

Community Literacy in Theatre for Development: A Framework for Reading Community Power Dynamics

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Abstract

Theatre for Development (TfD) has long positioned participation as its central methodological and moral commitment, yet that commitment has deferred a prior question, namely what kind of social space TfD enters and how power operates within it. Communities are not the harmonious, accessible collectives that much TfD scholarship implicitly assumes; they are stratified, contested, and power-saturated spaces in which some voices are structurally amplified and others structurally suppressed. Through conceptual synthesis of critical social theory, African communitarian philosophy, and TfD's practice-based literature, this conceptual and theoretical essay interrogates the romantic notion of community that has shaped the field, identifies a specific conceptual gap left by adjacent participatory frameworks, and develops the essay's central contribution, the Community Literacy Framework (CLF). Community literacy is defined as the capacity to read a community's social, political, and cultural dynamics with analytical depth and reflexive rigour, and is positioned here as a TfD-specific reconceptualisation of a term already used in adjacent fields rather than as an entirely new coinage. The framework comprises seven interlocking analytical dimensions, power mapping, stakeholder identification, conflict sensitivity, gender and generational analysis, participation analysis, cultural protocol analysis, and voice representation analysis, encircled throughout by a meta-dimension of facilitator reflexivity and positionality. A composite pedagogical scenario, constructed from recurring dynamics across student practicums supervised in Ghana's Central Region, illustrates how the CLF operates in facilitation conditions. The essay concludes that TfD training must move decisively beyond technical skill to equip practitioners with the community literacy that genuine emancipatory practice demands.

Keywords: Theatre for Development, community literacy, community power dynamics, TfD facilitation, performative participation, participatory theatre, Ghana.

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1. Introduction

Theatre for Development (TfD) rests on a commitment to community voice. Its foundational theorists, including Freire (1970), Boal (1979), Mlama (1991), and Mda (1993), locate the community not merely as the target of development interventions but as their agent, the source of authentic knowledge, and the ultimate judge of a process's meaning and worth. Participation, its quality, its breadth, and its authenticity, has dominated the methodological and evaluative discourse of TfD since its emergence as a distinct field in the 1970s and 1980s (Kerr, 1995; Prentki & Preston, 2009). This is one of TfD's most important inheritances from the Freirean tradition, the insistence that genuine education and development must proceed through the liberation of knowledge from within community experience rather than its imposition from above.

This foundational commitment contains a conceptual gap that has grown more consequential as TfD practice has scaled in reach and complexity. Participation answers how communities engage with TfD but not a prior question, who, in practice, participates, and what social forces determine whose voice is heard, whose silence is preserved, and whose interests the performance ultimately serves. These are questions about the nature of the community itself, and the field has addressed them with insufficient theoretical rigour. TfD has become sophisticated about the politics of representation in performance while remaining underequipped for the politics of power in the community spaces where performance is made. This essay enters the conversation at that gap, speaking primarily to applied theatre and TfD scholarship, with implications for participatory development studies and African philosophy more broadly. Its central argument is that without community literacy, TfD risks reproducing performative participation even when its methods appear exemplary.

The gap is not merely theoretical. Evaluation reports in TfD routinely count attendance figures, spect-actor interventions, and post-performance dialogue turns without asking whose voices those numbers represent. Community entry journals record warm reception from traditional leaders without noting that the warmth of a

chief's welcome may itself be a form of power. Pre-production focus groups document apparent consensus around visible issues such as sanitation, while more politically sensitive concerns, land disputes, domestic violence, elite capture of communal resources, remain unnamed. These are not failures of technique. They are failures of community literacy.

This essay proposes that addressing this gap requires a new conceptual tool, the Community Literacy Framework (CLF). Community literacy, as developed here, is the capacity to read a community, its social structures, power hierarchies, fault lines, and silences, with the analytical rigour and reflective discipline that TfD currently reserves for performance and facilitation technique. It is not background knowledge about a place; it is a cultivated set of analytical practices through which the facilitator comes to understand the community as it actually is, rather than as participatory idealism sometimes imagines it. Community literacy is not an optional enhancement of TfD practice. It is its precondition.

The argument proceeds in six stages. It interrogates the romantic notion of community that pervades much TfD theory and identifies the precise conceptual gap that existing frameworks leave open. It analyses the multiple and intersecting forms of power that structure community life. It examines the practical challenges these dynamics pose for TfD facilitation, with particular attention to performative participation, the simulation of community voice under conditions of hidden coercion, distinguishing this concept from adjacent ideas such as tokenism and elite capture. It develops community literacy as a theoretical concept and a practical competency, positioning it against existing uses of the term beyond TfD, and addressing the safeguarding obligations the framework entails. It illustrates the CLF through a composite pedagogical scenario drawn from student practicum supervision in Ghana's Central Region. It closes by articulating the CLF as a seven-dimensional model, explaining how the dimensions were derived and encircling them within a continuous principle of facilitator reflexivity, before turning to implications for TfD training and directions for future research.

