

**Making Sense Under a Midnight Sun:
Transdisciplinary Art, Documentary Film, and Cultural Exchange**

Steven W. Schoen

University of South Florida

David S. Spangler

Nova Southeastern University

Abstract

This essay analyzes the sense-making practices at work in directing a Russian-American youth arts program that included two weeks in Russia, and the production of a documentary film about that program. Both the filmmaker and the transdisciplinary art program director examine together their efforts to make sense of the event as their expectations for it collapse. We explore ways the creative practices of our disciplines shape our sense making and structure how we understand success, failure and art. We trace how our experience both *eludes* sense and *makes* sense, and do so in a way that reflects the provisional, incomplete, and emergent status of both our experiences of our sense-making and our collaboration. We struggle with the notion that knowledge must be tamed and stabilized by narrative to be theoretically productive, and we suggest that the processes of thoughtfully and creatively contextualizing lived experiences have knowledge-value that exceeds the “success” or “failure” of their expression in conventional forms.

Keywords: Sense Making; Documentary; Transdisciplinary Art; Cultural Exchange

Making Sense Under a Midnight Sun:

Transdisciplinary Art, Documentary Film, and Cultural Exchange

Steve: The Filmmaker is Restless

It's 3:00 AM and I lie still in the unfulfilled twilight of the early August Russian night—darkness never settles completely, just a long dusk slowly flowing into dawn. I am anxious and awake, my eyes wide open searching the shadows on the ceiling of my hotel room, a spare but fashionable modern space behind a lovely 19th Century facade in St. Petersburg.

A few miles away, across several of the dozens of canals that trace across the city, David lies awake too. He is worried about making a play, the creation and staging of an original musical in a handful of days; and I am worried about making a documentary film that doesn't seem to have a focus any more.

In a few hours David will face a crowd of about 20 Russian and American young people from fourteen to seventeen years old. He will try to convince them that in ten days (many of them half-days)—somehow—they will write words and songs, choreograph dance steps, learn dialogue, make sets and props, and then stage and perform a musical that is now but a montage of random ideas and themes collected in a halting but expansive brainstorming session the day before. He knows now that English will be a problem. The Russian students speak English well enough, but creative collaboration feeds on the subtle interplay of nuance; they catch most of the words but allusions and implications slip by; abstractions veer off obliquely.

Tight time-frames and daunting challenges are part of what makes the “Lovewell Method” work. The resulting intensity and the way it seems to evoke creative expression was part of what drew me to Lovewell as the subject for a documentary film. Lovewell Institute for

the Creative Arts is an “applied arts education program”¹ and the “Lovewell Method” as explained on their web site stresses “creative problem solving, critical thinking and provides training in team building, organization and leadership, conflict resolution, emotional intelligence, and vocational skills building.”² As part of a typical three-week summer program, high school-aged young people³ come together, and working with theatre professionals, develop, write, compose, choreograph, stage and enact a full, two-act, original musical theatre performance—the ideas and issues dramatized in the work emerge from the students’ expression of their own concerns. Earlier Lovewell participants had described the potent experience of day-to-day creative collaboration to me as a life-changing, “Outward Bound”⁴ kind of experience. I was intrigued by an *arts* program that seemed to offer a type of experience more often associated with sports programs or experiences of the outdoors: intense project focus leading to confidence building, teamwork, and dramatic personal growth. David likes to call the “Lovewell experience” the “inward-bound” of educational programs for youth. This vision of collaborative performance as a method of personal enrichment, along with the enthusiasm of the people I met, suggested to me that this indeed might be a fascinating program to document on film.

The idea for the trip to Russia began with a vision of common cause between two non-profit organizations. One organization centers its mission on fostering understanding between

¹ See the Lovewell Institute web site: <http://www.lovewell.org/about-us.php>.

² Ibid.

³ There are also programs for Jr. High aged youth.

⁴ Outward Bound provides intense character building programs. The organization’s web site [http://www.outwardbound.org/index.cfm/do/ind.about_philosophy, accessed December 8, 2008] describes their mission as “to inspire character development and self-discovery in people of all ages and walks of life through challenge and adventure, and to impel them to achieve more than they ever thought possible, to show compassion for others and to actively engage in creating a better world.”

Russian and American people. The group had focused its mission on mental health and substance abuse issues but began to see a role for itself using its resources to help facilitate other types of Russian-American cultural exchange, particularly involving children. The other organization, Lovewell Institute for the Creative Arts, uses theatre, transdisciplinary arts and creative process to engage young people in order to build self-esteem, nurture creativity and bring the skills of the arts to young people as a resource for living. The two groups worked in concert to create a two-week cross-cultural experience bringing together Russian and American young people who would create a musical theatre production as part of the event, under the direction of David, Lovewell Institute's founder.

I became associated with the project as a documentary filmmaker. After becoming familiar with the work of both organizations I saw the potential for a compelling story I hoped would be a film-festival quality documentary account of the event. At the center of the appeal for me was Lovewell's approach to "art." David told me he thought of art not as a thing or a profession, but as a process, a way of seeing the world and living life. David calls his approach to art "transdisciplinary" because it not only mixes various disciplines of the arts (such as music, theater, dance, design, film, and literature), but invites a "quantum" (de-centered, non-linear, multi-dimensional) response that might break open status quo ways of thinking and living. This vision of art resonated with my own work of searching for ways documentary film depictions might reconfigure and challenge calcified social scripts and show plausible alternatives to existing interpretations of social reality.

