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## Volunteerism and Calgary's "infa-Moose" Community Impro Theatre

Claire Carolan

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Article abstract

Moving beyond current discourses of increasing self-confidence, reduction of social anxiety, disengagement, and risky behaviour as positive outcomes of participation in youth theatre training, this article identifies volunteerism, entrepreneurship, and generativity as beneficial outcomes to youth participation in the Loose Moose Theatre Company (LMT) community in Calgary, Alberta. This article also discusses the increased benefits of learning that occur as compensation for time spent volunteering versus learning in exchange for a monetary fee. Examples of successful and notable LMT alumni are included.

# Volunteerism and Calgary's "infa-Moose" Community Impro Theatre

CLAIRE CAROLAN

*School of Creative Arts, University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada and Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada*

S'inscrivant au-delà des discours contemporains voulant que la participation au théâtre jeunesse aurait pour effet d'accroître la confiance en soi et réduire l'anxiété sociale, le désengagement et les comportements à risque, Claire Carolan fait valoir dans cet article que le bénévolat, l'esprit d'entreprise et le souci de pérennité ont été des retombées bénéfiques d'une participation par les jeunes à la communauté formée par la compagnie Loose Moose Theatre de Calgary. Carolan fait également valoir que les jeunes ont appris davantage en participant aux activités à titre de bénévoles que s'ils avaient suivi des cours payants. Elle cite en exemple des anciens de la compagnie qui se sont distingués.

**Mots clés :** Loose Moose Theatre Company, jeunesse, bénévolat, entrepreneurship, inclusion, multigénérationnel, souci de pérennité

Moving beyond current discourses of increasing self-confidence, reduction of social anxiety, disengagement, and risky behaviour as positive outcomes of participation in youth theatre training, this article identifies volunteerism, entrepreneurship, and generativity as beneficial outcomes to youth participation in the Loose Moose Theatre Company (LMTC) community in Calgary, Alberta. This article also discusses the increased benefits of learning that occur as compensation for time spent volunteering versus learning in exchange for a monetary fee. Examples of successful and notable LMTC alumni are included.

**Keywords:** Loose Moose Theatre Company, youth, volunteerism, entrepreneurship, inclusive, multi-generational, generativity



Confidence. Creativity. Comedy. All words that come to mind when thinking about participating in impro theatre.<sup>1</sup> Reduction of social anxiety (Sajnani et al.), disengagement (Finlay et al.), or risky behaviour (Bernstein et al.; Catterall et al.): all of these are current discourses on the benefits of youth participation in theatre and performing arts programming. Since 1977, the Loose Moose Theatre Company (LMTC) in Calgary has been providing youth with these desirable participatory outcomes. However, some overlooked benefits of theatre training for youths—including volunteerism, inclusion, entrepreneurship, and generativity—exist in Calgary's unique "Moose" community. The community at LMTC is intergenerational, with

volunteer members as young as fifteen working collaboratively with much older volunteers. Ideally, within this volunteer-driven model, the younger members learn to be responsible and accountable, while the older members remain playful and open to new ideas. It may not succeed one-hundred percent of the time, but there are few theatre companies where volunteers, young and old, work together decade after decade towards shared goals in a self-sustaining community.

Anyone who is interested in learning how to improvise can do so at LMTC, free of charge. The catch? Volunteerism. "Most performers at the Loose Moose come from our volunteer program where individuals help out with various tasks and in exchange we offer training and experience in improvisation" ("Volunteers"). In exchange for contributing to this community theatre with their time, people can participate in free classes at LMTC, taught by founding member and artistic director Dennis Cahill, senior company members, and occasionally Theatresports creator Keith Johnstone. This inclusive strategy means that no one is turned away from participating at LMTC due to program fees. "Moosers" are as likely to be from the least affluent neighbourhood as the most affluent in Calgary. "Even if you are not interested in performing there are many areas which require ongoing volunteer help. Selling tickets, ushering, costumes, technical support running lights and sound, set design and construction are just some of the volunteer jobs available" ("Volunteers").