2. Reconceptualising Community in TfD: Beyond the Romantic Notion

This section reconceptualises community in TfD, challenging the romantic notion of communal cohesion, establishing communities as contested, power-saturated social formations, and locating precisely where existing frameworks leave this reality under-addressed. The concept of community performs a great deal of work in TfD discourse. It functions simultaneously as the origin of the process, the medium through which it operates, and the standard against which its success is measured. Despite its centrality, community has been subjected to surprisingly limited theoretical scrutiny within TfD scholarship. It tends to appear as a self-evident category, a group of people who share a location, a set of problems, and a latent capacity for collective action that TfD can unlock. Mlama's (1991) influential formulation that TfD should be "by, with, and for" the community captures the spirit of this usage well. Mda (1993) similarly distinguishes community-driven TfD from state- and NGO-instrumentalised forms on the basis that the former serves genuine community interests, as if "community interests" were a legible and singular thing. These distinctions matter and should be preserved, but each depends on a conception of community that requires critical examination.

What might be called the romantic notion of community holds that beneath the surface differences of any given social group there is a latent communal will that participatory processes can bring to expression. This notion draws on two powerful traditions, African communitarian philosophy, encompassing the ubuntu principle and the related thinking of Gyekye (1997) and Wiredu (1996), and the Freirean tradition of conscientisation, which assumes a common condition of oppression that dialogue can name and awareness can transform (Freire, 1970). Both traditions offer genuine insight, but neither, properly understood, actually supports the romantic notion. Gyekye's (1997) account of "moderate communitarianism" explicitly preserves the individual's capacity for critical reflection and dissent within communal life, and Wiredu's (1996) insistence that genuine consensus is a deliberate achievement rather than a given condition presupposes exactly the internal differentiation that the romantic notion obscures. The romantic notion is, in this sense, a misreading of the African communitarian tradition rather than its faithful expression. It errs in treating the common as the unified, conflating the fact that community members share a location, and often a condition, with the assumption that they share interests, perspectives, and a common relationship to power. The CLF developed later in this essay follows directly from this reading, and it is not a rejection of communitarianism but a power-sensitive interpretation of community that understands consensus as negotiated rather than naturally given, and it draws as centrally on Gyekye, Wiredu, Yankah, and Ansu-Kyeremeh as it does on Lukes or Bourdieu.

In reality, communities are internally differentiated at every level. They contain competing interests, between landowners and the landless, established families and recent arrivals, those who benefit from existing

arrangements and those who do not. They are organised through hierarchies of cultural authority that determine who has the right to speak in which contexts. They carry historical grievances invisible to the outside observer but immediately legible to community members, and they are traversed by dynamics of gender, generation, religion, education, and language that ensure "community participation" is never simply participation; it is a social performance structured by power.

Postcolonial critiques of participation have exposed these dynamics with particular force. Cooke and Kothari's (2001) analysis of participatory development demonstrated that participation, far from automatically redistributing power, can legitimise existing inequalities by giving them the appearance of democratic consent. Servaes (1996) argued, from within participatory communication theory, that genuine communication for development must begin from a structural analysis of power, because the channels through which participation is expressed are themselves shaped by existing hierarchies of access and authority. "Community participation" can, in practice, mean the participation of those already able to participate, while the most marginalised remain as silent as ever, now invisibly excluded from a process that claims to include them. Boal (1979) recognised that the line between oppressor and oppressed does not run between communities but through them, a line TfD must learn to see before it can credibly claim to address it.

2.1 The Conceptual Gap: Community Analysis in Existing TfD Frameworks

It is fair to note that TfD and applied theatre scholarship have not been silent on these concerns. Feminist TfD scholarship has consistently interrogated the gendered dimensions of community participation, and work in conflict-sensitive and trauma-informed facilitation has drawn attention to the dangers of entering communities without adequate contextual sensitivity (Nicholson, 2014; Snyder-Young, 2013). Conquergood (1985) and Abah (2007) have each insisted, from different directions, that the practitioner cannot occupy a neutral position within a community's field of power. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), stakeholder analysis, and asset-based community mapping share an interest in understanding community structure before intervening, and these traditions have themselves developed reflexive, power-sensitive variants over several decades (Servaes, 1996).

The gap this essay addresses is therefore not an absolute silence but a specific and remediable one. Existing TfD scholarship has accumulated important practice-based insights about community complexity without translating them into a framework a facilitator, or a facilitator-in-training, can apply systematically across the TfD cycle. PRA and stakeholder analysis were developed primarily for needs assessment and project design; several of their strands attend seriously to power, but they offer limited explicit attention to the performative and public conditions distinctive of TfD, where the stakes of power distortion are directly visible in what gets staged and what does not, and limited attention to the facilitator's own positionality within the field of community power. The claim advanced here is not that these traditions ignore power, but that TfD has not yet consolidated and reoriented their insights specifically toward its own dramaturgical and representational conditions, nor rendered them transmissible through practitioner training in a consistent way. The CLF is offered as that consolidation and reorientation, not as a repudiation of participatory analysis but as its TfD-specific extension. Developing the capacity to see the line Boal identified as running through communities is precisely what the CLF is designed to support.

