

Social Circus and Applied Anthropology: A Synthesis Waiting to Happen

Dr Nick McCaffery

Abstract

This article explores the potential for developing anthropological investigation in the field of social circus – in particular with those projects that work with individuals living with disabilities. The author uses examples of research in Belfast to argue that the applied nature of anthropology is the ideal mechanism for analysing and comparing the emerging field of applied social circus projects around the world. In this case, anthropological tools were utilised that had a direct effect, not only on understanding the phenomenon of social circus projects, but also on raising the levels of quality, leading to a direct improvement on services provided.

Key Words

Social circus, disability, Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs), Northern Ireland, evaluation

Introduction

This article is the synthesis of two papers presented at separate conferences in 2012ⁱ that discuss the potential range of impacts amongst adults with learning disabilities who participate in social circus projects in Northern Ireland. The term Social Circus refers to a philosophy of using circus arts (juggling, acrobatics, aerial skills etc.) as a method of social intervention aimed at specific population groups, e.g. at-risk youth, homeless populations, or, in this case, adults living with learning disabilities. When I was asked to rework these

presentations into a journal article for *Anthropology in Action*, I was not entirely certain how to proceed. The difficulty being that the raw data for these conference papers has not been collected as a result of a focussed academic study; it has been collected through a combination of serendipity and curiosity. The fact that I happen to be an anthropologist as well as a circus performer may have some salience, but I found myself asking whether this data could honestly be seen as an example of anthropology intentionally engaging in the community. I was not convinced there was a connection between what I have been investigating and what could be called academic investigation.

But when I looked back at the first paper regarding the effects of the social circus projects discussed, I found my connecting theme – unintended positive outcomes. The fact that I was evaluating and assessing the work that I was conducting was a serendipitous occurrence, a curious side-effect of anthropological training, and the work conducted by the circus group would surely have continued regardless of my own curiosities. But, what I have slowly come to realise is that these anthropological musings have done rather a good deal to develop the potential that this work has, and to even improve the impact of the work that this small Belfast-based circus group does in the field of learning disability. By merely having an anthropologist ‘on board’ – regardless of the missing definitions of a nicely rounded academic research project – the delivery of the product has noticeably improved: and as such there has been an increase in the positive impacts of this project on the lives and well-being of several individuals in Northern Ireland currently living with a learning disability.

I feel I should add a small disclaimer at this point that puts some kind of balance into the gloriously positive picture painted here so far. I am not the saviour of social circus in Northern Ireland. I am not solely responsible for making this community project work merely by being an anthropologist. But I do love working as a circus tutor, and if I can convey the passion and enthusiasm that I have for this, which is fed entirely from working with a vast

range of performers – disabled and non-disabled, who constantly amaze me, frustrate me, inspire me, wear me out, test my patience, and make me laugh all the time, and often at the same time then I will admit that my academic side does have some use after all. And perhaps show that this may not be a case of anthropology engaging in the community, rather a story of how the community has finally engaged this anthropologist.

The Background

Streetwise Community Circus is a Belfast-based cooperative that has been in existence since 1995. It was founded by Jim Webster, who still acts as the administrator for the group, and currently consists of around 25 members from all sorts of walks of life, who share a common interest in learning, performing and teaching various circus skills. The mission statement of the group has remained largely unchanged and states that:

Streetwise Community Circus aims to make circus skills accessible to people throughout Northern Ireland, irrespective of gender, age, disability, or economic, religious or cultural background, by providing circus workshops throughout the community run by teams of experienced tutors.

As mission statements go, it is in my opinion, quite a good one. It is understated and makes no claim to changing the world, we aim to make the circus accessible, to open the doors – what you do with those skills once that door has been opened, is entirely up to you. We will teach anyone, anywhere, anytime – but only if you want us to! And, we try to make sure that we know what we are doing, by making sure that the people who work for us are experienced and professional.