Background and Method

One goal of this paper is to avoid presenting a narrative wherein the form itself promises that lived experience is, in the end, conquered by meaning making. But neither do we mean to

cast our experience as unintelligible. Instead, we trace the ways our experience of the events we discuss both *eludes* sense and *makes* sense, and we strive to do this here within a structure that reflects the provisional, incomplete, and emergent status of our experience of our sense-making and collaboration. With Stewart (2007), we want to avoid “models of thinking that slide over the live surface of difference... [and] bottom-line arguments about ‘bigger’ structures and underlying causes.” Instead we seek to foreground our experience of the “reeling present... composed out of heterogeneous and noncoherent singularities” (p. 4). In this way we examine what it means for us to produce films, make music theater, and compose academic papers when the stability of the very forms we are using are belied by our experience of events. We challenge the notion that knowledge, to be worthwhile, must be tamed and stabilized, and we suggest that the processes of thoughtfully and creatively engaging lived experiences have knowledge-value that exceeds the “success” or “failure” of their expression in conventional forms. Within this work of creative engagement we find the more elusive “meaning” Stewart seeks in the ordinary:

an animate circuit that conducts force and maps connections, routes, and disjunctures... a kind of contact zone where the overdeterminations of circulations, events, conditions, technologies, and flows of power literally take place (Stewart, 2007, p. 3).

With this paper we make the wager of ethnography—that carefully observing human events and then attending to that experience by composing a text that makes links with theory can produce knowledge that makes room for new opportunities for people (Denzin, 2003; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Holman Jones, 2008). But we also strive to enact here the possibility that such a work might be incomplete and unstable, yet still constitute important knowledge by facilitating the intersection of scholarly collaboration and a reflexive, trans-disciplinary engagement with the

events of the life-world. This paper holds forth of the possibility that carefully asked questions that never get fully answered still might count as inquiry, and that stories can simultaneously resolve and not resolve and still be narratively, and even academically true.

We present a story of creativity emerging from the unpredictable confluence of particular people and places. It is a story of art, and reaching for beauty and meaning at the intersection of cultural difference, human lives and the slings and arrows of fortune. More specifically, it is a story of failure, healing, “*Konflikt*”⁵ success and hope flowing from a multi-tiered project that began with a trip to St. Petersburg, Russia, in the late summer of 2007. Our cross-culture, collaborative project occurred in the midst of news reports of Russian objections to plans to locate U.S. missiles just across the Russian border in Poland, as well as news reports of U.S. denunciations of a Russian submarine planting the country’s flag underwater at the North Pole and claiming large swaths of the oil-rich Arctic Circle as Russian territory. And our project, our *art-work*, has continued to reverberate. It has continued to change and shape our sense of art, and our sense of the events and emotions we experienced in Russia. Our small, cross-cultural encounter suggests to us the value of “art” as a practice of enacting meanings that can both engage global and cultural circumstances (with their entrenched political and economic oppressions), and enlarge the space for alternative relationships, meanings, and ways of living.

More specifically, this study is an ethnographic account of the work of adaptation and reframing deployed by two project leaders, one, David, directing an applied arts program for adolescents in the context of a Russian-American cross-cultural exchange and the other, Steve, directing a documentary film about the experience, with both parties facing unfolding

⁵ “Konflikt” is the title the Russian and American Lovewell participants eventually chose for the musical theater production they would create, a title chosen because it worked across both languages.

circumstances and events that no longer fit expectations, preliminary plans or accustomed procedures. Together, we seek to study our individual efforts to make sense of this shared event: a documentary film project and a transdisciplinary art project that are each themselves performances of aesthetic sense-making, and the subsequent reflection, discussion and writing about our experiences. We choose to do this collaboratively, convinced that a mutual exchange of ideas will help us to probe our experiences with richer insight.

The story we tell follows from the work of documenting the events on film, our personal reflections and field notes, transcripts of two traditional style field interviews and a follow-up “interactive interview” (Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillman-Healy, 1997) conducted between David and Steve. For the interview David and Steve sat down together to discuss their experiences in St. Petersburg, Russia, through a mutual exchange of ideas, reflection and recollection. We chose to use interactive interviewing, a technique by which the categories of interviewer (controlling the flow of information through questions) and interviewee (constructed as “expert” from whom knowledge is extracted) are collapsed into a relational exchange of knowledge which locates all parties of the interview as framers and sources of knowledge. By allowing the perspectives and ideas of all involved to help probe, interpret and reframe what others say, the interview dynamic is restructured from standard interview practice where the interviewer is chiefly in control of the production of knowledge—bringing insight unavailable without such an interchange (Ellis et al., 1997). The interactive interview loosely followed a list of topics Steve had assembled after a telephone discussion with David, and then submitted to David for revision.

Along with the interviews and more traditional field notes, video field documentation includes approximately 24 hours of video footage shot on location in Russia and another 6 hours of footage shot in Florida when the Russian students came to America to restage the show in

English. The video footage was shot in a realist documentary tradition—what Nichols (1991, pp. 44-47) calls the “interactive mode” of documentary. While the video crew interacted freely with participants and never worked to “hide” itself from the camera, neither did we strive to shoot footage in a way that would reflexively document the production process. We concentrated on observing group activities and participants, and asked participants on-camera about their experience.

