

6-3-2018

Me on the Map: A Case Study of Interactive Theatre and Public Participation

Stephen Williams

University of British Columbia, stephengarywilliams@gmail.com


Jan Derbyshire

Freelance Theatre Maker and Co-Founder POD, Citizen Design., colossalsquid22@gmail.com

Adrienne Wong

adriennewong88@gmail.com, adriennewong88@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd>

 Part of the [Interactive Arts Commons](#), [Performance Studies Commons](#), [Urban Studies Commons](#), and the [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Williams, Stephen; Derbyshire, Jan; and Wong, Adrienne (2018) "Me on the Map: A Case Study of Interactive Theatre and Public Participation," *Journal of Public Deliberation*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol14/iss1/art8>

This Reflections from the Field is brought to you for free and open access by Public Deliberation. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Public Deliberation by an authorized editor of Public Deliberation.

Me on the Map: A Case Study of Interactive Theatre and Public Participation

Abstract

Me on the Map (MOTM) is a unique participatory show for classroom-sized groups of young people aged 6-15. Initially developed and produced by Newworld Theatre in Vancouver, through a commission from the Vancouver International Children's Festival, MOTM challenges participants to collectively solve the problem of how to best develop an actual lot of land that sits empty in their city. The MOTM experience guides participants through co-design activities that start in the classroom. The choice students make provide data that forms the foundation for the decisions made during the performance. This paper details the theoretical background of the show including participatory theatre, inclusive design, urban happiness studies and ethical decision making. We present lessons learned and make recommendations for public deliberation practitioners on using this technique in future projects.

Author Biography

Steve Williams is a PhD candidate in Resources, Management and Environment at the University of British Columbia where he is a Liu Institute for Global Issues Scholar and a UBC Public Scholar. He is researching the societal impacts of participatory processes focusing on the Alberta Energy Futures Lab. He holds a BA in Political Science from University of Western Ontario, an MBA in Management of Technology from Simon Fraser University, and a Graduate Diploma in Social Innovation from the University of Waterloo.

Jan Derbyshire is a freelance Theatre Maker and Co-Founder of POD, Citizen Design.

Adrienne Wong is a freelance Theatre Maker, Associate Artist at Newworld Theatre and Artist in Residence at Q on CBC.

Keywords

interactive theatre, urban design, public participation, decision making, participatory theatre, inclusive design, urban happiness studies, ethical decision making

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Newworld Theatre, the Vancouver International Children's Festival and Ethelo Decisions for their support of the early development and first production of this project and to our funding partners the Canada Council, BC Arts Council, City of Vancouver, Vancouver Foundation, and Telus Foundation.

Introduction

Me on the Map (MOTM) is a unique participatory show for classroom-sized groups of young people aged 6-15. Initially developed and produced by Newworld Theatre in Vancouver, through a commission from the Vancouver International Children's Festival, MOTM challenges participants to collectively solve the problem of how to best develop an actual lot of land that sits empty in their city. The MOTM experience guides participants through co-design activities that start in the classroom. The choices students make in-class provide data that forms the foundation for the decisions they will be asked to make during the performance making the students both audience and participants in the show. The audience are asked to make choices during the show using three different decision-making styles: majority rules, weighted preferences, and consensus.

MOTM seeks to empower young people with the knowledge that the built environment of their cities and communities, within some realistic parameters, is mutable and changeable—and that they can have input into those changes. Urban planning is the conceit for the game played in the show, but the narrative focus is finding processes for making value-based decisions. MOTM also gives students practical, hands-on experience applying the foundation skills necessary for civic engagement: 1) listening to the points of view of others, 2) using anecdotal and empirical data to analyze different options, and 3) expressing opinions and beliefs to a group of peers. MOTM is unique because it integrates real world empty lots, urban planning, classrooms, teachers, online tools, data analysis and visualization, hands-on play, group decision-making and the timely grappling with the idea of “if you can't get everything you want, can you be satisfied and perhaps even happy getting some of what you want.” Evidence of the show's effectiveness can be seen in Vancouver Deputy Mayor Andrea Reimer's post on Facebook, “Completely blown away by *Me on the Map* and its power to engage younger audiences in collaborative planning” (May 25, 2015).