Streetwise works largely on an outreach project basis and work with partners and clients who aim to use the potential benefits of circus skills to achieve a range of aims and objectives. The benefits of circus are broad and varied, but can include:

- bringing people together using circus as a common bond
- raising confidence and self-esteem
- increasing mobility or fitness
- providing an opportunity for future employment¹

And so Streetwise provides workshops tailored to a range of clients, from stilt walking projects for youth groups, team building days for corporate clients, and social circus projects in areas of social and economic deprivation, and (in the slightly unusual case of Northern Ireland) we have used circus skills within projects designed to challenge concepts of sectarianism. Unlike many sports – particularly soccer, circus has no perceived religious affiliation - a stilt walker is a stilt walker, not a catholic stilt walker or a protestant stilt walker. In many ways, our activities reflect those of most other social circus groups in other places (see Hyttinen 2011, Virolainen 2011, La Fortune 2011, Trotman 2012).

Circus and Disability

In 2002, one of our members introduced the concept of developing circus skills workshops for individuals living with disabilities. The group supported this idea, and a small team of tutors began to deliver workshops to a range of clients in Northern Ireland. Our administrator's talents as a fundraiser came into full force, and we were soon able to begin

¹ For a more detailed discussion of the benefits of social circus see Trotman (2012: 22-23).

providing clients with circus skills projects funded through both the Arts Council of Northern Ireland as well as through Belfast City Council funding streams. These projects ran parallel to our other activities, and some members chose not to become involved in the disability strand of our work for a variety of reasons.

When I look back at the quality of workshops that we ran ten years ago, I often cringe in embarrassment. We were doing something new and exciting (and the feedback from our clients was overwhelmingly positive), but as is so often the sentiment on so many projects – I really wish that I knew then what I know now about working with individuals with learning disabilities. The process of developing circus skills workshops for this client group is a gentle and slow process and one where we as educators are still continuing to learn and to push ourselves. Although we were making a generally positive impact at the time, I do not believe that we knew quite enough about what we were doing or how, for these projects to be as effective as they could have been.

But this is the crux of our work across the board in social circus: the fact that our work should have a dynamic quality, it should keep getting better, and we should keep going forward and keep making mistakes! It should be noted that this interest in dynamic quality came from an interest in the field of the anthropology of tourism, and in particular the concept of dynamic authenticity (Zhu 2012) as well as Robert Pirsig's metaphysics of quality (Pirsig 1974, 1991). The former is an influence of my academic training, whilst the latter is an influence of being immersed in a mildly counter-cultural circus context.

Regardless of analytical origin, this dynamic quality reflects one of the most important factors in learning circus skills: if you keep practicing you will improve. As such, the role of tutors is to make this learning experience as much fun as possible, and to provide enough guidance so that the participant wants to practice and therefore improves. Working

with individuals with learning disabilities is also based on this ethos, and is therefore not really very different from working with any other client group. However, the tutor in a disability project may have to work that little bit harder to find ways to communicate and express the joy of practising something that does not necessarily have immediate results. To give an example, we often work with individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs). One of the ways that this disorder manifests itself in our workshops is as an apparent lack of communication between tutor and student. Tutors are often looking for clues from students that a piece of information has been understood, and some of our performers with ASDs do not provide these clues. Our circus tutors have to trust that at least some of this information has got through, and we develop much more creative and interesting ways of communicating that sparks some interest in our students. These methods are as individual as the students we work with; for some it may be increasing eye-contact - for others it is decreasing it, or referring to the student in the 3rd person, or providing a commentary of every movement made, or increasing or decreasing touch, or providing rewards, or using specific coloured props – or excluding certain colours, or ensuring certain noises are minimised or maximised. In short, every tutor has to get to know every student. But, this persistence has, for example, led to a number of individuals with apparently no communication learning to walk on stilts, and subsequently perform as extremely competent and comfortable stilt walkers at several public events. This is demonstration of a skill that the majority of the neurotypical population does not possess.

In any circus workshop that Streetwise delivers we aim to provide the full range of circus skills that we are currently trained to teach². To elaborate, juggling would include ball, club and ring juggling, but also diabolo, flowerstick, poi and other props – often rather ambitiously referred to as the ‘equilibristic and manipulation’ area of circus skills. We also

² To date we do not currently offer training in aerial skills, acrobatics/tumbling, or dance – although many other circus groups do, and with amazing results – see e.g. Cirque Nova in London.

aim to teach stilt walking and unicycling where appropriate; this decision is always based on safety issues, most often with regard to the suitability of the space available and number of staff on a project. The latter is never based on assumptions about ability of our potential performers and, certainly, we do have several unicyclists and stilt-walkers from projects where we have had the space and time to teach these skills.