There is a large collection of literature problematizing the representational practices of realist documentary filmmaking (Butchart, 2007; Cowie, 1999; Gaines, 1999; Minh-ha, 1991; Nichols, 1991, 2001; Renov, 1993; Ruby, 2000). We share these concerns. The problem of representation runs deep for documentary film—and for ethnography too (Denzin, 1997; Van Maanen, 1988). A documentary film (or ethnographic account) is necessarily a “selection” and “deflection” of the events it depicts (Burke, 1966). That is, neither documentary nor ethnography are “windows” into events, but are instead always enmeshed with the perspectives, presumptions and preoccupations of filmmakers and writers. Some details are set in the foreground, and others set in the background or overlooked entirely; some narrative patterns are embraced, others are passed over; events are shot from this position rather than that one (or not at all). Instead of locating both documentary and ethnography as “representation,” we locate them as *sense-making practices* (Weick, 1995), that is, as ways of knowing that are provisional, contingent, and situated (Clifford, 1986; Conquergood, 1991).

This story represents an attempt to make *further sense* of the emergent sense making that took place in Russia. For Steve, this story is a reframing of that event from a documentary filmmaking project gone awry to an exemplar of documentary sense making at work in the field and pushed to its limits, thereby foregrounding a kind of sense making often at work in

documentary filmmaking. From another angle, it is his attempt to reframe the event as an instructive example of sense making under the threat of a collapse of purpose—and in *that* sense a *success*. Similarly, for David, participating in this study has been an opportunity to make sense of the re-framing he did “on-the-fly” in Russia as he struggled to adapt his arts education methodology to a situation which both fit, and worked against, the way the method ordinarily functions—a method which is itself teaching the skills of *creative sense making* as a technique, a *skill for living* which can be taught and nurtured in the collaborative work of creating and presenting what David calls “transdisciplinary artwork,” that is, bringing together music, dance, theater and design. For both of us, art is a way of structuring meanings that expand possibilities for cooperation, challenge patterns of domination, and enhance self-determination. In other words, we see imagining and symbolically enacting new possibilities as opening space for personal enrichment and social change.

Steve Searches for a Film

I scan the large space of the rustic “theatre” where our make-shift Russian-American theatre troupe practices. It has the feel of a space for dance rehearsals—large, mostly empty, with a beautiful, old wooden floor, a mirrored wall along one of the long sides of the room, a small raised alcove about 15 feet deep forming the “stage” (sans theatre lights) at one of the narrow ends of the room, and faux stained-glass pattern film stuck on several large windows directly across from the mirrored wall. I have already featured the multi-colored reflections of the window on the wooden floor in several shots, which I thought evoked a feel of simple beauty—the reflected colors on the honey-toned floors somehow both lively and somber at the same time.

But now I am looking for my next shot, and slack faces, eyes fixed on nothing-in-particular, don't read well through the viewfinder. Neither do David's strained attempts to keep students focused on smithing a play.

I see nothing to shoot, so I roll tape and perform "filmmaker," periodically crossing the room, tracing standard camera moves and running through standard shot sequences as my mind scampers across the events I've seen, searching for clues to a new story, a story worth the couple thousands of dollars worth of production already invested in this shoot and worth the hundreds of hours of reviewing and editing footage that potentially lie ahead.

But I see nothing to shoot.

I keep shooting.

I still see nothing to shoot.

I keep shooting.

But I am shooting fewer and fewer close-ups of faces.

I shoot groups of people interacting, working together, the quotidian motions of people struggling to accomplish something difficult.

I shoot Russians and Americans who are not smiling much. There are no faces lit up with the marvel of cultural discovery. Instead, people look like they are working hard as they negotiate differences and communicate across language barriers. This has its own beauty, like watching someone planting seeds in a garden on a hot day, but I'm not sure how it will keep a film audience watching for ninety minutes. My hopes for the film as a story for the festival circuit were slipping away.

David Looks Back

I knew that Steve had been thinking carefully about the mission we had undertaken in Russia and the challenges we had both experienced during the process. Neither one of us could rest until we made some sense out of the unique and oddly disturbing two weeks in St. Petersburg. During the interviews Steve asked hard questions, stretched my analytical muscles and invited me to look through his lens at the content and process of what our American team had co-created with the Russians. Steve observed the subtleties of situations that I thought only Carrie (Lovewell's Associate Artistic Director) and I noticed. We were both experiencing apprehensions as we struggled to adapt our expectations and craftsmanship to an astounding collision of two very different cultures and a series of unexpected circumstances.

Steve Looks Back

During our interactive interview I spoke to David about my frustration and discomfort with searching for a narrative focus for the shooting I was doing,⁶

“I got a little panicky. I started doubting my own ability to pull things off.”

David in turn spoke about the pressure of having to adapt on-scene to a series of unexpected circumstances. He remembered,

“I was in that situation of saying oh my god, we have a video crew here doing a documentary, we have people coming, and we don't know what we're doing.”

This, in turn, led to us probing our experience for the ways those pressures influence creativity in sense making.

Steve: Imagining a Documentary

⁶ The following quotes are from our interactive interview.