3. Forms of Power Within Communities

This section analyses the multiple and intersecting forms of power that structure community life, tracing their implications for participation, voice, and TfD facilitation. Power within communities does not take a single form. It is distributed through multiple channels and intersects with cultural, economic, political, and epistemological structures in ways that produce a complex and shifting landscape of privilege and marginalisation. Understanding this landscape, provisionally and locally rather than as a fixed inventory, is the first task of community literacy.

3.1 Traditional Authority and the Politics of Gatekeeping

Access to community space, physical and social, in many Ghanaian and West African contexts is mediated through systems of traditional authority. Chiefs, elders, queen mothers, and religious leaders function as gatekeepers whose endorsement is often essential for an external intervention to proceed with legitimacy. This reflects deep structural norms about belonging and the right of strangers to enter communal space. Yankah's (1995) analysis of the Akan spokesperson tradition illuminates the interpretive dimension of this authority, for it is precisely the function of the okyeame to mediate between the chief and the community, an act of discursive

power in itself. The TfD practitioner who enters through the chief's palace has aligned with one form of authority and implicitly signalled a relationship to others; this is a political act regardless of whether the facilitator intends it as such.

More consequential is the invisible dimension of gatekeeping power. The most significant shaping of the TfD process may occur not through outright refusal, since the gatekeeper who says "no" is at least visible, but through what Lukes (2005) calls non-decision-making power, the capacity to keep certain issues off the agenda entirely. A chief who steers baseline research away from sensitive land disputes, a religious leader who signals that reproductive health is not an appropriate subject for community theatre, an opinion leader who nominates "appropriate" participants for focus groups, all exercise agenda-setting power that shapes the performance before a single scene is devised. The facilitator who has not developed the community literacy to detect these forces may produce, in good faith, a performance that reflects the community's most presentable concerns rather than its most pressing ones.

3.2 Political, Economic, and Factional Power

Communities are never insulated from the political and economic structures that penetrate them. Party affiliations, factional rivalries over resources, land disputes, and the interplay between formal governance and informal community authority all create lines of tension the TfD process will navigate, consciously or not. Bourdieu's (1984) concept of the field is useful here, since every community is a structured arena of struggle in which actors compete for resources according to rules that are themselves products of historical power. A pre-production focus group dominated by one faction does not yield community views; it yields factional ones. The risk of elite capture, the appropriation of a participatory process by those who already hold power, is real and documented in African TfD contexts (Abah, 2007; Kamlongera, 1989).

3.3 Gendered and Generational Power

Among the most persistent forms of community power are those organised along gender and generational lines. In many Ghanaian communities, women's public voice remains constrained by internalised dispositions, what Bourdieu (1984) calls *habitus*, that lead women to self-censor, speak through proxies, or limit contributions in public forums to what male authority structures will countenance. Sutherland (1975), Aidoo (1970), and Onwueme (1997) have charted the strategies through which African women navigate and contest these constraints. The mere physical presence of women in a workshop is not evidence of their genuine participation, any more than the sound of their voices in rehearsal is evidence that their actual experiences are being spoken.

Young people encounter a structurally comparable barrier. Where age carries symbolic authority, youth voices are routinely subordinated to those of elders in public settings, regardless of the fact that young people are often those most directly affected by the issues TfD addresses, including unemployment, reproductive health, and migration. A community's most vocal members are not always its most affected ones, a structural reality that TfD methodology must be designed to engage rather than a facilitation problem to be solved simply by creating more speaking opportunities.

3.4 Religious Influence, Linguistic Dominance, and Educational Hierarchy

Religious institutions exercise significant moral authority over what topics may appropriately enter public discourse. A TfD process addressing domestic violence, sexual and reproductive health, or contested traditional practices will encounter this authority as discursive gatekeeping, not necessarily preventing participation but shaping its permissible terms. Language compounds this dynamic, since Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (1986) argument about the epistemological power of language in postcolonial contexts applies directly here, for where facilitation proceeds primarily in a national official language rather than the community's mother tongue, an educational hierarchy of voice is introduced that mirrors existing inequalities.

Ansu-Kyeremeh's (1998) analysis of indigenous communication systems in Ghana is instructive. His account of how Ghanaian communities process and transmit knowledge through indigenous oral and performative traditions reveals that community members who appear reticent within Western-derived participatory frameworks may be highly articulate within their own epistemic registers. The fisherman who says little in an English-language focus group may be a gifted storyteller in Fante; the elder woman who defers publicly may be the community's primary keeper of institutional memory. This challenges TfD to ask not only who speaks but in what form

knowledge is expressed, and to design facilitation that can receive forms of community voice that do not conform to formal participatory conventions.