Streetwise provide opportunities for certain individuals to work on clowning skills. This is arguably the most difficult area of circus skills because it relies less on a physical skill, requiring excellence in character, emotion, timing, complicity, power, and other factors that take a good deal of time, trust, and hard work to get to a point where we are comfortable to put performers on stage in front of an audience. But it is possible. The area of circus skills that we teach and don't teach at Streetwise reflects our tutors' backgrounds in the world of street performance, rather than in 'traditional' tented circus.

Analysis and Evaluation of Disability Projects

As with most organisations in the world of community/participatory arts, the area of evaluation, or analysis of projects, involves brief reporting to funding bodies that the work that they had paid for was successful. If only these funding bodies would see to it that they continue funding these projects, then this organisation could continue spending their money wisely. After witnessing the transformative nature and power of social circus projects, I feel that the work being undertaken by my colleagues is worth more than the standard evaluation process. The conversations that I was having with the group's administrator about the ethos and practice in the world of circus and disability were raising some pertinent questions. After several years of complaining that there was little to no useful analysis of this field, and moaning that these projects were worth more than the perfunctory nod to funders regarding

the effects that Streetwise was making in the world of learning disability, I realised that it was probably up to me to make the first move.

The final incentive came in a moment reminiscent of the best ethnographic experiences, a moment of pure serendipity. Since 2009, Streetwise have hosted a 2-week summer school for up to 20 adults with learning disabilities. It is our flagship project and involves participants from across Northern Ireland, often meeting for the first time, and working with an international director to devise, rehearse and produce an original hour long piece of circus theatre in the space of 10 days. Whilst working on this project in 2010, I was approached by the parent of one of the participants regarding a matter of costume. We began talking about the progress of this performer over the past few days, and the parent began to tell me about the effects that she had noted regarding her son: improved speech and communication, better sleep patterns, increased confidence, higher levels of participation in other areas of everyday life, and more besides. These were effects that we had not deliberately looked for when devising this project, but through participating in this circus show, the well-being of the performer had begun to improve.

It is at this point that my own disparate identities of circus performer and anthropologist begin to converge. The circus side of me admits that this is all very well and interesting, but it has no direct impact on the artistic integrity of the imminent showcase and, as such, I really should be spending more time rehearsing and less time chatting with visiting parents. The anthropologist in me is more intrigued: these are fascinating elements of identity - communication, confidence, socialisation, and so forth. What is it about the circus that has triggered an increase in these areas? How do I begin to analyse this kind of data? How do I even begin to collect more of this data? Is this anthropology or nursing?

From this fortunate encounter, I began to collect interview and other data from a range of informants: audience members, parents and carers, circus tutors, staff from health and social services, and of course from the participants and performers themselves. Soon enough, I had found that there was a good deal of data ready to be analysed and presented. But to whom?

As I stated earlier, this data was not collected to answer any specific anthropological question, I have just found myself collecting it. I have not answered any questions, as I am not really sure what those questions are yet! But more importantly for this article, I find myself asking whether any kind of academic analysis of a social process – in this case the process of learning/teaching circus skills – would contribute to that process. Surely this work has been successful enough that if there were no academic investigation, the work would continue anyway. The circus group has willing and able tutors; the client population seems to be satisfied with the process and continues to seek circus workshops. Where is the role of an anthropologist in this picture?

The idea that anthropological investigation should do no harm to its host population is fairly widely accepted these days, but my own personal sense of ethics suggests that it should do more than ‘no harm’. It should contribute. My experience of research amongst contemporary Native American populations (McCaffery 2005, 2012) perhaps complicated this personal ethic. As my own ‘research population’, the Hopi Tribe considered the idea of being ‘helped’ by the anthropologist simply patronising. However, this did not rule out the opportunity for developing collaborative research projects, a concept that the Hopi have used particularly well with local museums and university departments and with generally good resultsⁱⁱ.

This collaborative approach to applied anthropology is a very useful method when assessing the world of social circus.