I became hooked on the idea of shooting the Lovewell Russian project after meeting David. He struck me as a great documentary “character.” I found him to be vibrant and felt he would come across on camera as passionate, articulate about Lovewell, and “larger than life.”

I thought the plans to do a Lovewell program *in Russia*, bringing together students from America and Russia, was another ingredient in the mix that might be a compelling factor for a documentary. The Russian students attend an English speaking high school in St. Petersburg. I thought the cultural interchange and collaboration would add an interesting dynamic to the documentary.

As a scholar, I was hoping to explore the way language might structure the Lovewell experience as “life changing.” I was interested in both the language the program offered to participants and the words the participants themselves used to describe their experience and its impact on their values and conceptions of self. As a filmmaker, I thought this language would provide the structure for a compelling, emotional, story about the organization’s work. So I decided to shoot the documentary.

The Russian version of Lovewell, in many ways, would very quickly begin to deviate from Lovewell’s usual approach. Day by day, it became increasingly apparent (to both me and those leading the Lovewell program, David and Carrie) that the dynamics for this Russian experience were very different from the Lovewell norm. There was something different about the program in St. Petersburg.

Steve: A Changing City, A Changing Project

St. Petersburg, Russia is a city in transformation. To get back and forth from our hotel at *Pyet Ugal* (“five corners”) to the school where the Lovewell workshops took place, our small group of Americans walked about half an hour, crossing fashionable Nevsky Prospect (the main commercial street in the city), moving down that street, then several more blocks through a bustling city that looked more European than “Russian”—in its architecture, but also in the way people dress and the ubiquitous cell phones at the ears of passers by. The five students, two adult chaperones from the trips co-sponsoring organization, my video assistant (and nephew) Jake and I walked most days through part of the city to get to the program site.

For much of the journey to the school and back again in the evening we walked under scaffolding and over board-covered sidewalks, which had been opened for access to plumbing and electrical lines. The city was shrouded in green plastic netting covering the facades of buildings being (re)constructed for the *new* Russia—preserving the city’s nineteenth century charm while equipping it for a reconfigured future. Along stretches of the route, there were more buildings marked this way, as under transformation, than not. The city is a place of flux, an environment defined by becoming.

Along with an evening adventure in Russian cuisine, which we shared around a large table in the hotel restaurant, walking back and forth through the city was an occasion for casual conversation. Various groups of us discussed the events of the day as we made our way past the crowds. Here the adults began to make sense of the experience that was emerging.

“The kids seem disengaged. I think the language barrier is making things difficult”

“Going to the museums and palaces, visiting Russian organizations is great; they’re amazing experiences. But how are we going to have time to put together a show?”

This was indeed the question: time. There simply was not enough to do all we had hoped. Time would be our “konflikt.”

I had noticed these things through the lens of the camera too. I wasn't gathering what I had expected from observing an earlier Lovewell production: a growing energy, or passion in the young people as they took on the project of creating the show for themselves. In retrospect, I realize I had expected to capture in Russia “Lovewell plus;” that is, I had envisioned the usual Lovewell experience: a story enlivened by dramatic personal transformations flowing from the passionate engagement of young people in a collaborative theater project—but intensified and enriched by cultural exchange and Russian scenic circumstances, rather than *changed* by it. I said to David in our interactive interview back in the United States, “I started to realize, this is just not happening. So what's my story going to be? And you know I got the butterflies. I'd come all this way, I'm shooting all this tape, we've spent a lot of money—am I going to emerge with anything here?”

Narrative structure was showing itself as an absence—and hinting at itself as impossibility. What use is a story without structure? What use is beautiful video footage and images of moments and events that resist wholeness? Can large gaps in coherence invite something worthwhile? Or do they just mark narrative collapse; do they just mark failure? Or is the compulsion to impose a “structure with payoff” so ingrained into our meaning-making that we don't even notice when it is more roadblock than stepping stone?

David is Restless

It's 3:00 AM and I lie still in the unfulfilled twilight of an early August Russian night in the second week of our adventure. A few miles away, across a week's worth of experimenting with this curious mix of art, science and global realities, Steve lies awake too. He is still worried

about making a film, and I'm worried more than ever about making a music theatre artwork and creative experience worthy of a good documentary.

In a few hours Steve and I will face our Russian and American students and teachers and try to convince them that in a several days they will stand in front of their families, teachers and peers in a live performance of their creation being filmed for a documentary.

David Faces a New Situation

It is not unusual for a Lovewell event to include a number of young people without much experience in theatre or music. But *no* singers, dancers or actors in this group of American and Russian Lovewell students? This was an anomaly. Carrie, the assistant director of this project, and I would often look at each other helplessly as we groped for another tactic to draw a meaningful story out of this diverse group. In America and Sweden where Lovewell Institute has established programs since the mid 90s, students were drawn to the workshops because they identified with the mission of Lovewell – they had a passion for expressing their life experiences and viewpoints through *art*. They knew that Lovewell gave them a voice in a world that seldom listened. In Russia, these Russian students had no tradition of free expression or the arts in their school. There were no arts courses offered at the Gymnasium the students attended in St. Petersburg. The American students had been recruited by the behavioral health organization that cosponsored the trip and had mostly come to see St. Petersburg and work together with the Russian students; they had no extraordinary interests or proficiencies in the arts. But, there was a growing engagement with the notion of the show, and slowly, subtly, the broad outlines of a plot for the show began to emerge as the process continued. The most popular concept was an internationally televised “brain-bowl” type of competition between American and Russian

students that covered topics such as history, politics, sports and culture. The students began to imagine their individual characters and how they could contribute to the storytelling.

