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Sexting can be sexy...if it's consensual: challenging victim blaming and heteronormativity in sext education

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Sexting can be sexy...if it's consensual: challenging victim blaming and heteronormativity in sext education

Natasha Richards

Creative Work

Sexting Scenes — what do you think?

Character List (in order of appearance)

- Kirsty
- Lacey
- Nick
- Amy
- A'dab

The characters have a range of identity categories, including gender, race, and sexuality.

Pause the video during each question on the black screen for a critically reflective discussion.

Scene One — Setting up the relationships

S1: Different shots of Kirsty and Lacey hanging out in various places, looking happy and in love.

Kirsty Voiceover: We've been together for 3 years. Lacey is my first girlfriend. She is the person that held my hand as we both came out to the world. She has filled my days with laughter and wiped away all my tears. She's great.

S2: Shots of Nick and Amy hanging out just them, followed by a scene with a bigger group where Amy is getting along with Nick's friends.

Nick Voiceover: Amy and I have only been seeing each other a little while. She's cool. She gets on ok with the boys, which is good. Not too well though. Which is important.

S3: A'dab is sat with the girls, watching the boys play football at school. The boys kick the ball near the group of girls. A'dab kicks it back and goes over to chat with the boys.

A'dab Voiceover: We watch the boys play football every lunchtime. They like us to watch.

They always look over to see if we see them make a goal or something. It's nice to feel wanted.

Question on the black screen: Are these relationships healthy?

Scene Two — Initial messages

S1: A shot of Lacey and Kirsty's texts and Snapchats. They have been sharing memes and exchanging messages detailing how they feel about each other.

Kirsty Voiceover: Lacey and I would message each other all the time. We both love memes and would send them back and forth. I found it easier to tell her how much I liked her over messages. How sexy she was...how much I wanted her.

S2: A shot of Nick and Amy's phone messages. He is asking where she is and who she is with. When she does not answer straight away, he sends multiple question marks. Shot of Amy hanging out with her friends.

Nick Voiceover: I like to know what she's up to. Who she's with. She's my girlfriend. I'm meant to know that stuff. I don't want the boys thinking she's not mine.

S3: A'dab receives a message, from a group of boys in her class. It is a cartoon aubergine along with the words 'you want this'. A'dab responds by looking at the boys whilst laughing and shaking her head. The boys are laughing too.

A'dab Voiceover: The boys are always messing around and sending stupid messages on Snapchat. I don't care. It's just banter.

Question on the black screen: What kind of messages are the characters sending?

Scene Three — Asking for the nude

S1: Lacey in her bedroom, taking a photo of herself nude. Kirsty, in her bedroom, receives the nude and

then sends one back. They are both smiling and looking happy. They both go to start masturbating.

Kirsty Voiceover: We weren't ready for sex. But we did want to have fun. To pleasure each other. To feel sexy. We were both happy to send the photos. I know I was verrrrry happy looking at those photos in bed.

S2: Nick taking photos of Amy in his bedroom with her posing. He tries to take her clothes off, but she backs away and leaves the room.

Nick Voiceover: She's really hot. I wanted to show her off to my mates. To show them what's mine. Plus, everyone has nudes of their girlfriend. It's part of the relationship.

S3: A'dab is on her own in her room with her phone going off next to her and her staring at the screen.

A'dab Voiceover: I never asked them to send these messages. I never sent any back. But then... I'm not a guy. I reckon it's just a guy thing.

Question on the black screen: Why are the characters sending these messages?

Scene Four — Feelings after the nude

S1: Lacey and Kirsty spending a day in the park together, messing around and having fun.

Kirsty Voiceover: I felt safe. Lacey and I talked a lot about the photos before we sent them. Plus, it was only one part of our relationship. She was my girlfriend. But also, my friend.

S2: One shot of Amy looking sad on her bed and another shot of Nick messaging her to apologise. He explains that he found her so sexy that he wanted a picture, so he could see her when she wasn't there because he missed her—followed by a shot of Amy about to send a nude to Nick.

Nick Voiceover: I felt annoyed. She should want to send me the photo! I knew I had to be nice though... to get what I want. Which I did...in the end.

S3: A'dab going through her Instagram and opening the message requests and receiving dick pics.