Volunteers are the heart and soul of the company, and many relish their time greeting the audience or serving regular patrons from behind the concession counter. Front of house relationships are just as celebrated and as strong as those on stage. The show quite literally cannot go on without the sum of its parts in place. Volunteers sign up for front-of-house positions and technical and performance slots weeks in advance; a volunteer coordinator ensures that any gaps in the schedule are filled before showtime. Not everyone who joins the Loose Moose community aspires to improvising on stage. Many "Moosers" find the impro skills that they learn in the free classes are as applicable outside the theatre as they are in. Impro skills are valuable life skills, and at LMTC, volunteers teach, model, and apply them on stage and off.

For those who do want experience performing for a live audience, stage time is tied to volunteer hours. This caveat further reinforces that volunteerism, community, and collaboration are essential to being a "Mooser" and the importance of each piece of the theatre machine. You cannot buy your way onto the stage—if you want to perform on stage, you have to support the business and technical aspects of operating the theatre with your time. If you are a youth, this means that a parent is not able to volunteer on your behalf in order to get you on stage. Youths are responsible for fulfilling their own volunteer hours.

The long-term success of the company is due in no small part to the loyalty and commitment of its volunteers to participating and training others. Many like Dave Ware—who came to the company as a teenager in the late 1980s and acts as a liaison for the alumni—continue to improvise, teach, and mentor new volunteer members. LMTC loyalty is no laughing matter—nearly 260 individuals belong to the private alumni page on Facebook, regularly planning events like the fortieth anniversary celebration in 2017, which drew company members from around the globe home to "the Moose." For decades, volunteerism at LMTC has supported a model of inclusion where bodies of all ages, types, abilities, and socio-economic identities have come together. The emphasis on volunteering promotes a dismantling of traditional theatre hierarchies, demonstrates that it takes more than onstage performers to operate a successful theatre company, and that you do not have to be an onstage performer to belong to a performance community.

There are strong connections between volunteerism in youth and entrepreneurship in adulthood (Pantea). The development of entrepreneurial skills attained through volunteering include, “confidence, autonomy, responsibility, decision-making, interpersonal skills, and the ability to react to professional adversities” as documented outcomes (Pantea 189). Many an entrepreneurial “Moose” has created their own performance opportunities outside of LMTC, not waiting for conventional theatres to program seasons or create roles that represent them. “Moosers” unapologetically forge their own path. Examples include noteworthy Moose-alum Rebecca Northan and her award-winning *Blind Date*, Peter Oldring and Pat Kelly’s *This is That*, or the cult-favourite mockumentary *Fubar*, which grew out of a comedy bit by Dave Lawrence and Paul Spence. The entrepreneurial spirit of LMTC resonates Johnstone’s savvy decision to trademark and copyright the seemingly ubiquitous term “theatresports,” a move that has arguably financed and contributed to the company’s longevity.

Loose Moose is a generative volunteering model. Generativity is a psychosocial development term first coined by Erik Erikson and taken up extensively by Dan P. McAdams. In short, it means caring for others without expectation of reciprocity, which is demonstrated by meaningful relationships and passing on skills, values, and knowledge through mentorship, volunteering, and philanthropy. Typically seen as a mid-life behaviour, generativity is modelled to and by the youths who participate in the weekly impro training and live productions at LMTC.

Where LMTC excels beyond other extracurricular or youth theatre training programs is that no one is at risk to “age out” of the tight-knit yet accessible community. This is not an after-school pursuit with an end date. No one is required to stop participating in the classes because they have taken all of the lessons, or have all of the badges, or because they are twenty-one. Participation in the weekly schedule of shows and training is not limited by disposable income. Learning and creating are embraced as ongoing and continuously worthwhile occupations. There is much to be learned from the Loose Moose Theatre Company, but perhaps the most important is that you get out of it what you are willing and able to put into it.

## Note

- 1 This article uses the term “impro” rather than “improv” in keeping with Keith Johnstone’s published books on the discipline.

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## Contributor

**CLAIRE CAROLAN** teaches a wide range of courses—scenography, performance studies, theatre history, theatre for young audiences, and acting—at the School of Creative Arts at the University of the Fraser Valley and courses in drama education for the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University. Dr. Carolan is the founder of the Tri-University Colloquium for Theatre and Performance Research. Her work appears in *TRiC/RTAC*, *Blue Pages: The Society of British Theatre Designers*, *Canadian Theatre Review*, and *Musicological Explorations*. Claire has been an active scenographer (lighting, set, scenic art, and properties) since 1992.