Another unique aspect of the situation was the constant presence of a number of interested adults. The adult chaperones, the Russian teachers, even the principal of the local school were all excited about the program and came at every chance to the large gym and stage where the workshops and performance took place. Normally the only adults involved in a Lovewell program are the theatre professionals: musicians, choreographers and directors who work with the young people to create a show. The changed circumstances invited a possible new interpretation of the project: a program expanded to encompass both the young people and adults. An intergenerational program had been a longtime goal of Lovewell Institute, but was not planned for this Russian workshop. The Russian adults were enthusiastic and eager to make the program work, and they sensed the reticence of their students. David began to think it might make sense to tap into the energy of the adults and invite them to participate more actively in the project.

Steve Looks at Footage

David asked the students to consider including the adults as full members of the troupe. All votes would be equal and the teachers would have no more authority in the creative process than the students; it was still to be the students' show and their voice being expressed. The students agreed, and even seemed grateful for the help; the Lovewell Russia program was now intergenerational.

But in the brainstorming sessions about the script that were to follow, video images show adults on the edges of their seats, eagerly jumping in with very creative ideas, and young people sitting back and only offering ideas when called on. Carrie and David worked hard to invite the

young people in, and the teenagers did indeed participate with strong ideas, many of which were adopted for the show. But the images I was looking for—faces lost in a project, people who seemed to have vanished to themselves in a creative focus on something else—were of adults, not young people. The students were there, and attentive to the process, yet did not look like what I had seen at an earlier Lovewell workshop in Florida. But the adults did.

David Re-Imagines Lovewell

Bringing in the adults constituted a re-framing of the “Lovewell Method” to accommodate a new situation (Burke, 1969). The Lovewell process was being re-imagined. I saw this as an opportunity to expand and update the mission of Lovewell to integrate the new realities of generational and international exigencies.

Lovewell’s mission has always included somewhat elevated goals such as encouraging creativity as a tool for personal and social transformation, and developing the Lovewell Method as an effective arts-based life-enhancing technology through creative process, education, and therapeutic applications. The changed “scene” in Russia (such as time spent experiencing the local culture, but much less time for creating the show; few young people with arts experience; a language barrier) began to shift the emphasis from personal transformation to cultural and social engagement.

By the summer of 2007 it had become clear that the mutual understanding President Bush had once said he found by looking into Russian President Putin’s eyes was not going to translate into international harmony. While the Russian and American young people laughed and chatted with one another about shared interests in music and film and clustered around computers to

become Myspace friends, the daily headlines we read in the St. Petersburg Times⁷ reflected eroding international politics, and echoed the confrontational rhetoric of the Cold War.

The clashing national perspectives we found in the news finally dropped into our script discussions in the form of Khrushchev's shoe. As we Americans wondered if the political disputes of our own day are any more relevant to our daily lives than Khrushchev infamously banging his shoe on the table at the UN in September of 1959, we found ourselves talking with flesh and blood Russian teenagers who believe what they have been taught - that Khrushchev was dealing with a sore foot, and that America is the real bully in the world politik.

Talk of different perspectives followed, and our show's title emerged out of a heated creative session attempting to weave some of these issues into our script. *Konflikt – An International Incident with Music* was a compromise that seemed to please everyone in the troupe. It was a linguistic gift that the word “conflict” has a similar sound, meaning and visual appearance in both Russian and English, and this in spite of the very different alphabets. Since the troupe was scheduled to perform the show in America in English in a few months, the title *Konflikt* would translate appealingly on posters in both places. So in this simple selection for a title of our production, we were making sense out of the conflict.

We also learned that the Lovewell affirmations (learning meditations) were authentically engaging to the Russian teenagers only after *they* translated them into their very own vernacular. These seven affirmations, described later, are the bedrock of Lovewell philosophy and are used to center and focus the students while setting the philosophical and psychological landscape in which creativity thrives (Spangler, 2007). Discussing the nuances of the Russian words that

⁷ This English-language daily newspaper published in St. Petersburg, Russia should not be confused with a newspaper of the same name published in St. Petersburg, Florida.

might best translate these affirmations, and making connections with relevant Russian proverbs, at last drew many of the young people to the edges of their chairs.

Sense Making: A Pedagogy, a Documentary, a Show

The Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) observed that everyday speech, rather than merely encoding a finished cognitive product or simply channeling elements of larger social discourse, is a sense-making activity whereby meaning is constituted for the speaker *in the speaking*, through creative interaction within a specific social context. Sense making is performed as the speaker constitutes meaning for—and of—the self, through and for the social; the social context for speaking provides the symbols, patterns of thought, impetus, and field of operation from which a self is dynamically constituted—In this sense, communication *is* sense making.