MOTM evolved through an iterative design process. In this paper we review the history of the project, then describe the evolution of the engagement process and the final version of the Vancouver show. We conclude with key findings and areas of further exploration for the design team.

History of the Show

Derbyshire and Wong began the design process in 2011 after collaborating on two podplays¹ together. The two artists started with a desire to make a podplay experience for children because we were -- and continue to be -- deeply interested in children's perspectives of the city. At the time, Wong lived in downtown Vancouver and observed that children were rarely (if ever) seen unaccompanied on the city streets -- despite there being an estimated 6000 children living in Vancouver's downtown peninsula.

Then, in 2011, the Stanley Cup Riot happened (Furlong & Keefe, 2011). Rioters started fires, smashed windows, overturned cars. Police responded with tear gas, flash-bangs, and by making multiple arrests. Other citizens on the street formed human barriers between rioters and shop-fronts, preventing damage to some businesses. What happened the next day was unexpected and beautiful. Citizens



took to the streets with rakes, brooms and garbage bags and cleaned up. More people saw their efforts during the morning rush hour and joined them. People wrote messages of love and appreciation for the city on the plywood used to board up The Bay's broken display windows.² Police cars were covered in post-it notes thanking the servicemen and women for their efforts (Lavoie et al., 2014). These

actions didn't erase the previous night's destruction, but they did bring home the message that a city is not just the backdrop for sports games and hooliganism. A city is also a living entity that is cared for and cultivated by its citizens.

This led Wong and Derbyshire to ask "how can we instill this kind of citizenship, responsibility and respect in young people? How can we empower young people with the understanding that the city is not a rigid, finished space,

¹ A 'podplay' is a audio play that guides the listener on a walk through urban space. Wong initiated a project to commission and produce 11 podplays while Artistic Producer at Newworld Theatre in Vancouver.

² Image: https://c2.staticflickr.com/6/5274/5863465017_fbebb1b0a6_b.jpg

but continuously evolving and mutable -- and moreover, that even kids can have a voice and effect how a community or city grows and changes?

Me On the Map was designed to ignite these questions, and, more importantly, to give students a practical experience of collectively making decisions that will affect all residents of a city. The two artists are building on our individual practices of participatory, community-engaged theatre -- and exposure to works like “Are We There Yet?”, a participatory show for grade 9 students about sexual decision-making (Munro et al., 2007; Selman et al., 2007) and applying the technique that kids absorb difficult material best when it is presented with humour and in a way that respects their innate intelligence and problem-solving skills. Me On The Map combines the aesthetics of participatory theatre with principles of game design, where shared goals and objectives galvanize collaboration and cooperation among the players.

Iterative Design for MOTM

Phase One – Co-design Workshops

Wong and Derbyshire held workshops in schools, a Design camp at the Roundhouse Community Centre in Vancouver and a making tent at the 2013 Vancouver International Children’s festival. The two artists gathered perspective from kids on what they thought about civic engagement, urban planning and how to make sure every resident has some of what they need to be happy.

Phase Two – Prototype Testing

Several schools in Vancouver, Toronto, and Ottawa were chosen to participate in the classroom activities and to test prototypes of the show. Me On The Map requires that students have an understanding of Inclusive Design, units of measures in math, collective and ethical decision making as well as some elements of urban planning and happiness studies. Student and teacher co-designers in this phase helped us to identify what worked, what didn’t and what we can do to make the Me On The Map a truly unique, engaging participatory theatre show.

Phase Three- First Production

Me On The Map premiered at the Vancouver International Children's Festival May 25-31, 2015. There were 10 school performances. Attendees were Grade 1-5 students and their teachers. In addition, there were 4 performances that were open to the general public. Attendees at these shows were a mix of adults and children.

