
  - Documentation texts seen as neutral & technical
 - "maintaining the conceit" Reason (2006:236)
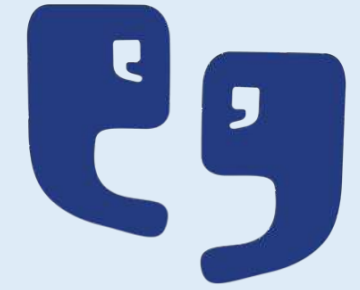
Why is this important?

- "Enduring and reproducible" nature (Reason 2006: 233)
- A legacy - not just an end
  - Used for training, communication, M&E etc.
- Documentation acts as a 'way of knowing'
  - Meaning is constructed, produced, contributed, shaped, revealed, communicated and disseminated
 - Knowledge about practice and how that intersects with PEOPLE

Politics of Distance
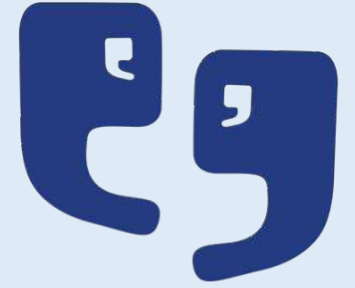
- Documenters - often coming from privileged socio-political context
  - In TfD, often someone from the 'Global North' writing about the 'Global South'
  - Carry an authority
  - Connected with knowledge production and power
- Participants
  - Often disadvantaged, marginalised, even illiterate with little control over means of knowledge production
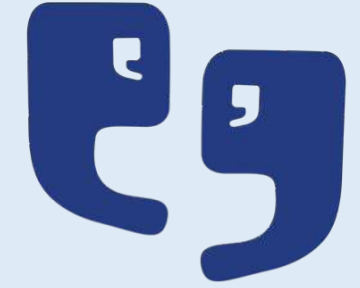
Overcoming the Distance

- Clipboards at the back of the room?
- Participatory and Creative Practice = Participatory and Creative Documentation
- 'Giving Voice' in Practice = 'Giving Voice' in Documentation
- Must consider how "Others" are represented in documentation
  - "our representations cannot escape othering" (Kapoor 2004: 644)
  - Equitable representations? Tyrannical?

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Technologies of 'Giving Voice'

- Interview You

- Give you the camera
  - Participatory Video
  - Participatory Photography

- Ask you to get involved in discussions
  - Participatory Mapping
  - Participatory M&E

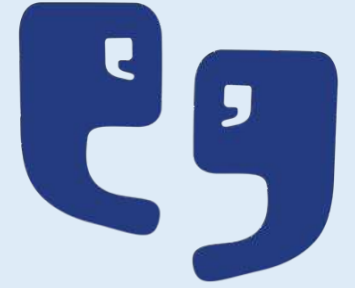- Lots of ways to seek and include your voice in my project

Ethics of Giving Voice

- Development Practitioners talk about ethics of 'empowerment'
  - Who am I to 'empower' them?
  - Do they need 'empowering'?
  - Do they want 'empowering'?
  - Is 'empowerment' a façade which is hiding what's really going on here?

- Are documenters also talking about the ethics of 'empowerment'? Or considering the potentially tyrannical outcomes of their work?

- "the responsibility for either negating or perpetuating oppression", that TfD practice is suggested to hold, should be considered when documenting (Byam 1999: 195)

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Giving Voice – Overcoming tyranny?

- 'Giving voice' sounds empowering

- "too often it collapses under the weight of sentimentality and ostensible researcher neutrality" (Robertson 2001: 296)

- "[d]ifferent methods [of hearing participants' voices] are underpinned by alternative epistemological perspectives [...that affects] the relation between participants' voices and the knowledge that is produced about them" (Alldred, 1998: 155)

- "the question of who edits the stories, how they are presented, for whom and what purposes they are framed" (Kapoor 2004: 637)

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'Working the Hyphen' (Fine 1994)

- Hyphen between Self-Other (or Documenter-Documented)
  - Separation AND a Connection
- Construction of the documentation says just as much (if not more) about the documenter
- Documenter cannot be 'detached' from representations of the 'Other'
- Writing *in* the documenter's complicity, subjectivity, and entanglement in the construction of 'Others'

Eurocentrism

- The process by which European ways of knowing are, consciously and subconsciously, prioritised or seen as more 'legitimate' and 'universal' than other worldviews
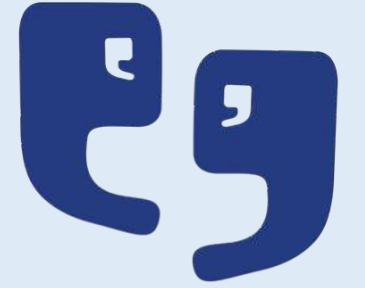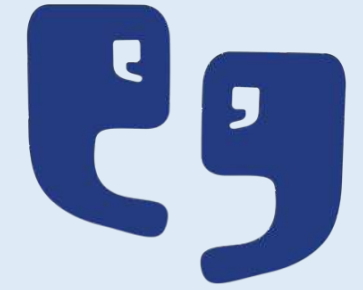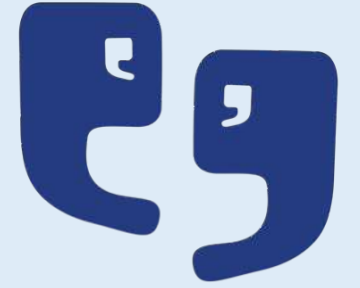
Working the Hyphen- Eurocentrism

- Resist Eurocentrism by invoking an awareness of the unequal relationship between one's own knowledge and that of the 'Other'

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# Working the Hyphen- Eurocentrism

- Acknowledge your bias – your account is not universal truth (it is just one truth)
- What language are you writing in? Where are you writing?
- How is your voice privileged?
  - You provide the commentary, they provide the evidence?
  - Do you allow the participants to disagree with you?