A'dab Voiceover: I felt fine. I mean, it's not like it's only my friends that I get pictures from. I've had loads

of message requests from strangers on Instagram with titles like ‘take your pants off’ and then... there’s a dick pic. So, it’s just normal.

Question on the black screen: Were all these messages consensual?

Scene Five — What happened next

S1: Lacey and Kirsty sat on the bed, kissing and slowly lying down.

Kirsty Voiceover: We didn’t have sex straight after the nudes. We had sex in stages. We talked about everything. We did what felt right for us both at the time.

S2: Shots of Nick showing the boys the photos of Amy. Most of them laugh and pass the phone around, but two of them stand staring, looking mildly disapproving.

Nick Voiceover: Of course, I had to show the boys. Had to prove the goods! Show them who is the boss. They loved it!!

S3: A’dab is sat in the canteen with a mixture of boys and girls from her friendship group. When she receives a Snapchat notification, the boys snatch her phone and all laugh. The girls try to get her phone back.

A’dab Voiceover: I got a dick pic from Simon at school, and the other boys saw it come through on my Snapchat. They all laughed and asked why he sent it. They didn’t believe me when I said I didn’t send any nudes to him.

Question on the black screen: Why did the characters act that way?

Scene Six — Outcome

S1: A scene with Lacey and Kirsty sat on a bench looking sad and then walking in opposite directions.

Kirsty Voiceover: After a while, Lacey and I weren’t making each other happy anymore. We both changed over time. We liked different things. So...we broke up.

S2: Two of Nick's friends tell him to stop, and the other boys distance themselves from Nick.

Nick Voiceover: Well, most of them loved it. Two of the boys said it wasn't cool, and she only sent them to me, no one else, so I shouldn't be sharing them with anyone else. Then the other boys started to look awkward. Bunch of pussies.

S3: A'dab watching the boys play football, but they all turn and start shouting rude comments at her. Some of her friends try to comfort her, but some walk away, shaking their heads at her.

A'dab Voiceover: Some of my friends believed me that I hadn't sent any photos. But not all of them. Some of them even think we've had sex. The boys call me a slag. The girls are annoyed that I didn't tell them. Even though there's nothing to tell.

Question on the black screen: Would you have predicted those outcomes for the characters?

Scene Seven — How they felt about the outcome

S1: Kirsty sat at her desk with her friends in the classroom. Lacey walks in with some friends. They both smile and lift their hand slightly for a wave, and then Lacey goes and sits with her friends at the back of the class.

Kirsty Voiceover: People expected me and Lacey to hate each other afterwards. But we don't. We just needed some space to heal.

S2: Nick going through his phone and looking at all the pictures that he has been sent.

Nick Voiceover: I thought this was what boys were meant to do. I didn't know the photos had to stay just between us. Between Amy and me. I've got loads of these photos from other mates. I thought they'd like it.

S3: A'dab sat alone, ping-ponging an elastic band on her wrist. A classmate is watching her.

A'dab Voiceover: I don't know what I should do. I just want the lies to stop. The pain to stop. I don't think it ever will.

Question on the black screen: How do you think the characters are all feeling?

Scene Eight — Other people involved

S1: Kirsty and Lacey meeting on the same bench and passing each other their phones to delete the messages.

Kirsty Voiceover: I didn't want her to have my nudes anymore though. And she felt the same. It didn't feel right. A friend suggested we could delete them all. So, we did. Together.

S2: Quick shot of each: Amy breaking up with Nick; his friend telling his brother; his parents taking his phone.

Nick Voiceover: One of my friends told Amy, and she broke up with me. My brother found out, and he told my parents. They took my phone off me. They told me it's illegal to send nudes before you turn 18. I could get into trouble with the police. I didn't know.

S3: A teacher asking A'dab to stay behind after class. The teacher indicates to A'dab's wrist, and A'dab cries and tells the teacher everything that happened.

A'dab Voiceover: Miss Tiffin asked me to stay behind after class today. A classmate had noticed I had cuts on my arms and told the teacher. They both wanted to help.

Question on the black screen: How did other characters help in these situations?