First Production - The Me on the Map Experience

In-Classroom Activity

ATTRACTIONS			
 Playground	 Waterpark	 Zoo	 Amusement Park
GREEN SPACE			
 Forests	 Wetland	 Fruit Orchard	 Community Gardens
COMMUNITY SPACES			
 Outdoor Stage	 Community Centre	 Interfaith Chapel	 Library
SPORTS SPACE			
 Sports Field	 Skate Park	 Tennis Court	 Swimming Pool
SERVICES			
 Daycare	 Co-Op Housing	 Fire Station	 Hospital

The Me on the Map experience for students begins with their engagement in the classroom before the show. Teachers receive a toolkit and guide students through an in-class activity. In this activity, students redesign a public space in their city. Students complete this task as individuals. Students must complete a Ground Plan Drawing by drawing in the features they choose to place in their park and create a map Legend. Students are able to choose six features from a predetermined list of 20. See Figure 1 for a list of features.

The activity introduces basic challenges of urban design and the recent connection of happiness researchers and urban planners (Montgomery, 2014). The activity is framed as a “mission to design a public space that will encourage happiness in the people who use it. You will create a design that repurposes an actual empty lot in Vancouver.” (Derbyshire & Wong, 2015)

Park Name: _____
 Student: _____
 Teacher: _____

Figure 2: Empty map ready for populating with features

Building the Database and Generating the Visualizations

Two weeks before seeing *Me On The Map*, the show Producer contacts the teachers and arranges to pick up copies of the Ground Plan Drawings and Legends completed by each class. The production team then uses the choices each student made to compile an individualized profile of each class's preferred features. This profile will be used during the show.

Each feature on the map is assigned ratings on a scale of 1-10 along dimensions of Happiness, Health, Inclusion, Spontaneity, and Connection. These dimensions were inspired by Montgomery's work in *The Happy City* were simplified for kids; happy, healthy, included, surprising and friendly. Different features have different value profiles. For example, an Amusement Park rates high on values of Happiness but low on the value of Inclusion as admission prices can deter low income families from attending. In this iteration, value ratings were assigned based on discussion among the production team. As described in more detail below, the ratings assigned and the dimensions used generated intense discussion during the shows and provide another avenue for discussion.

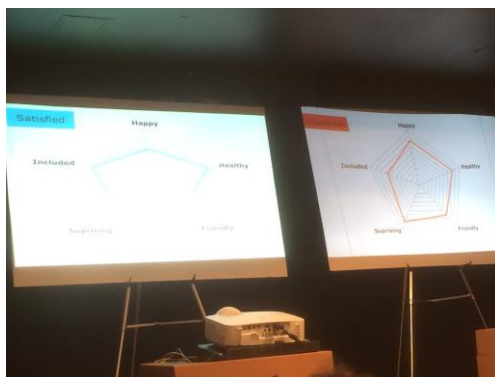
This data retrieved from the classroom work is then loaded into a database for visualization and to tabulate the most popular choices. The data is also entered into Ethelo, an online collaborative decision-making tool. The tool is designed

to optimize multi-criteria decisions based on “fairness”. Users select their preferred options along with weightings of how much they prefer each option. The Ethelo algorithm then sorts through the many permutations of options (in the MOTM case, 65,536!) to find the one that will be the most satisfactory to the most people. In the MOTM case, choices are entered on behalf of students using their maps to indicated choice and preference.

For example, if a student chose to include 4 greenspace options (such as forest or garden) and no community amenities (such as interfaith centre or library), we infer they have a strong preference for green space and a weak preference for community amenities. Note that the students have not yet been told about the value assignment. That is part of the “reveal” of the show.

At the Theatre

On entering the theatre, students are greeted by the Performer/Facilitator. During the performance, students are both audience and members of the production. The experience is co-created with the Performer/Facilitator and the students. Students retrieve their maps from an office mailroom type box as well as a card that says Designer and has a number 1-6 on it. This way the kids have their original work with them to compare with the other configurations that will be decided on during the show and a keepsake that not only designates them as a designer but tells them what smaller design group they will be a part of. The Performer shows how the students’ maps have been used to gather data on what would be the most fair use of the public space for this group. The facilitator



shows how each feature fits into one of five categories, and how we used their choices to weight the importance of each category to the group. This data was analyzed by a software algorithm that attempts to find the most satisfying solution for the greatest number of people. We reveal the six features that should make most people satisfied. The students move into smaller groups and decide where to put those features. The

features are presented as stylized cardboard models and a map is collectively constructed on the floor.