The Lovewell Method, as it has generally functioned, has had to do with teaching young people how to embrace for themselves a creative agency—the skill of using creative process to reconfigure their world through artistic expression. By re-imagining possible configurations they learn to express (describe and account for) the unorganized dramatic or intuitive desire for order, a sense making expressing a story useful for them to make sense of their own lives. Engaging in the creative process “exercises” these “muscles,” the sense-making capacity of the participants. They are practicing the manipulation of the various elements of how something might be understood, not in just the cognitive sense, but in the fuller integrative sense of how events are experienced as taking place embedded in particular situations, and thereby shape those situations (Burke, 1969). These are the lessons of the dramatic arts—they teach the logic of sense making—how situations are symbolically structured to evoke meanings, and how those symbols might be clustered together to shape meanings in the ways they interactively describe the aspects of

those situations (setting, how the “actors” are understood, the available ways of acting, acts that are performed and the purposes for these acts). By engaging young people in creating drama, Lovewell practices the art of sense making. Students are given “equipment for living” (Burke, 1974). Further, the students *enact* stories related to their concerns and their sense of identity—a kind of *embodied* imagining that materially inscribes the meanings they create.

In creating a work of transdisciplinary art, the students are introduced to an extremely robust toolbox of symbolic forms as they configure the story they want to tell. Their sense-making capacities are further reinforced by the Lovewell “affirmations” that link the dramatic sense making of the participants experiences of everyday life:

- Within me there is boundless creative power
- I am now at this moment, all that I need to be
- I visualize perfection daily, until I breathe it into expression
- I am pure energy and awareness
- All my needs will always be supplied by my understanding of creativity
- I have a kind thought for everyone, may we create today in the spirit of cooperation and joy
- Now let me in silence reaffirm why I am here (Spangler, 2007)

These affirmations are an unfolding of the understanding of transdisciplinary art described earlier in this study. They presume the capacity of language (and other symbols) to structure the possibilities and directions of life experience. More concretely, the affirmations function performatively, that is, they are intended to bring about what they describe (Austin, 1975; Butler, 2004).

And the Lovewell affirmations structure a strategy for interpreting the experience of making art that is extendable beyond an “art” context. This aspect of Lovewell, the central focus of its pedagogy of sense making, shifted in Russia, ironically, as an exercise of sense making. As the situation changed through obstacles emerging in language barriers, time, and the familiarity

of the students with the arts – plus the rich new dimension of cultural diversity present – the nature of the Lovewell workshop changed too.

Steve: meaning in “other”

The Russian documentary filmmaker Dziga Vertov (1984) built on Viktor Shklovsky’s notion of *ostranenie*, (a “making strange” or “defamiliarization”) to advocate *kino-pravda*, a “film truth” relying on the capacity of film to render a familiar scene as “strange” to viewers and open new possibilities for understanding the world. I hope he is right, and wonder if travel can do something similar. Along with the risk of “othering” and “exoticizing” an unfamiliar place, perhaps the environments of daily urban life, rendered in a different guise, can help us see things differently. Walking the streets of St. Petersburg, Russia, it feels to me like I am physically moving as much through a psyche as a city. This building, that street, seems substantial enough, yet the overall effect leaves an unshakable awareness that this urban substance enveloping me has, for all its elegance and subtlety, been chiseled and lifted into place, like every city, through the force of will and according to the plans of human imagination. Whimsy, hard force, and material limits have been pushed together in a continuing, centuries-old process; possibility and its limits come together in a procession of forms that make joy and sorrow, hope and despair, past and future all inextricable, simultaneous, true, and beautiful. I think of the sublime interplay between crushing deprivation and proud resilience invoked in places remembering the World War II siege of St. Petersburg (then Leningrad), scattered around the city in both large monuments and small school museums—horrors and dignities improbably pushed together.

I pause on one of the countless bridges that link the parts of this city, in a place that is in-between, neither right bank nor left bank, and feel the formless possibilities of my documentary. Surely my film is no more improbable than this city?

Steve interviews David

Later, my hotel room (and now make-shift “studio”) seems very still as I sit across from David at *Pyet Ugal*. The moment, like the location of the hotel, is an awkward intersection. The faintest whir of the camera registers in my left ear and our interview begins. I have waited until now to start interviewing people, until a story emerged or I ran out of time. We leave tomorrow, so the first interview starts for my documentary, with still no story in sight. In twenty years of production work, I have never done a project where I failed to quickly find a story I want to tell—until now.

It’s not that I don’t have questions. There are plenty of questions to ask. And it’s not that there have been no interesting events. There are any number of discrete images and events that are compelling to me in various ways. I just don’t see a documentary I want to make.

Again, the (1984) notion of *ostranenie* comes to mind. I hope my disorientation will bring my interview with David an “estranged perspective” that brings enlightenment, but it doesn’t.

I ask questions about how Lovewell “usually works,” how the Russian version was different, and how a subsequent visit of the Russian teenagers to the United States might “complete” the experience for them—all questions in search of possible avenues for finding an organizing theme for the documentary.

David and I have an interesting conversation, a worthwhile conversation. But I still don’t see a documentary. Step by step I have worked to make sense with my camera, but there is no story that seems right to me, and I’m not sure why not. Sitting across from David, performing “filmmaker,” I feel queasy as I realize I will fly home the next day without a story. He mused later about the experience in our interactive interview:

If you clear the path for something to happen, and you surrender, and you start listening to the story... I really had to stop telling the story, stop it. Just stop telling the story and just listen to what the story wants to be. And it'll come.