Scene Nine — Changes

S1: Kirsty and Lacey deleting the messages, and then the two of them smiling and this time hugging before they leave the bench and walk separate ways.

Kirsty Voiceover: I don't regret sending the nudes. And I definitely don't regret my relationship with Lacey. But I am happy we both can feel safe knowing the nudes no longer exist. It felt good to have that closure to our relationship.

S2: Nick walking past all his friends as he is escorted off school premises.

Nick Voiceover: I regret showing those pictures. Everyone is annoyed at me, and I upset Amy. I got suspended from school because someone reported me to the teacher.

S3: Seeing A'dab showing the messages to the headteacher.

A'dab Voiceover: I thought it was my fault, but I know now. I did nothing wrong. I only wish I had spoken to someone sooner about the messages. But it didn't seem as big of a deal at the time.

Question on the black screen: Why are the characters talking about regret?

Scene Ten — Conclusion

S1: Kirsty and Lacey spotting each other in the street, seemingly after a while, and going over to say hello.

Kirsty Voiceover: Lacey went to a different sixth form to me. I still see her around town sometimes. We're happy.

S2: Nick hanging out with some of his friends and seeing Amy and another guy looking happy together.

Nick Voiceover: I deleted all the photos and started hanging out with some new mates. Amy has another boyfriend now. They look good together. She's happy.

S3: A'dab talking to a counsellor and then leaving the room and her friends being outside waiting to look after her.

A'dab Voiceover: Miss Tiffin took me to the school nurse, and they put me in touch with a counsellor. It has been helping to talk about everything at school. I'm happy.

Question on the black screen: How do you feel about how these stories end?

Critical Commentary

Sexting involves sharing a sexually explicit text message, a naked or semi-naked image, or a video, with another person.¹ Young people's sexting is an area of concern amongst parents, policymakers, and educators.² Sexting is one of many topics concerning relationships and sex covered in educational workshops led by the School of Sexuality Education (formally Sexplain UK).³ During a recent placement with the School of Sexuality Education, I created a film script intended as a resource for sext education. The term 'sext education' was playfully coined by prominent feminist scholars Amy Shields Dobson and Jessica Ringrose in their essay *Sext education: pedagogies of sex, gender and shame in the schoolyards of Tagged and Exposed*. Here, Dobson and Ringrose highlight the prevalence of victim blaming and heteronormativity in two cyber-safety campaign films, arguing the need to question and challenge these dominant narratives in future forms of sext education.⁴ My sext education resource aims to answer their call and address the issues of victim blaming and heteronormativity highlighted in their essay. My previous placement at the School of Sexuality Education, my current PhD Practice-as-Research, and my experience as an applied theatre practitioner all informed the script content.

Tagged and *Exposed* are film resources depicting the consequences of sexting and were widely distributed around 2012.⁵ *Tagged* was part of the 'Cybersmart' Campaign by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA). *Exposed* was part of the 'Think U Know' campaign distributed by the UK's Child Exploitation Online Protection Centre (CEOP). With the advancement of and increasing access to technology, films have been used as a resource to address the digital pressures on young people. Governments have had to respond quickly to the highly publicised possibilities of

¹ NSPCC, 'Sexting and Sending nudes', <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/sexting-sending-nudes/?gclid=Cj0KCQiAgomBBhDXARIsAFNyUqPbUgW3njKPPJEGN_2uRoiBt3LQBXCGEkEa6CHfq_Tch6SUDqG0FvYaAiO1EALw_wcB&gclid=aw.ds> [accessed 10 February 2021].

² Clara Rübner Jørgensen, Annalise Weckesser, Jerome Turner, and Alex Wade, 'Young people's views on sexting education and support needs: findings and recommendations from a UK-based study', *Sex Education*, 19 (2018), pp. 25-40.

³ School of Sexuality Education, 'Approach', <<https://schoolofsexed.org/approach>> [accessed 19 February 2021].

⁴ Amy Shields Dobson and Jessica Ringrose, 'Sext education: pedagogies of sex, gender and shame in the schoolyards of Tagged and Exposed', *Sex Education*, 16 (2016), pp. 8-21.