At this point, the Facilitator introduces the concept that the choices we make in urban design can affect how the citizens of the city feel. Together we explore five values (inspired by Charles Montgomery's book) that contribute to happiness, such as health, connection, and inclusivity. Each feature has been scored on these inherent values. We show the students radar charts that illustrate how the solution generated by the algorithm fulfil the values. More often than not, this choice did not match the values the students thought were most important. The Facilitator moderates a discussion to decide if some features can be swapped in to better reflect the group's values.



The Facilitator introduces a possible development deal: a luxury high-rise that would take up 30 of the 100 available units of space. The Facilitator guides the students through a process to collectively and ethically design the public space while accepting or rejecting this compromise. The students will use what they've learned to this point to inform their choices, defend values, and be continuously engaged with ideas of collaboration and including others opinions. If we can't have everything, what are we willing to strive for and/or settle for? The students have an assignment by the end of the performance. They can 1) reject the development proposal and stick with their Values Map, 2) accept the development proposal as is, or 3) accept the development proposal with amendments.

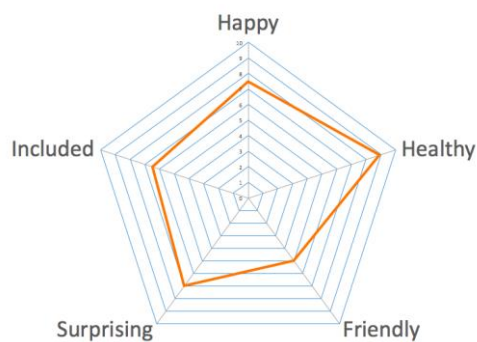
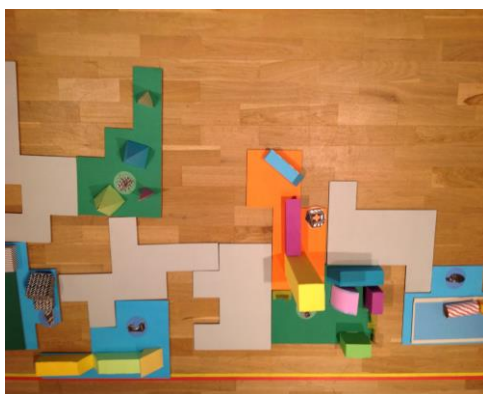
Note that the audience members attending public performances did not have the same pre-show, in-classroom preparation. Instead, the artists set up an activity tent outside the performance venue and suggested that audience members arrive 15-30 minutes prior to the performance start to complete the feature selection and map-making exercise. It was not possible to process that data using the algorithm in the limited pre-show time, so instead the artists used the cumulative

data selections generated by all the audience members (including school performances) who had attended up until that point.

Interestingly, the way the Wong and Derbyshire approached decision making had profound influence on the outcomes of the show. The two artists started one public show with democracy (i.e. voting on the best choices) which triggered divisiveness and competitiveness. Two adult participants talked over everyone else - mirroring what often happens in public engagement activities. In addition, it was apparent that people couldn't just vote - they argued about the validity of other people's choices rather than listening to other people's votes. This validated the importance of the core questions around fairness - if we can't have everything we want, can we be satisfied or even happy getting some of what we want?

Post-Show

Students are asked to submit, as a class, a final ground plan of their design, along with a letter to the Mayor explaining three reasons why they made the decision they did. Final designs are available on the Me On the Map website, which collects all the information from each show at the Vancouver International Children's Festival. Following the performance, students can go online to see the collective design made at the show and see the designs other classes made at the show.



Figures 3 and 4: Final map and ratings from May 31st 2015, 3pm show

Key Learnings

Experiencing Values

A key success of MOTM has been connecting emotion to issues in a way that is not possible through policy briefs and traditional forms of public engagement. It is in this way that theatre and games overlap. Both aim to influence the affective experience of the participant, both rely on the art of feeling. However, while games let participants experience feeling, games do not necessarily leave time to contemplate the choices and factors underlying those feelings. Theatre does this very well.

