

FIVE TWO EIGHT O: An overview-description and suggestions for further development
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Julia Ostberg, a Communication major at Regis College in Denver, wrote the following suggestions after studying Five Two Eight O for her Strategies of Dialogue class (2009). She made many good observations, and came up with some excellent suggestions. Read on:

In its first year of existence Five Two Eight O has already provoked dialogue between individuals and communities in Colorado. The four communities where these events took place were Five Points, Lowry, Santa Fe and Berkeley-Regis. Through the combinations of story-telling, dialogue and the arts, Five Two Eight O has successfully brought people together who may have never realized the commonalities that they share with others.

The basic idea for Five Two Eight O is “Share your story, Change the world” (Five Two Eight O). Because people cannot argue with stories like they can with opinions, story-telling is a great way to provoke dialogue and avoid discussion. These dialogues are in direct response to stories and personal experiences that people have had. As a result, there is not the feeling that a position is being held without an explanation as to how that person came to that position. The people involved can talk amongst each other about their experiences, and though they may not always agree with one another, they become less likely to be involved in a full on debate about specific issues. There are not many rules and the story telling is kept wide open for any participants who would like to be involved.

I was not involved in Five Two Eight O until the final culminating event at the Crossroads Theater. Even though I was a part of the audience and not a participant of story-telling or the arts, I was a participant of dialogue. I got the opportunity to connect with artists, story-tellers, facilitators, family, participants and friends who had been a part of the five events or had been impacted by family members or friends who have been involved. I learned about the

stories that were told, got a chance to see the art that was created and watched as the year was summarized in movie format.

This was really cool because it gave me, and other people in the audience, an opportunity to see what we had missed out on in the past year. Participants, volunteers, students and members of Five Two Eight O were acknowledged and their contributions were noted. I became very interested in Five Two Eight O but at the same time confused because I had not heard of this group until the spring semester. I was disappointed that I was not aware of the events that were going on because I wanted to become more involved.

What I think is great about Five Two Eight O is that their story-tellers are on a completely voluntary basis. People can choose to tell their stories to the audience or keep them to themselves. Usually once a story is told, it opens doors to other stories. As people find connections with the story-tellers, the flow of the story-telling becomes more fluid. It also seems that people have a tendency to become more comfortable sharing stories when they hear other people open up and share something that is personal. It gives them a chance, which they may not have had otherwise, to be heard and to share their stories with people of their communities.

The best thing about Five Two Eight O is that it opens the door to community change. Problems or concerns that arise during these events could spark awareness and an action plan for the communities involved. These events leave participants with the questions “so what?” and “what’s next?” Steps can be discussed and action can be taken to change what participants are not happy with and to make their communities better places to live.

In order to find ways in which Five Two Eight O could improve, I did research on three large community-based theater groups that have been around longer and have expanded outside of a single state. The three community-based theater groups I researched were Sojourn Theater,

Cornerstone Theater and Playback Theater. I started off examining each group and pointing out the similarities and differences between each one and Five Two Eight O. Through these examinations it became easier to see the next steps Five Two Eight O could take to stay successful, change and expand in the future.

Sojourn Theater seemed to be the group that was most closely aligned with Five Two Eight O. Sojourn Theater has been around for eight years and combines art, theater, dialogue and story-telling. The goals of Sojourn Theater are to “examine values that both bring Americans together and also keep them apart” (Sojourn Theater). They do this through investigations of stories and themes from people of different communities. Sojourn Theater strives for community development and believes that art and theater can act as a bridge and offer spaces for illumination, recognition and above all else, dialogue (Sojourn Theater).

Sojourn Theater is made up of a “team of designers, performers and logistical wizards” who work with individuals and communities from all around the nation (Sojourn Theater). Much like Five Two Eight O, they combine story-telling, art and dialogue and they also include theater.

Cornerstone Theater is a multi-ethnic ensemble based theater company in Los Angeles, California that commissions and produces new plays, both original works and contemporary adaptations of classics, which combine the artistry of professional and community collaborators (Cornerstone Theater Company). Cornerstone Theater was founded in 1986 and strives to “build bridges between and within diverse communities” (Cornerstone Theater Company). People tell their stories and the actors will take the story into consideration and apply it to a classical play. To reach their goal, the people of Cornerstone Theater make theater with and for people of many ages, cultures and levels of theatrical experience (Cornerstone Theater Company). They have four key values in their value statement:

“We believe that society can flourish when its members know and respect one another, and we value theater made in that spirit. We value art that is contemporary, community-specific, responsive, multilingual, innovative, challenging and joyful. We value theater that directly reflects the audience. We value the artist in everyone,”(Cornerstone Theater Company).