⁵ Dobson and Ringrose, 2016, p. 10.

extreme consequences for youths involved in sexting.⁶ Besides film, theatre has a long and varied history of being used as an educational tool.⁷ In terms of exploring sexting, Evan Placey's acclaimed play *Girls Like That*, first performed in 2013, explores the pressures on young people in the digital age. It follows the aftermath of a naked photograph of schoolgirl Scarlett going viral.⁸ Though films can be distributed widely and quickly, theatre's liveness encourages active learning and dialectical thinking.⁹ My sext education resource can be far-reaching, as a film, and incorporates active learning through participatory discussions between scenes.

The School of Sexuality Education takes a sex-positive approach in their workshops, as they 'actively encourage positive attitudes towards sexuality and body image, bust myths, but also expose taboos and tackle feelings of shame driven by inequalities'.¹⁰ In contrast, in *Tagged* and *Exposed* a focus on anti-sexting — stopping the creation and sharing of images — is prioritised over a challenge to the sexist culture that makes sexting risky, particularly for girls.¹¹ The recently mandatory Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) UK guidance also maintains anti-sexting messages, focusing on secondary school students knowing their responsibilities and the risks online.¹² By centring anti-sexting, personal responsibility, and risk-based rhetoric, these approaches can create a culture where victim blaming thrives. Victim blaming refers to assigning fault to the victim rather than the perpetrator by assuming the victim did something to provoke the issue.¹³ My script does not focus solely on anti-sexting. Instead, it provides multiple viewpoints of sexting, including sexting as a positive expression of sexuality, to tackle feelings of shame and to challenge dominate narratives of victim blaming.

⁶ Amy Hasinoff, *Sexting Panic: Rethinking Criminalization, Privacy, and Consent* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

⁷ Helen Nicholson, *Theatre, Education and Performance* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 19.

⁸ Evan Placey, *Girls Like That* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2013).

⁹ Nicholson, 2011, p. 67.

¹⁰ School of Sexuality Education.

¹¹ Dobson and Ringrose, 2016, p.9.

¹² Department for Education, 'Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education Statutory guidance for governing bodies, proprietors, head teachers, principals, senior leadership teams, teachers', <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/908013/Relationships_Education__Relationships_and_Sex_Education__RSE__and_Health_Education.pdf> [accessed 19 February 2021].

¹³ Harvard Law School, 'How to Avoid Victim Blaming', <<https://orgs.law.harvard.edu/halt/how-to-avoid-victim-blaming/>> [accessed 19 February 2021].

As well as challenging the dominant narrative of victim blaming, my script aims to challenge heteronormativity, a world view that promotes heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual orientation.¹⁴ Both *Tagged* and *Exposed* focus exclusively on heterosexual intimate relationships. The UK RSE guidance has a separate LGBT section rather than these identities being integrated throughout, thereby centring heterosexuality as the norm. My sext education film script explores sexting in both heterosexual and same-sex couplings, taking a significant step away from the heteronormativity present in *Tagged* and *Exposed*. Integration of different sexualities increases their visibility and normalises them.

My Practice-as-Research PhD has explored applied theatre as a useful tool for questioning and challenging dominant narratives through creativity and discussion. Influential applied theatre practitioner Katherine Low stresses that playfulness and space to breathe are essential for exploring sexual health.¹⁵ Questions are included after, or close to, each scene in my film script, providing a moment for self-reflection. Educators using the film as a sext education resource should pause at these questions for an extended discussion, encouraging young people to critically interrogate their position. For example, in the question following scene six, young people can expand on whether their predicted outcomes would be the same or different depending on the characters' identity categories. The reflective questions create the time for self-reflection — that desired space to breathe — and provide a sense of playfulness through interaction.

When considering identity categories, young people can interrogate how different issues impact people's lives. The School of Sexuality Education's approach is intersectional, aiming to educate and empower young people to understand and challenge inequalities dependent on intersecting identity categories such as gender, sexuality, age, disability, race, and class.¹⁶ Low argues that explorations of sexual health concerns need to provide a space where the individual can appreciate the subject 'in a way that speaks to their experiences'.¹⁷ Multiple storylines, diverse characters, and reflective questions provide various opportunities for connection within my film. Multiplicity allows for a greater range of

¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁵ Katharine Low, "It's difficult to talk about sex in a positive way': Creating a space to breath", in *Performing Health and Wellbeing*, ed. by Veronica Baxter and Katherine E. Low (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 146-161.