Exoticism

- A marker of difference and separation between 'Self' and 'Other'
- Contrasting 'their' 'peculiarities' with 'our' own sense of familiar rationality
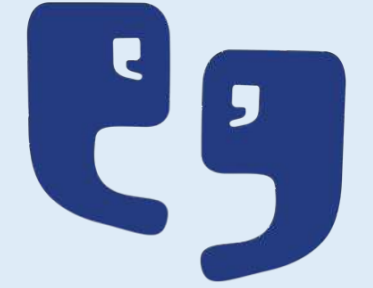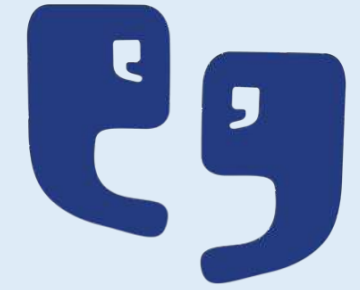
Working the Hyphen- Exoticism

- Resist exoticism by revealing the ways in which the 'Other' does not exist purely in opposition to the 'Self'

Working the Hyphen- Exoticism

- Do you only focus on all the ways the participants are different to you?
- Do you romanticise their lifestyle?
- Do you focus on their vulnerability, at the expense of their richness?

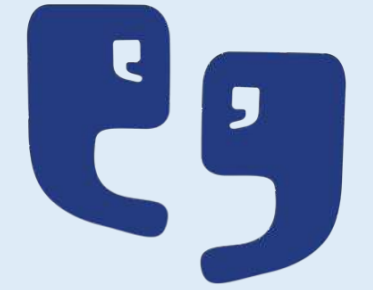- …also focus on the similarity and connection between Self and Other.
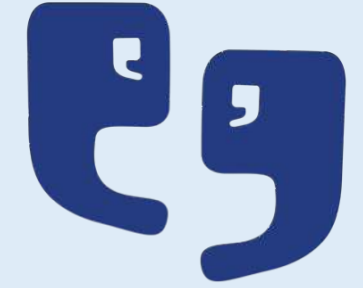
Essentialism

- Fixed and bounded truth
- 'Self' and 'Other' are fundamentally and irrevocably fixed

Working the Hyphen- Essentialism

- Resist essentialism by disrupting notions of the 'Other' as being a fixed and bounded category.

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Working the Hyphen- Essentialism

- Do you homogenise participants?
- Do you assume that one person speaks for everyone?
- Do you speak of "the audience" a lot?
- Do you speak of participants as if they never change? Using the eternal present tense?

- ...also focus on how categories of 'Self' and 'Other' are liable to change.
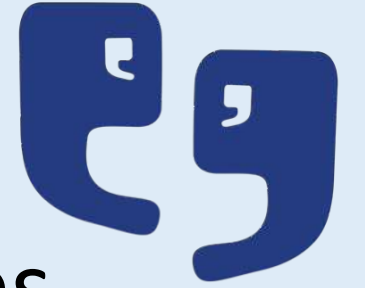
Key Trends

- Eurocentrism – e.g. mediation, hierarchies
- Exoticism – e.g. localism, poverty
- Essentialism – e.g. homogenous, timeless
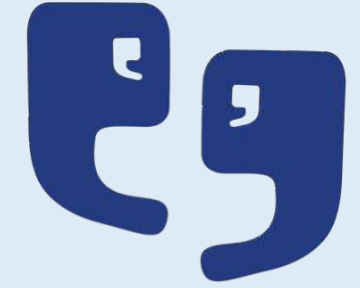
How does this change documentation?

- More nuanced – less tyrannical

- Rejects constructions of 'Self' and 'Other' as binary opposites, detached from one another

- Not vilifying the documenter or erasing the politics of distance

- Does not magically resolve 'Othering'

- "[o]ur work will never 'arrive' but must always struggle 'between'" (Fine 1994: 75)
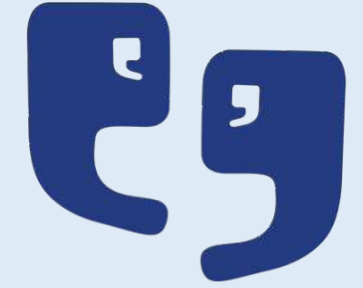
Conclusions

- We need to "articulate how, how not, and within what limits" participants' voices are curated, and the effect this has on the construction of knowledge about TfD (Fine 1992: 219)

- Aiming towards a document that is conscious of its subjective construction – and conscious of the politics of distance

- Never going to get it "right"

- Creating documentation in this way hopefully leads to something more equitable that has potential to influence future practice in a positive way

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References

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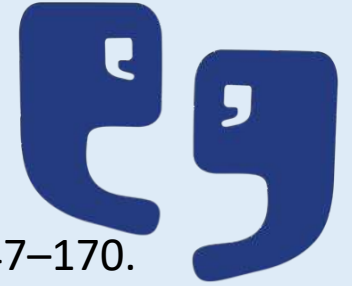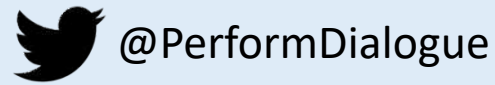
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