4. Community Power Dynamics and the Challenges of TfD Facilitation

This section traces the practical implications of community power dynamics for TfD facilitation, from community entry through to post-performance evaluation, and develops the concept of performative participation as a distinctive risk in TfD practice. It is not enough to be able to read community dynamics analytically; the community-literate facilitator must also understand how those dynamics shape, and can distort, the TfD process from entry through to evaluation.

4.1 Community Entry as Political Navigation

Community entry in TfD is conventionally understood as a rapport-building exercise, the process of establishing trust and gaining familiarity. This understanding is correct but insufficient. Entry is simultaneously a political process, a set of choices about whom to approach first and through which institutions, that aligns the facilitator with certain interests and distances them from others before the formal process has begun. There is no politically neutral point of entry into a community constituted by competing interests and hierarchical authority. The community-literate facilitator does not seek such neutrality, which is in any case illusory, but approaches entry with a conscious analytical orientation to the political landscape being navigated. This is equally true for practitioners who are themselves community insiders, since shared ethnicity, language, or residence often intensifies rather than dissolves the dynamics of power, since insider facilitators are already positioned within the community's field of competing interests and will be read accordingly.

4.2 Whose Stories Become the Performance?

The pre-production research phase, community walks, focus groups, and participatory needs assessments, is the moment at which the story theatre will tell begins to take shape, and the moment at which community power dynamics most directly determine that content. The stories that become performances are disproportionately the stories of those with the social authority and cultural permission to tell them. Domestic violence, adolescent pregnancy, economic desperation, and the fear of speaking truth to local power may be precisely the experiences that existing power dynamics make most difficult to surface in participatory research. The question every TfD facilitator must carry into pre-production is not only "what is the community telling us?" but "what forces are preventing the community from telling us something else?"

4.3 Performative Participation and Hidden Coercion

One of the most significant and undertheorised risks in TfD practice is what this essay terms performative participation, the simulation of community voice under conditions of hidden coercion, in which community members engage in workshops and performances not because they endorse the process, but because non-participation would carry social cost, the displeasure of a chief, marginalisation from resources, or the reputational damage of appearing uncooperative. Engagement here is outwardly active; it is its authentic basis that is absent.

Performative participation should be distinguished from several adjacent concepts with which it shares a family resemblance. Tokenistic and nominal participation describe processes in which involvement is structurally limited by design, participants are invited but given no real influence. Coerced participation describes engagement compelled by overt or implicit pressure. Elite capture and managed consensus describe the appropriation of a participatory process by those who already hold power, in the service of their own interests (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Performative participation names something more specific to TfD's conditions, the visible enactment of participatory behaviour, attending, speaking, appearing enthusiastic, while the conditions required for authentic agency remain absent, and participants structure their contributions around expectations they cannot safely refuse. It differs from tokenism in that the invitation to participate may be entirely genuine; the constraint operates on what can safely be said once access is granted, not on access itself. It differs from straightforward coercion in that no single actor need coerce anyone; the constraint is diffuse, anticipatory, and self-administered by participants reading their social context correctly. This is what makes it difficult to detect through conventional participation metrics, and why community literacy, rather than facilitation technique alone, is required to see it. Practical indicators include contributions that mirror the facilitator's framing rather than introducing community-generated concerns, a marked contrast between structured and informal talk, participants

glancing toward authority figures before responding, and an absence of disagreement where known community differences exist.

4.4 Facilitation Neutrality, Ethical Dilemmas, and Reinforcing Inequality

TfD facilitation ethics require that the facilitator not impose an agenda and support the community's own processes of articulation. This commitment is genuine and necessary, but a claim to neutrality in conditions of unequal power may in practice reproduce existing arrangements when differences in participants' capacity to speak and influence the process are treated as irrelevant. A facilitation practice that treats all voices as equivalently positioned, without attending to the structures that make some louder and others quieter, can therefore reproduce the very inequalities it seeks to avoid. The post-performance dialogue, TfD's moment of greatest democratic potential, is also the moment when this dilemma is most acute, as when an elder reinterprets the performance to reinstate the hierarchy it questioned, or a woman who began to speak looks to her husband and falls silent, the facilitator who has not anticipated these dynamics through prior analysis is left responding reactively and often too late.

5. Community Literacy as a Core Competency for TfD Practitioners

This section develops community literacy as a theoretical concept and core practitioner competency, arguing for its place at the centre of TfD training rather than its margins. The analysis developed so far converges on a central conclusion, namely that effective and ethical TfD practice requires knowledge and skill the field has implicitly demanded of practitioners while rarely explicitly cultivating in training.