¹⁶ School of Sexuality Education.

¹⁷ Low, 2017, p. 154.

young people to see their experiences presented, while the reflective questions promote consideration of differences and similarities between others' experiences depending on identity categories.

It is valuable to consider how intersecting identities are represented and respected in discussions of relationships and sex. Heteronormativity and victim blaming can be questioned and challenged by not condemning expressions of female sexuality. *Tagged* follows the chain reaction after a group of high-school friends post an online rumour about a rival. The main character in the film, Kate, has a tattoo of a star on her hip. The tattoo is clearly visible in intimate photographs that are shared amongst school peers without Kate's consent:

Kate's star tattoo is constructed here as a visual mark of her sexual desire. The star symbol is used as a background design on the Cybersmart government website promoting the film, both reinforcing the notion that girls are visibly and permanently 'marked' by their sexual desire, and visually linking the schoolbased harassment depicted in the film with the digital realm.¹⁸

In my sext education film script, Amy is not permanently marked by her sharing nudes. Amy's ability to move on after her nude goes viral, without her being represented as forever shamed by this action, questions dominant narratives surrounding the suppression of female sexuality.

As well as not shaming female sexuality, sext education resources can go further and show positive examples of female sexuality. Low argues that people 'struggle to speak about sex and relationships in a positive manner'.¹⁹ This struggle can lead to depictions of sexting being rooted in risk and shame. *Exposed* presents a deterrent tale of a girl's distress after her nudes are circulated at school. The film dismisses and vilifies young people's sexual agency, shown when Dee says she 'thought it would be fun' to share nudes and is dismissed as 'stupid' by her alter ego. Low discusses 'pervasive moral codes...[that allow]... little space for playful experimentation, burgeoning desire or an acknowledgement of the emotional aspects of sexuality'.²⁰ My script includes a positive example of female sexting, which highlights how sexting can induce pleasure. It demonstrates a celebration of female desire and an acknowledgement of the emotional aspects of sexuality.

¹⁸ Dobson and Ringrose, 2016, p. 12.

¹⁹ Low, 2017, p. 147.

²⁰ Low, 2017, p. 148.

My sext education resource includes both positive and adverse outcomes for sexting. By including multiple storylines, with different results, varied experiences of sexting can be presented and discussed. In storyline one, Kirsty and Lacey delete the photos they have shared after ending their relationship, demonstrating how consent is an ongoing negotiation; people can withdraw their consent at any point. In storyline two, the perpetrator, Nick, is punished for his actions, highlighting the potential adverse outcomes of non-consensual nude image sharing. In storyline three, the victim, A'dab, receives support once she reports the incident, suggesting that sharing experiences can mitigate the potential harm of sexting. In all the three storylines, consent and communication are the critical factors for the subsequent outcomes. By focusing on consent and communication rather than shame and blame, my creative piece aims to move away from victim blaming and heteronormativity. As stated in the title of this critical commentary: Sexting can be sexy...if it's consensual.

Sext education resources should address relevant issues and include realistic results for young people:

Seeing another young person dealing with daily practices familiar to them, scenarios like munch screens or exposing others, or being asked for a naked photo, or for a 'blow job' by text or Facebook message, seems particularly powerful, certainly more influential than advice pages, top tips or negatively worded advice (don't do this, don't do that).²¹

My sext education resource aims to fulfil young peoples' desire for realistic scenarios. The storylines are based upon my experiences working with young people, both in my roles as a researcher and as applied theatre practitioner, and experiences detailed by other researchers and practitioners. By having multiple storylines running in parallel, young people can engage with multiple scenarios relevant to their day-to-day lives. These multiple outcomes are not exhaustive and therefore may not seem realistic for everyone. The reflective questioning allows young people to discuss why some scenarios and outcomes may be more realistic for them than others, or vice versa. Even if the outcomes do not seem plausible to one person, the space to reflect, play with, and breathe upon other potential consequences means that realistic outcomes become part of the discussion.