The artists' aim with MOTM is to intertwine the intellectual exercise of examining the community's values with the affective exercise of making choices that are supported or rejected by the group. This is the difference between MOTM and a public demonstration or presentation: the artists ask participants to root for particular choices. When the show is working at its best, participants passionately argue for or against specific features. By doing this, the implicit message to the participants is that our cities are places where not only all people are welcome (or should be) but are also places where all feelings are welcome. Seeing a classmate feel sad about the loss of something (or feeling that loss yourself) makes a very human connection between the built environment and how that environment affects individuals. MOTM brings together emotion and intellectual experiences, allowing participants to assess what is needed in the city, what is useful, what is desired, and how that makes the residents feel about living there. By integrating values into our discussion of the built environment, we are also introducing participants to specific values. For some students MOTM was a watershed moment for their understanding of values like inclusion and belonging, for example.

Art and Public Engagement

The use of arts in public engagement processes is not new (see for example Greene, 1995). However, the arts are often used in an instrumental fashion to achieve a specific objective or is very "light" in engagement, for example having participants contribute to a mural (Lee, 2015; Maggs, 2014; Moser, 2014). Using the arts in an intentional way to facilitate deliberation and values presented an interesting set of challenges for the production team. Our belief is that agency has to come out of emotional connection - both in terms of feeling and connecting that feeling to agency. We do this first by trying to connect agency to real world problem which can expand out authentic engagement through the arts by making the connection to real world space. An open question

we are still exploring is - can you still use theatre techniques with real world parameters? A second part of our approach is the awareness that if our true intent is civic engagement, the last thing we want to do is put artifice on that. We have all experienced didactic arts-based programs that felt more like a lecture than an engaging experience. Our goal is to promote civic engagement without losing sight of the power of the arts.

Connection to Policy and Political Process

One of the most interesting comments from a student participant was connected to his dissatisfaction with our value assignments for the Library feature. In his words, he felt that “libraries should be happier”. This statement highlights an interesting connection of the show to the political process. The choice of dimensions used for scoring and the values assigned to each feature are not empirical choices with fixed values. Different people will have different ratings and opinions on what dimensions should be used for evaluation - these are political choices. That MOTM has prompted this reflection and critique from participants we see as a success of the process. For example, during one of the test shows in Toronto, the production team assumed that sports fields were very inclusive but were challenged by students who said that if parents did not have enough money to enroll them in the league and pay for uniforms, shoes, pads, etc. then you could they could not use the field. This proved a visceral demonstration of how values are subjective.

We also found ourselves - quite by chance - drawn into the real world of urban planning and the policy process. Unbeknownst to the production team when planning the show, the City of Vancouver and the Province of BC had been evaluating the vacant lot we have been using as a site for the new St. Paul’s Hospital (Fayerman, 2015). This was announced in a press conference as the show opened. At the same time, the City of Vancouver launched the False Creek Flats (the neighbourhood in which our park is set) development consultation starting the same day as the show (City of Vancouver, 2015). Moving forward, we wish to explore how MOTM can more explicitly connect with the policy development process.

This may take the form of installing engagement processes "in place" which brings in participants beyond the usual suspects that may attend public meetings. In this case the Children's Festival on Granville Island and in the future community centres, seniors’ centres, shopping malls and other locations that are outside the normal venues. We have learned from early work with

Young People's Theatre in Toronto that MOTM is not only city specific but also neighbourhood specific. For example, the neighbourhood of Regent Park in Toronto is experiencing rapid gentrification. The City is pulling down big public housing towers, residents are being moved out and told they can come back but there is a lot of uncertainty in the community as to what will happen next. Students are already immersed in a 'vertical culture' so will have a very different experience from students in a rural community. We see this a rich area for future exploration.

Value of Kid-Led Processes

Our final, and perhaps most exciting, observation is the power of power of kids bringing adults to the show. At the start of the show, we made agreements the process would be kid-led. The adults easily people picked that up first from a place of amusement "OK we'll let the kids lead" then to a deepened the engagement. Kids occupy a unique space between the practical and the imaginary. In that space all values seem possible for them - for example, course everything has to be inclusive - they don't question that. This ability to deal with real parameters with a sprinkling of utopian ideas freed up adults to look at things in a different way. At the end of the public shows there was a lot of hope expressed by the adults largely, we feel, as a result of the kid-led process.