And perhaps it will. But now, months later, I make a choice. I let go of the film. At least for the moment, I leave behind the digital bits, the images and sounds stored on videotapes. I try to escape the binary logic of success-failure that now seems to haunt me about this film, and instead begin to push together written words instead of film frames. I reach out to David, and the project takes on a new cast as an academic paper.

David: A New Context

It is 3:00 AM and I lay awake again, thinking now about the show we created a few months ago in Russia—and in a few days will perform here in Florida. Steve and I did our interactive interview yesterday. I know he is on the other side of the state trying to make sense of a still elusive documentary.

While the film remains formless, the show “Konflikt” has taken shape, and I’m not completely sure what to make of it as a work of “art,” but I know that for our troupe it means more than it can represent. Here in Florida, the performance points to a yearning for cultural connection, and has the awkward beauty of a memento that conjures experiences far beyond the syntax of its own symbols and forms. “Konflikt” is now, at the very least, an artifact valued by and continuing to inform those who created it.

I think about the energy and hopes of the Russian students’ parents as they spoke after the performance in Russia. It exceeded itself and became a point of contact to gather up hope and dreams for their children’s future, a hint at a bigger and friendlier world more filled with art, “culture” and beauty.

And I think of the Russian students staying in my home, seventeen-year-old boys that are so well-behaved and so engaged in learning all they can about the “real” America. They interact well with my daughters and other American Lovewell students who had not been part of our project in Russia. They bring gifts and share music with us as we deepen the bonds of this exchange.

I hope that across the swamps of south Florida, on the other coast, Steve too is sharing this sense of our experience: art is not just found in what is made, but in the making.

Steve: Making Sense, Making Film

Many months ago, when this project began, I promised David that along with the documentary film I meant to produce, I would also use the footage from Russia to make a short promotional video for Lovewell. And now under the weight of that commitment, I return to the footage of our trip. I read over my field notes again. I pass over the footage once more. Again, I annotate what I observe in the footage and the transcripts of interviews. Again, I search for patterns in the words and images of the footage.

And this time, as I push together what I see in the footage, I find a pathos I haven't seen before. As I review the footage, over and over, I hear voices of young people speaking about the value of their experience in Russia. They are not breathless. Their gestures are not big. But both the Russian and American teenagers say those days in St. Petersburg are an important experience for them. Their reasons are deeply mundane, “I really liked getting to know them.”

“It's cool that we like some of the same music.”

“Everyone was really nice.” Or just, “It was really a great experience”—without any answer at all about what was “really great” about the experience.

But I begin to realize that the thing that will “work” in these “sound bites” is not the content of the words. It is instead the *way* the young people speak about these things.

So too, I am struck by what I see in the footage on the faces of the parents of the Russian students as they watch their children perform. There is nothing distinct or tangible that I can describe, no unmistakable emotions or obvious drama. Neither is there anything I can point to in the words the parents used when they spoke in St. Petersburg that night of the performance. But I know something *is* there, in the speaking. I realize that I can put together these interview bites and these images of faces and interactions and they will work together in a film to affect viewers—there will be a “feel” that would be completely absent from a transcript of the video.

And so I edit together images and words and music that constitute a seven-minute promotional video. Instead of narrative, there is a just the subdued, small claim (in words, images and affect) that meeting and spending time with people who seem different is good—in itself. Can this be a new insight for anyone? I look again at this video and realize how deeply embedded the meaning of this trip to Russia is in the particularity, the immanence of its events. For all the drama that seems promised by the circumstances of making theater, producing a film and bringing together people across culture, it may be that the productive force of our experience is much more, well, ordinary. Stewart argues for the value of tracing “ordinary affects,” where the “potency of forces lies in their immanence to things that are both flighty and hardwired, shifty and unsteady but palpable too” (2007, p. 3).

Along with the (good and important) instrumentalities of learning life lessons and building relationships across national boundaries and discovering in the arts techniques for more effectively managing one's life—the short film has only the plain, clear tenor of what the young people claimed themselves for their experience: “I’m really glad I did this.” Perhaps listening to and watching these interview segments stacked up together in the short film becomes an invitation to viewers to consider the possibility that beyond demonstrable outcomes and explanations, the trip to Russia was indeed good—in a way that feels grounded and important in the mouths of the young people we see on screen, though it seems trite when it is abstracted as a “message.”

These thoughts lead me to think about my larger project, the documentary. Perhaps if I let go of my imagined audience, push away the imagined approvals of film festival juries, I can, as David suggested, and as happened with the promotional video, let the story reveal itself.

But I also wonder if every story needs to be told. Maybe it's okay if some things stand untamed by narrative, slipping its grasp. Can there be bits of narrative that are beautiful and seem like they should all cohere, but don't. Can there be theory that truly illuminates an experience, yet simultaneously reveals itself as insufficient? Can theory, like the claims of the students about their experiences, invite us to deeper inquiry in ways that are modest and refuse extrapolation, yet remain productive and even transformative at deep levels? Can events, stories, films and performances be theory? And how coherent must events, narratives, theories and methods be to emerge as valuable knowledge? Can events be attended to in film, in theater, in scholarship, *as ordinary* in the sense Stewart describes it?