Community literacy is the capacity to read a community, its social structures, power hierarchies, fault lines, silences, and conflicts, with analytical depth, cultural sensitivity, and reflexive self-awareness. It is not the same as community knowledge. A practitioner may have grown up in a community and be deeply familiar with its customs, yet still lack the analytical orientation of asking not only what the community is but how it came to be this way, and whose interests existing arrangements serve. Conversely, a practitioner with no prior familiarity can develop genuine community literacy through systematic inquiry and disciplined reflexive attention. It is a practice, cultivated through deliberate analytical habit, rather than background knowledge accumulated through experience.

The term is not coined here from nothing. In rhetoric and composition studies, Peck et al. (1995) and Flower (2008) developed community literacy to describe intercultural, community-based inquiry through which university and neighbourhood participants collaboratively address local problems through writing and public deliberation. In literacy studies more broadly, Barton and Hamilton's (1998) account of local literacies established literacy as a situated social practice rather than a technical skill, a premise this essay's own account of community literacy shares. In community development and civic engagement scholarship, Goldblatt (2007) uses a cognate vocabulary of literacy sponsorship to describe how institutions and communities jointly build the capacity to read and act on local circumstances. This essay does not claim to originate the term in the abstract; these traditions have already established it in adjacent fields. Its contribution is a TfD-specific reconceptualisation, one that redefines community literacy through the lens of power, integrates it structurally into TfD facilitation, translates it into seven analytical dimensions encircled by a reflexive meta-dimension, and connects those dimensions to practitioner preparation, performance creation, and post-performance evaluation. Where the traditions above tend to describe a community's own capacity for literate action, a facilitator's general sensitivity to context, or the sponsorship relationships that support these, the conceptualisation developed here treats community literacy as a disciplined, teachable analytical practice specific to TfD's performative and public conditions, oriented toward power rather than toward literate or rhetorical action as such.

The concept draws on but extends existing TfD scholarship. Conquergood's (1985) insistence that the practitioner cannot occupy a neutral position but is always enmeshed in the power relations of the context anticipates the reflexive dimension developed here. Abah's (2007) emphasis on understanding communities as complex social formations, and Thompson's (2011) critique of "good intentions" in applied theatre, point in the same direction, showing that the most ethically motivated facilitation can produce harmful effects when community dynamics are not adequately understood. What community literacy adds is a positive account of what such understanding requires in practice, not a general orientation of complexity-awareness but a structured set of analytical capacities that can be taught and applied. The CLF is best understood as a conceptual-analytical framework with pedagogical and practice applications; it is not exclusively a theory or a training checklist, but both, and its value lies in the way theoretical grounding makes the training practices more than mechanical.

5.1 Diagnosis Before Intervention: Safeguarding in Community Literacy

Community literacy equips the facilitator to see power. It does not, by itself, resolve the ethical question of what to do with what is seen. If a facilitator discovers that a chief, faction, or powerful family is suppressing a particular issue, community literacy has done its diagnostic work; the interventionist question, what should now be dramatised, disclosed, or pursued, is separate and more demanding. A facilitator, and especially a student facilitator, is not necessarily mandated, equipped, or ethically positioned to resolve every structural inequality that community analysis uncovers. The CLF should therefore guide practitioners toward safer consultation, more representative devising, and conflict-sensitive engagement, rather than direct confrontation with community power structures.

This distinction carries safeguarding implications the framework must make explicit. Where marginalised participants disclose material touching on domestic violence, chieftaincy conflict, resource disputes, or the conduct of powerful local actors, staging that material without care may expose those who shared it to retaliation. Voice representation analysis, the seventh CLF dimension, cannot mean simply ensuring that suppressed stories appear on stage. Ethical representation may instead require anonymisation, fictionalisation, indirect dramatic treatment, composite characters, private rather than public facilitation, delaying performance, or a considered decision not to perform a particular issue at all. Community literacy is diagnostic before it is interventionist, and its ethical rigour lies as much in what a facilitator chooses not to stage as in what is ultimately performed.

Implications for practitioner training are significant. Current Tfd training generally prepares students well in the technical dimensions of facilitation, performance devising, forum theatre, and participatory scriptwriting, but insufficiently in the social and political complexity awaiting them in the host community. This requires not an entirely new curriculum but a reorientation of existing training toward social analysis alongside technical skill, through a required pre-entry power-mapping memo documenting local authority structures and potential conflict zones before the first community visit; a post-practicum reflective essay structured around the seven CLF dimensions; and peer feedback sessions during practicum debriefs coded by CLF categories, so the cohort develops a shared analytical vocabulary. Evaluation criteria should be explicitly power-sensitive, assessing not only performance quality but whose voices the process centred and whose it may have marginalised.