Communities of faith, geographic neighborhoods and workplaces are a few of the different groups they have worked with. Currently they are in the middle of The Justice Cycle, which is a series of six world premiere plays designed around how laws “create and disrupt communities” (Cornerstone Theater Company).

The last theater company I studied was Playback Theater. Playback Theater was founded in 1975 and acts out stories of individuals on the spot, accompanied by music. The participants share their stories and simultaneously or immediately afterwards the people of Playback Theater act the stories out. As they are acting the stories, musicians play music in the background.

The purpose of Playback Theater is to “encourage and foster individual human rights and community dialogue through personal improvisational theater by facilitating the narration of diverse opinions, recollections and stories; listening; empathy; vitality; and hope” (Playback Theater). They have worked in educational, therapeutic, social change and arts settings and provide audiences with a theater of their own stories (Playback Theater). All of the three community-based groups show unique differences but also have key similarities to one another.

There are many differences between Five Two Eight O and the other three community-based theaters I studied. Because Five Two Eight O is a brand new community-based group, they have not had as many performances as Sojourn, Playback and Cornerstone theaters have had. Five Two Eight O is based in Colorado and has not yet expanded to areas outside of Five Points,

Berkeley-Regis, Santa Fe and Lowry. More adults and college students are involved in the dialogue, art and story-telling than children and families. Also, acting is not as predominate in Five Two Eight O as it is in the other community based theaters.

Even though there are many differences in the ways these groups work with their surrounding communities, there are also very important similarities that are shared with Five Two Eight O Sojourn Theater, Playback Theater and Cornerstone Theater. All of the groups are community-based. Each group seeks awareness, understanding, connections and community change. When people get together for these events they share their stories and common themes develop. These common themes bring awareness to the people of different communities and spark ideas for action and change.

Each of the groups has people that they designate as facilitators and people who volunteer as story tellers. The facilitators make sure that everything is flowing smoothly and they help the story tellers share their stories by asking questions. The biggest similarities that these three groups share with Five Two Eight O are that they all reflect on the happenings of the events and they combine story-telling, arts and dialogue. Reflection is one of the first steps in taking something out of the stories that were told. Participants and listeners get the chance to engage in dialogue about what they heard and how they reacted to each story. It gives the group a chance to see what the present is like and come together to make plans for the future. The combination of story-telling, arts and dialogue appeals to a larger number of people and gives them opportunities to express themselves in the ways which they see fit.

I believe that these last two similarities are the most important. Five Two Eight O has already been successful in combining different forms of arts with story-telling and dialogue. In their first year, they are already following in the footsteps of groups that have been thriving.

(I included the chart below to provide a visual summary of the similarities and differences between the four community based structures.)

	Five Two Eight O (5280)	Sojourn Theater	Cornerstone Theater	Playback Theater
How Long it's Been Around	One year	Eight Years	Founded in 1986	Founded in 1975
Goals	Tell your story, change the world. Community development. Giving communities the chance to interact and share stories.	Examine values that both bring Americans together and keep them apart. Community development. Investigations of stories and themes.	Community development and understanding through the theater and arts.	Heal relationships. Promote communication and understanding between people. Community development.
What Areas are Involved	Colorado cities and communities	Nationwide	Nationwide	Worldwide
Basic Structure	Combination of story-telling, arts, dialogue and schmoozing	Combination of art, theater, dialogue and story-telling	Uses twists on classical plays to tell the stories of different individuals and communities	Acting stories out on the spot, with music and reflecting on them afterwards

Although Five Two Eight O has been successful in its first year, there are a few things that could be changed in the future. To start, advertising would be a great thing to improve upon. I had not heard anything about Five Two Eight O until my spring semester when it was talked about in class. I would have really liked to participate and hear peoples' stories. Therefore, I think that by expanding the advertising and promoting Five Two Eight O in a more obvious way, that it would greatly increase the amount of people who get involved.

To increase advertising around Regis University, people could put up brightly colored flyers on the informational boards around school, write articles online on Insite, in print in the

Highlander, promote through the school's radio channel KRCX and rely on word of mouth by having people spread the word about events to classmates, professors and students in classes. What also seems to be effective is when professors allow students to receive extra credit for going to these kinds of events. It may start out as an attempt to better a grade but it could end up in increased interest and more people showing up to tell their stories. To increase advertising around Denver and the surrounding communities the same steps could be taken but on a larger scale so that a greater number of people could be reached.