Within my script's multiple storylines exists a range of diverse characters. Diverse characters

²¹ Jessica Ringrose, Rosalind Gill, Sonia Livingstone, and Laura Harvey, *A qualitative study of children, young people and 'sexting': a report prepared for the NSPCC* (LSE Research Online, 2012), p. 55.

can help to challenge victim blaming and heteronormativity by showing a range of identities and experiences, thereby ensuring young people can see practices relevant to their daily lives. As mentioned earlier, *Tagged* and *Exposed* both focus on heterosexual intimacies, but I include heterosexual and same-sex intimacies to normalise different sexualities. Low argues that focusing on the intimacy of sex can create spaces where ‘different experiences are equally valid and important’.²² Showing the intimate exchanging of pictures between Kirsty and Lacey provides a questioning of and challenge to heteronormativity, as LGBTQ+ young people can see themselves as valued and consider the resource as relevant to their own lives.

Sext education resources should not only consider the identities of the characters, but also which character will be central in the narrative. In *Exposed*, the central character is Dee, with the boyfriend that she sent the nudes to only briefly seen and interrogated by her. During the limited time we see him, rather than take responsibility for his actions, he blames others for the nude being shared widely and non-consensually, including Dee herself. It is Dee’s actions that are scrutinised, not the actions of those who shared the images without consent. By following Nick’s journey in storyline two, my script aims to challenge heteronormativity and victim blaming by spotlighting the perpetrator rather than the victim. Additionally, A’dab is the focus of storyline three, highlighting the ways in which a victim of non-consensual image sharing can potentially be supported. Focusing on the perpetrator in one storyline, and the victim in another, emphasises how the main character can challenge and question victim blaming and heteronormativity depending on what actions and outcomes the storyline highlights.

As well as the main characters’ actions, the supporting characters’ actions need careful consideration when creating sext education resources. My film challenges heteronormativity and victim blaming through bystander intervention, whereby the supporting characters recognise a harmful situation and intervene safely and effectively.²³ Not all the young males in storyline two endorse the perpetrator’s actions, and instead some report him to the school. The bystander intervention counters

²² Low, 2017, p. 158.

²³ GOV.UK, ‘Bystander interventions to prevent intimate partner and sexual violence: summary’, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/interventions-to-prevent-intimate-partner-and-sexual-violence/bystander-interventions-to-prevent-intimate-partner-and-sexual-violence-summary>> [accessed 19 February 2021].

an assumption of all young males supporting non-consensual sharing of nudes based upon heteronormative understandings of masculinity. In storyline three, bystander intervention occurs when a classmate reports cuts on A'dab's arm, which challenges victim blaming narratives where classmates only see the victim as 'getting what they deserve'. The inclusion of bystander intervention highlights the collective responsibility to challenge heteronormativity and victim blaming, particularly regarding non-consensual image sharing.

The characters' personal development is also critical in sext education resources. Victim blaming and heteronormativity can be questioned and challenged by stressing the possibility of change. Kirsty's feelings regarding the nudes changed after the breakup; Nick's character changed from not caring to regretting his actions; A'dab's self-confidence changed, finally reporting the issues rather than accepting the peer pressure. In my film script, change precedes positive outcomes for the characters. Though it could be argued that having positive results in all three storylines is unrealistic, it counters the dominant narratives rooted in risk and shame discussed at the start of this essay. Low outlines that the 'fact that there is no right or wrong or a tragic moralistic ending is liberating, it demonstrates flexible choice and possibility'.²⁴ If the storylines only focus on negatives, particularly in outcomes, change will appear pointless. When change is presented as possible and preferable, dominant narratives of victim blaming and heteronormativity become more malleable, and young people may have more desire to question and challenge them.

In the future, I would like to film this sext education resource in partnership with a group of diverse young people, adapting the script, and the filming, according to their ideas and skills. The experiences of young people are rapidly change, particularly as technology and forms of information sharing develop. This script is an initial idea that will vary according to the context in which it is filmed, and the people that are featured in the film. By working in partnership with young people, sext education resources can be more relatable, up-to-date, and relevant. Victim blaming and heteronormativity can be questioned and challenged when researchers, educators, and applied theatre practitioners work alongside young people, valuing their contributions rather than telling them how to think, act, or feel.

²⁴ Low, 2017, p. 161.

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