6. The CLF in Practice: An Illustrative Scenario

This section illustrates the CLF through a composite pedagogical scenario, demonstrating how community power dynamics operate in facilitation and how each dimension of the framework enables a more analytically grounded response. The scenario is not presented as an empirical case study. It is a composite constructed from recurring dynamics observed across multiple student practicums supervised by the author in Ghana's Central Region, synthesised rather than drawn from any single documented project, and offered here for illustrative and pedagogical purposes.

A student facilitator from the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Education, Winneba, enters a fishing community in the Gomoa area for a semester project. Community entry is smoothly accomplished, as the local chief endorses the process enthusiastically, and the facilitator is allocated a committee of community representatives to assist with pre-production research. Focus group sessions are well attended, drawing twenty to twenty-five participants over three days. The facilitator documents apparent community consensus around solid waste disposal as the primary concern, proceeds through the full Tfd methodology cycle, and stages a well-attended forum theatre performance that generates lively post-performance dialogue. The practicum report is satisfactory. The facilitator believes the process has worked.

A community literacy analysis reveals a more complex picture. Power mapping shows that all three focus group sessions were held in the chief's courtyard, a spatial choice that exercises authority even when no word is spoken; in that domestic space, community members attentive to the chief's known preferences moderate their contributions accordingly. Stakeholder identification would have revealed a grouping of younger fishermen and market women who form the community's economically most precarious stratum, nominally present but largely silent. Conflict sensitivity analysis would have surfaced a more urgent issue navigated by the fishermen's group, a commercial fishing company's encroachment on traditional fishing grounds, a dispute involving members of the chief's own extended family that does not surface in any focus group.

Gender and generational analysis reveals that the women who appear most articulate in the sessions are the wives and daughters of community leaders, whose contributions are genuine but represent one stratum of female

experience. The fish vendors, whose livelihoods intersect most directly with the waste problem, contribute minimally, moving between English and Fante in ways that signal discomfort with the formal research frame. Participation analysis, applied honestly, would identify this pattern as evidence of performative participation, in which the sessions are well attended, but the most structurally vulnerable members are managing the facilitator's perceptions rather than articulating their own experience. Cultural protocol analysis would note that several of the community's most experienced women communicate most powerfully through proverb, narrative, and call-and-response song, forms the structured focus group cannot receive.

The resulting performance addresses solid waste management with theatrical effectiveness. It draws a large crowd, and the chief and his associates dominate the post-performance dialogue constructively and approvingly. What voice representation analysis reveals, however, is that the performance's central narrative reflects the concerns of those with the social authority to surface them, while the fishing-ground rights dispute that most acutely threatens the livelihoods of marginalised community members is entirely absent from the stage. This is not a failure of technique; the facilitation was, by conventional measures, competent. It is a failure of community literacy, producing, in place of genuine emancipatory theatre, performative participation at the structural level, a process that generates the appearance of community voice while leaving the deepest power arrangements undisturbed.

It is worth asking how this scenario would have unfolded had the student entered with community literacy developed through the CLF. A pre-entry power-mapping memo would have flagged the chief's family's commercial interests in the community's most contested resource issue. Stakeholder identification would have prompted a separate session with the fish vendors' cooperative, away from the chief's courtyard. Conflict sensitivity analysis would have positioned the fishing-ground dispute as a probable shadow issue requiring careful navigation. Gender and generational analysis would have led to a parallel women-only session conducted in Fante, using story and song as entry points. The resulting performance might have addressed waste management differently, or placed it alongside the contested fishing-ground issue, but it would have reflected a more differentiated account of the community it claimed to serve. This scenario also clarifies, in concrete terms, the distinction introduced earlier in this essay, since a checklist-oriented or insufficiently power-sensitive application of participatory rural appraisal might have registered this community as consultative and cooperative. Only an approach attentive to power, entry politics, and the facilitator's own positioning would have surfaced the fishing-ground dispute before, rather than after, it reached the stage.

7. The Community Literacy Framework: Seven Dimensions of Analysis

This section articulates the Community Literacy Framework as a structured set of seven analytical dimensions, encircled throughout by a continuous meta-dimension of facilitator reflexivity and positionality. The seven dimensions were not derived from a single method. They were conceptually synthesised from the theoretical literature reviewed in the preceding sections and further informed by the author's pedagogical experience supervising student Tfd practicums in Ghana's Central Region. These practicum experiences function here as reflective professional context rather than as an independently analysed empirical dataset. Each dimension corresponds to a form of power identified earlier in this essay, gatekeeping authority, political and economic faction, gender and generational hierarchy, religious and linguistic dominance, and the performative dynamics of participation itself, translated into a question a facilitator can ask before, during, and after a Tfd process. The seven dimensions cluster, loosely rather than rigidly, into three functions, where power mapping, stakeholder identification, conflict sensitivity, and gender and generational analysis read the community's existing structure; participation analysis and cultural protocol analysis read the unfolding process; and voice representation analysis holds the completed process accountable.