The Results

There have been several direct implications of assessing, analysing and reporting upon what Streetwise have developed over the past ten years using ethnographic methods and drawing upon anthropological concepts. In my own case, it has led to a direct improvement of the quality of the product that we, as a circus organisation, now provide.

One of the most useful results of the investigation into our own work has been the discovery that it has a place in a global context – the broad field of social circus. Social Circus is a relatively new term in UK based discourse, as UK circus groups have tended to use the term ‘community circus’ to describe working with non-professional circus performers. For many, the differences between the term ‘social circus’ and ‘community circus’ is semantic; for others ‘social circus’ has wider and deeper connotations. For the latter, social circus seeks to use the media of circus skills as a tool for social development and is focussed on the transformative potential of learning circus skills:

Since its inception in the 1990s, social circus has spread around the world and today inspires a large number of projects aimed at different types of people (at-risk youth, women survivors of violence, prison inmates, refugees, etc.). This intervention approach prioritizes the personal and social growth of participants. It encourages the development of self-esteem and the acquisition of social skills, artistic expression and occupational integration. It gives participants the chance to express themselves and be

listened to, to realize their own potential and to make their own contribution as citizens of the world. (La Fortune 2011: 14)

Despite using the same tools and techniques as professional or recreational circus, the key difference with social circus is that the explicit aim of a social circus project is to have some specific social outcome.

For our own projects working with individuals living with disabilities, this was perhaps not always made explicit in our earlier projects. There was a general consensus that this was an identifiable section of the population whose access to professional or recreational circus may be more complicated than other sections of the population, and it was therefore a good thing for us as an organisation to ensure that everyone had access to these opportunities. But it took ten years of doing this and a lucky conversation with a parent for us to begin consciously collating the other positive effects of what we were doing.

By collecting data from a broad range of people, we have begun to realise the social, emotional, physical and cognitive benefits of our projects. From improved range of movement, to better levels of communication, to finding a potential career as a performer, we have begun to realise that these projects are not merely about learning circus skills, but that the experiences of being a part of these projects have a direct relation to life outside of the workshop.

By doing this research, and reflecting on our services, we are now in a position to explain with more clarity the potential impact of social circus projects to our funders, to our participants, and of course to our own tutors. The next stage, which is a work in progress, is to put these results into a more analytical and critical environment and see if these purported results are actually doing what they say they are doing! Do our claims, and the claims of similar organisations stand up to more thorough academic analysis?

Conclusions

In all the years that I spent in training and education in the field of social anthropology, I recall two very useful observations, both made by the same anthropologist. As a doctoral student, I recall a question asked by one of my fellow students to our teacher, Kay Milton: she asked, “when you ‘became’ an anthropologist – was it after your first degree, after fieldwork, or after the successful defence of your thesis?” Professor Milton replied that it was, “when you started thinking like an anthropologist”.

The second comment was more fleeting, and perhaps said in jest, but was a response to the apparent lack of social anthropologists used in the media to explain or comment on certain current events. A presenter at a department seminar bemoaned the fact that there always seemed to be an economist or a historian, or someone in the field of social policy appearing on the news or the radio, but hardly ever any anthropologists. The reason, according to Professor Milton, is that we are not black and white commentators, we inhabit the grey areas – there are no definite answers in our field, and the public don’t want to hear ambiguities. People want clear, precise solutions to difficult problems.

These two instances stick with me. They have defined my approach to most of the things that I do. I suppose that I will always be an anthropologist, no matter how many times I run away with the circus, because I can’t stop thinking like one. And, yes, I like the grey areas too. The area of social circus and disability is a complex field looking for thorough academic analysis, innovative research methodologies, useful and exciting theoretical models, and an increase in cross-cultural, multi-sited comparative research. It is an area that needs work with speech and language therapists, historians, psychologists, social workers,

development workers, performers, and a whole host of others. In short, it is an exciting area for social anthropology to investigate, and I am excited to be a small part of it.

Nick McCaffery completed his PhD in social anthropology at Queen's University in Belfast in 2005. Since then he has been working as both independent social researcher and circus performer. Although he is a clown and a doctor, he is not a clown doctor.

nickmccaffery@hotmail.com

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ⁱⁱ Although recent sales by a French auction house of Hopi spiritual objects has highlighted the fragility of relationships between the 1st and 4th worlds (see McKeown 2013).