Conclusion

MOTM is an evolving platform for experimentation and public deliberation. Since the Vancouver iteration of the project, Wong and Derbyshire have delivered a new version in collaboration with Young Peoples Theatre in Toronto and continue to explore open questions including the process for choosing a real-life empty lot in each community. What are the considerations for smaller urban centres or rural communities? We also need to consider the real challenges faced by most cities: gentrification and the displacement of urban populations (often marginalized) in favour of construction of higher value properties and the more affluent citizens they attract. Finally, the two artists plan to explore how we connect real world developers and government decision makers to this theatrical experiment in civic engagement. When invited to the Playwrights Lab at the Banff Centre in March of 2017, Wong and Derbyshire continued to explore ethical decision making by building on the MOTM work and developing near future city planning scenarios entitled *Then comes now*. This work will become a way of teaching how to facilitate Interactive Theatre for real world impact to an interdisciplinary drama class in the fall of 2018 at The University of Calgary. We are excited about all of the questions MOTM

continues to generate with its multiple levels of engagement and participation, and the integration of technologies before, during and after the performance. MOTM is a flexible platform for exploration and public deliberation that is accessible and inclusive of all residents in the city. We hope the project inspires practitioners in the arts and in public deliberation to explore the role of iterative design, inclusive design and kid-led design in their work.

References

- Ballas, D. (2013). What makes a 'happy city'?. *Cities*, 32, S39-S50.
- Boal, A. (2000). *Theater of the Oppressed*. Chicago: Pluto Press.
- Butterwick, S. (2002). Your story/my story/our story: performing interpretation in participatory theatre [Transforming Dangerous Spaces project]. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 48(3).
- City of Vancouver. (2015). *False Creek Flats Planning Process*. Retrieved from <http://vancouver.ca/home-property-development/false-creek-flats.aspx>
- Derbyshire, J. (2014). *In Kind: Inclusive Design for Self and Others*. Toronto: OCAD University.
- Derbyshire, J. & Wong, A. (2015). *Me on the Map Teacher's Kit*. Retrieved from <http://meonthemap.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Me-On-The-Map-Teachers-Guide1.pdf>
- Fayerman, P. (2015). St. Paul's Hospital on the move to False Creek flats. *Vancouver Sun*. Retrieved from <http://www.vancouversun.com/health/Paul+Hospital+move+False+Creek+flats+with+video/10967245/story.html>
- Fishkin, J. S. (2009). *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Furlong, J. A., & Keefe, D. J. (2011). *The night the city became a stadium: Independent review of the 2011 Vancouver Stanley Cup playoffs riot*. Government of British Columbia
- Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lavoie, J. A., Eaton, J., Sanders, C. B., & Smith, M. (2014). 'The Wall is the City': A Narrative Analysis of Vancouver's Post-Riot Apology Wall. In *Symbolic Interaction and New Social Media* (pp. 203-222). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Lee, C. W. (2015). *Do-It-Yourself Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Maggs, D. (2014, June 13). *Artists of the Floating World*. (J. Robinson, Ed.). Vancouver.
- Montgomery C. (2013a). *Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design*. Anchor Canada.
- Montgomery, C. (2013b). "Secrets of the World's Happiest Cities". *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/nov/01/secrets-worlds-happiest-cities-commute-property-prices>

- Moser, S. C. (2014). Communicating adaptation to climate change: the art and science of public engagement when climate change comes home. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 5(3), 337-358.
- Munro, B., Selman, J., Esmail, S., Ponzetti, J. (2007) "Are We There Yet?: Using Theatre in Sexual Education." *The International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities, and Nations*, vol 7.
- Salter, J., Robinson, J., & Wiek, A. (2010). Participatory methods of integrated assessment—a review. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 1(5), 697–717.
- Selman, J., Esmail, S., Munro, B., Ponzetti, J. (2007). "Are We There Yet? On the Road to Safer Sex through Interactive Theatre." *Routledge Reader in Applied Theatre* (Chapter 47)
- Sloman, A. (2011). Using participatory theatre in international community development. *Community Development Journal*, bsq059.
- Woodford, M. R., & Preston, S. (2013). Strengthening Citizen Participation in Public Policy-Making: A Canadian Perspective. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 66(2), 345–363.