Facilitator reflexivity does not sit alongside these seven as an eighth item on a list. It is the meta-dimension through which all seven are exercised, since power mapping conducted without attention to how the facilitator's own institutional identity shapes access is only partial power mapping, and voice representation analysis conducted without asking whose expectations the facilitator has internalised is only partial accountability. Figure 1 represents this architecture, showing the seven analytical dimensions operating across the Tfd cycle from community entry to evaluation, encircled by the continuous principle of reflexivity and positionality. The framework is not a checklist applied mechanically at the start of a process; it is a set of sustained analytical orientations informing engagement from entry through evaluation, applied iteratively as community dynamics shift.

Power mapping is the first and foundational dimension. It asks who holds formal and informal authority, through what mechanisms, and where the points of tension lie, and what different possible routes of community entry imply for the facilitator's subsequent ability to reach marginalised voices. Developing this capacity requires deliberate practice in reading social space, noting whose presence shapes others' behaviour and what spatial arrangements signal authority, built through pre-production journal-keeping and supervisor-guided reflection.

Stakeholder identification asks who the distinct groups and interests in the community are, what each group's relationship to the issue is, and which groups are likely to support or resist the process. The critical question is who is absent from initial consultations and what that absence signifies; mapping absent voices is as important as mapping those present.

Conflict sensitivity analysis asks what existing tensions or unresolved disputes are present, whether they are likely to surface during the TfD process, and whether particular topics or framings could inflame existing divisions. Conflict sensitivity does not mean conflict avoidance, since TfD is precisely a practice of making productive what is usually suppressed, but it does mean the facilitator should make reasonable efforts to identify and anticipate potentially consequential community conflicts before they surface within the TfD process.

Gender and generational analysis asks what norms govern women's public voice, whether women participate on their own terms or on terms set by male authority, and what structural barriers constrain young people's participation. The mere presence of women or youth at an event does not constitute genuine voice; this dimension requires the facilitator to design approaches, including single-sex workshops, youth-specific forums, and mixed-gender facilitation pairs, that structurally extend voice rather than simply invite it.

Participation analysis asks who is actively participating and who is absent or passive, whether there is evidence of performative participation, and whether those most affected by the issue are among the most genuinely engaged. This should be an ongoing rather than one-time assessment, since participation patterns shift as the process develops. The key diagnostic question is whether participation is generative or performative, indicated by the texture of contributions, the gap between structured and informal talk, and non-verbal signals of constraint.

Cultural protocol analysis asks what norms govern communication and collective decision-making in the cultural context, and what indigenous performance forms carry epistemological authority and might be integrated into the TfD process rather than displaced by it. Yankah's (1995) and Ansu-Kyeremeh's (1998) work point to the richness of the epistemological resources communities bring to participatory encounters; the performance forms that carry community authority in a given context are likely to carry more emancipatory potential than imported conventions that community members navigate as guests rather than owners.

Voice representation analysis asks, as both an ongoing and summative question, whose story the TfD process tells, whose experiences are dramatised, and whether the voices of the most marginalised are genuinely represented in the performance or whether power dynamics in devising and research have ensured their stories remain untold. This dimension holds the entire process accountable to TfD's emancipatory mandate. At the close of any TfD process, the facilitator who has applied the CLF reflexively should be able to give a specific, evidenced account of whose voices shaped the performance, and of whose were missed or marginalised.

FACILITATOR REFLEXIVITY & POSITIONALITY

(continuous meta-dimension across the full Tfd cycle)