They work not through meanings per se, but rather in the way that they pick up density and texture as they move through bodies, dreams, dramas and social

worldings of all kinds. Their significance lies in the intensities they build and in

what thoughts and feelings they make possible. (Stewart, 2007, p. 3)

The story I feel in my experience with the Lovewell Russian trip is tied to its fractures. I want to tell a story without a beginning, middle and end. I want to find a way to tell this so that the fragments are not transformed into wholeness and unity—a coherence that has never been part of the experience for me. Instead, I want to lay out the threads, the story fragments, as fragments. I do not want to mask the awkward, fragmented “beauty” and “truth” that somehow seem more important than a successful film.

Is there room for what David would call a “quantum” film? For that matter, is there room for “quantum” ethnography or performance? Can our work have purposes beyond producing a thing, a product?

I think so. And now freed from narrative coherence (for the moment anyway) and from dependence on a successful, extra-ordinary product, I feel freed to return to my documentary. My path forward is not the film but the filmmaking.

David: Making Sense, Making Art

We often don’t know what works until we know what doesn’t work. Creative artists need to take the risk and know that occasionally being a fool is part of that risk. The worst idea often triggers the best idea, and in the Lovewell culture this happens everyday. Steve’s concern with success and failure certainly motivates me to go deeper into the challenges we faced during this project. But I wonder if we have moved beyond the realm of success and failure. I hope old dialectic is obsolete; it strives to contain the possible with false limitations. In this project we see glimpses of its irrepressibility – where everything is possible and some things are manifested.

I recall back how one morning in Russia I started off rehearsal by having the troupe lie on the floor and quietly listen to a piece of music. I wanted them to listen like they had never listened, and let the music take them on a guided journey. After we listened, I asked them if anyone recognized the composer or the cultural origin of the music. Absolutely no one knew that Rachmaninov conducted the world premier of this Adagio from his Second Symphony in 1908 only a few blocks away from where we were rehearsing. This was their first exposure to the genius of this great Russian composer. While Russian jets were flying over American airspace in bold saber-rattling exercises flaunting the power of the new Russia, an American-based cultural exchange program was introducing these Russians to one of their own great cultural heroes. I wondered why the government, in their recent desperate quest for cultural identity and global acceptance didn't educate their next generation in the magnificence of their artistic heritage – the Russian giants of music, literature, dance, theatre, film and visual art. This is a legacy of intellectual, artistic and creative prowess that any teenager could relish and benefit from.

As I later watched the troupe perform *Konflikt* for an American audience, I realized that when political, military and economic solutions aren't working, art *is* working. Barriers fell, fears evaporated and lifetime bonds were forged. This is true homeland security. These Russian students and teachers have been guests in our homes and we in theirs; we shared epiphanies and frustrations, we created a brainchild that will demand that we make sense of it for years to come. In a “quantum” universe, the possibilities are infinitely open.

References

- Austin, J. L. (1975). *How to do things with words* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bakhtin, M. (1981). Discourse in the novel. In M. Holquist (Ed.), *The dialogic imagination: Four essays by M. M. Bakhtin* (pp. 259-422). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Burke, K. (1966). *Language as symbolic action*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Burke, K. (1969). *A grammar of motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Burke, K. (1974). *The philosophy of literary form* (3rd ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Butchart, G. (2007). On ethics and documentary: A real and actual truth. *Communication Theory*, 16(4), 427-452.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. New York: Routledge.
- Clifford, J. (1986). Introduction: Partial truths. In J. Clifford & G. E. Marcus (Eds.), *Writing culture: The poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (pp. 1-26). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Conquergood, D. (1991). Rethinking ethnography: Toward a critical cultural politics. *Communication Monographs*, 58(2), 179-194.
- Cowie, E. (1999). The spectacle of actuality. In J. M. Gaines & M. Renov (Eds.), *Collecting visible evidence* (pp. 19-45). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Denzin, N. K. (1997). *Interpretive ethnography: Ethnographic practices for the 21st century*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N. K. (2003). *Performance ethnography: Critical pedagogy and the politics of culture*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (1996). Introduction: Talking over ethnography. In C. Ellis & A. P. Bochner (Eds.), *Composing ethnography: Alternative forms of qualitative writing* (pp. 13-48): AltaMira.
- Ellis, C., Kiesinger, C., & Tillman-Healy, L. (1997). Interactive interviewing: Talking about emotional experience. In R. Hertz (Ed.), *Reflexivity and voice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gaines, J. M. (1999). Introduction: "The real returns". In J. M. Gaines & M. Renov (Eds.), *Collecting visible evidence* (pp. 1-18). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Holman Jones, S. (2008). Autoethnography: Making the personal political. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials* (pp. 205-244). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Minh-ha, T. T. (1991). *When the moon waxes red: Representation, gender and cultural politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Nichols, B. (1991). *Representing reality: Issues and concepts in documentary*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Nichols, B. (2001). *Introduction to documentary*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Renov, M. (1993). Introduction: The truth about non-fiction. In M. Renov (Ed.), *Theorizing documentary* (pp. 1-11). New York: Routledge.
- Ruby, J. (2000). *Picturing culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Spangler, D. S. (2007). *The story of Lovewell Institute for the Creative Arts: Its vision, theory and method*. Unpublished Dissertation, Union Institute and University, Cincinnati, OH.
- Stewart, K. (2007). *Ordinary Affects*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Van Maanen, J. (1988). *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Vertov, D. (1984). *Kino-eye: The writings of Dziga Vertov* (K. O'Brien, Trans.). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.