Another idea for change also involves more people of the Regis Community. A class much like Strategies of Dialogue could be offered in which students could facilitate different events for Five Two Eight O and receive college credit. I am not positive about this but it seems that internships have already been offered through Five Two Eight O. I know a lot of people who would be much more interested in that kind of an internship than a desk job. If there were a class dedicated solely to Five Two Eight O, I believe that it could become more successful and could more easily grow.

Unlike the other community based theaters, Five Two Eight O does not involve much of a theater or acting aspect. One woman chose to do some interpretive dances as a way to tell her story but there was no set acting as a part of Five Two Eight O. I think that by adding a form of theater, whether it is improv or a style like Playback or Sojourn theaters, that it would bring up interest for people around Colorado and the Regis campus who are involved in theater already. It would provide yet another medium for people to watch and participate in.

A part of theater that could also be added that is not necessarily acting based is backdrops and scenery. Even though Five Two Eight O already has a set up of two chairs and a table with flowers on it, a few more props may make the set feel even cozier and more inviting. This would

also provide opportunities for artists to come in and be a part of the group and share their stories through the pieces of art they create for the backdrops of the story-tellers.

Opening up other opportunities for kids and families to become a part of the program is another suggestion for change that would be very interesting. Because there are so many college students and adults that have been involved with Five Two Eight O, we only get to hear their stories and the issues that are affecting them. There are many more issues that are more family based and also stories that children have that other people of the community may not know about. Children do not get many opportunities in general to speak out and be taken seriously. Five Two Eight O could give them this opportunity. Communities could find out what is really happening behind the scenes with their children and find connections with other families.

I am sure this is already on the plan for the following years but I suggest that the four communities visited in the last year be revisited in the next year as well as new communities that have not been involved in the past. This would provide an opportunity to see if the communities have incited any change or have had any more concerns since the last year. It would also provide opportunities to examine a larger cross-section of the communities of Colorado. If possible, it would really be a great stepping stone for Five Two Eight O if the people involved could set up some form of story-telling in other states in which they live. This would jump start expansion and give a comparison for the communities outside of Colorado to those inside Colorado.

The last suggestion for change is to go to the areas where communities are that tend to stay in one place. For example an orphanage or a prison. These areas are difficult or impossible to expect people to come meet in a designated spot. Five Two Eight O would go to them in their place of living and make it as easy as possible to become involved in community story-telling, arts, dialogue and open doors to change.

There are a few cases in which Five Two Eight O would need to expand. The first is if children from K-12 schools became involved. This is a great opportunity to get children and families involved but it is also problematic. Some stories that could be shared may not be appropriate for people of all ages. Five Two Eight O would need to expand and hold more events to make sure that every one has a chance to be heard without feeling censored. There could be events for all ages and events like they already have for students and adults. Also, they could simply hold events at the schools where these children attend.

The second case would be if Five Two Eight O became involved with community areas such as prisons, homeless shelters, orphanages, Tennyson center, other colleges, and so on. Each community area is placed in a number of different areas in Colorado and certainly across the nation. Five Two Eight O would need to expand to accommodate all these different types of people in all the different areas in which they are located. It would be very interesting to bring Five Two Eight O to people instead of expecting them come to the areas that the group assigns.

The third case would be if it were to be considered for research on inquiry into community issues. The size of the people involved would have to be much bigger. Therefore, steps already discussed above would have to be taken so more people could become involved. The more people that are involved, the more stories will be heard and the more reflection and dialogue about these stories will result. Also, to be considered for research, Five Two Eight O would have to continue their events over a longer period of time. One year is not very much time to gather enough information to be considered for research. The more time that Five Two Eight O holds events, the better the data for research will become.

Overall, Five Two Eight O has seen great success in its first year as a group. They have provoked dialogue between individuals and communities in Colorado's Five Points, Lowry,

Berkeley-Regis and Santa Fe areas. They have combined story-telling, arts and dialogue along with schmoozing and reflections on the stories that were told. They have brought awareness to the communities of Colorado and helped people to see the commonalities we all share as the human race. Awareness has brought up new ideas and sparked action plans for change.

By examining other community-based theater groups like Cornerstone Theater, Sojourn Theater and Playback Theater, it will become easier for Five Two Eight O to try new and exciting things to reach out to communities. They can see what works, what doesn't and what can be changed for the better. Getting children and families involved is a great way to expand and will come as a result of getting the word out in a more effective manner. By bringing Five Two Eight O to people who do not have the opportunity to share their stories, communities and individuals can become more aware of their commonalities. There are many opportunities for Five Two Eight O to expand and grow in the future, the first year is only the beginning.

Sources

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