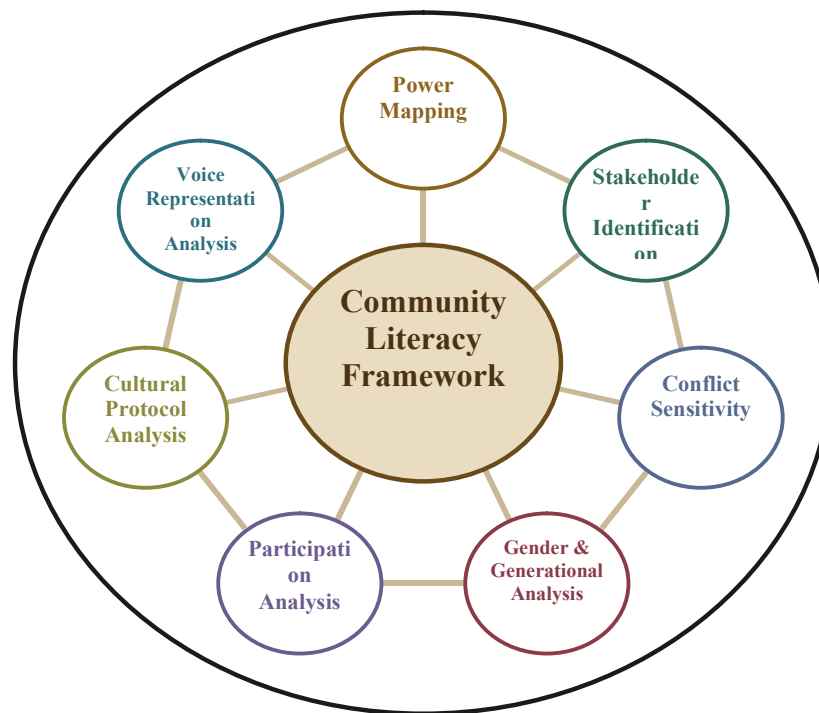


Figure 1. The Community Literacy Framework: seven analytical dimensions across the Tfd cycle, encircled by facilitator reflexivity and positionality.

Table 1. The Community Literacy Framework: Seven Dimensions, Guiding Questions, and Observable Indicators

Dimension	Core Question	Observable Indicators	Tfd Application
Power Mapping	Who holds formal and informal authority? Where are the points of tension?	Deference toward particular individuals; choice of meeting venue; who nominates participants	Informs community entry strategy and identification of gatekeeping
Stakeholder Identification	Who is present? Who is absent, and what does absence signify?	Groups consistently missing from consultations; unexplained gaps in the participant list	Guides consultation beyond socially obvious participants
Conflict Sensitivity	What existing tensions may surface or be inflamed by the Tfd process?	Topics that go unmentioned; abrupt changes of subject; gaps between formal and informal accounts	Shapes scene selection, facilitation approach, and topic framing
Gender and Generational Analysis	Are women and youth present on their own terms? What structural barriers constrain their voice?	Women or youth present but silent; contributions channelled through male or elder proxies	Informs parallel sessions, mixed-facilitation pairs, and devising approaches
Participation	Is participation generative or	Glancing toward authority	Monitors performative

Dimension	Core Question	Observable Indicators	TfD Application
Analysis	performative? Who is managing perceptions rather than speaking their experience?	figures before responding; unanimity despite known disagreement; divergence between formal and informal talk	participation; prompts process adjustment
Cultural Protocol Analysis	What indigenous communication forms carry community authority? How can they be activated rather than displaced?	Reliance on proverb, narrative, or song rather than direct statement; code-switching between languages	Ensures devising draws on community-owned performative vocabulary
Voice Representation Analysis	Whose story does the performance tell? Whose is absent, and why?	Absence of a known community issue from the devised performance; narrative concentrated around one social stratum	Holds the entire process accountable to TfD's emancipatory mandate
Reflexivity and Positionality (meta-dimension)	How is the facilitator's own identity, access, and assumptions shaping this analysis?	Facilitator's own assumptions about what counts as "success"; comfort with the access initially granted	Operates continuously across all seven dimensions and the full TfD cycle

8. Conclusion

Theatre for Development has built, over half a century of practice and scholarship, one of the most compelling bodies of participatory methodology in the global South. Its commitment to community voice and to the cultural dimensions of development remains genuine and vital. But that commitment must grapple honestly with what community actually means, not as a rhetorical ideal but as a social reality constituted through power.

This essay has argued that the community into which TfD enters is never the harmonious, unified social body the romantic notion of community implies. It is stratified, contested, and traversed by multiple and intersecting forms of power, traditional authority, factional interest, gendered and generational hierarchy, religious influence, linguistic dominance, and educational inequality, that determine, in practice, whose voices are heard and whose experiences reach the stage. A TfD process inattentive to these dynamics risks becoming, in place of the instrument of emancipation it intends to be, an inadvertent mechanism for legitimising existing arrangements, producing what this essay has called performative participation.

The Community Literacy Framework proposed here is offered as a principled response to this risk. By articulating community literacy as the capacity to read community power dynamics with analytical depth and reflexive self-awareness, and by specifying the seven analytical dimensions, encircled by a continuous reflexive meta-dimension, through which that literacy is exercised, the CLF provides both a theoretical account of what community-sensitive TfD requires and a practical scaffold for practitioner training. Community literacy does not guarantee just outcomes. It shifts the practitioner's orientation from assumption to inquiry, from the comfort of participatory idealism to the discipline of analytical honesty, and toward the ethically grounded practice that a field committed to those whose voices are structurally marginalised must sustain.

Several directions for future research follow from this work. Empirical studies are needed that test the CLF in actual TfD projects, comparing CLF-guided facilitation with conventional approaches to assess differences in participation quality and voice representation outcomes. There is scope for developing CLF-specific assessment instruments for practitioner training, and for exploring how the framework applies in urban as distinct from rural settings, where power dynamics take different but equally consequential forms. The scenario offered here is composite and pedagogical; longitudinal case studies tracking the CLF's application across a full TfD cycle would extend and test its claims in ways conceptual analysis alone cannot achieve.

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