

<b>Institution:</b> University of Essex		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 33		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Using verbatim practice in theatre and film to support and strengthen the use of ethical trauma testimony in charitable, cultural and mental health sectors		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> October 2015 to March 2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Nic Blower Annecy Lax	Lecturer Senior Lecturer	Sept 2015 to Date October 2015 to Date
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2016 - Dec 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>This impact case study centres on the use of verbatim testimony in creative practice-as-research undertaken in collaboration with NGOs, social justice arts, and welfare organisations. This case study demonstrates impact on the policy of NGOs such as Amnesty International, on training for working with victim testimony in welfare and medical contexts, on the use of testimony in arts practice for social justice and collective trauma, and on public understanding of conditions such as PTSD. Lax and Blower's practice-based research explores the ethics of collecting and disseminating testimony and has influenced NGO staff, health workers and arts practitioners, and improved the health and wellbeing of participants and their families.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>The underpinning research of this case study investigates the ethical stresses inherent in verbatim and documentary arts practice, and the retelling and sharing of 'other people's stories' across a range of wellbeing and human rights advocacy fora. This body of practice-as-research investigates the use of verbatim testimony in creative projects, the dynamic exchange of power in extractive interviewing processes, and issues of shifting consent in the replaying and reproduction of testimonies.</p> <p>In this impact case study, Blower and Lax explore shared methodologies for the use of testimony in creative practice. Building on Lax's extensive body of work on testimony performance, Blower and Lax's combined and individual projects from 2016 to the present continue to challenge, interrogate, and innovate methodologies using verbatim testimony in human rights and at-risk community development. Their practice-as-research uses creative interventions to help organisations and service providers think more critically about the use of testimony in documentary-led arts practices. Fundamental to their research is a mutual interest in challenging the assumption that first-person testimony automatically offers a lasting therapeutic encounter, while still recognising its value in revealing 'other peoples' stories'. Their research investigates strategies to handle traumatised 'storytellers' and create innovative interview methodologies to enable further agency in the process of trauma testimony for participants, creative practitioners, and organisations. Each of these research projects is underpinned by a consideration of how human rights frameworks and discourses are performed and asks how testimony might be deployed effectively and ethically by community groups and campaigning organisations.</p> <p><b>[R1]:</b> <u>Blower and Lax, <i>Tales of Spring and Winter; Gender, Histories and Intergenerational Exchange in Global Theatre (2016-19)</i></u> A multi-faceted research project in collaboration with Essex colleague Liz Kuti with AHRC GCRF funding. <i>Tales of Spring and Winter</i> investigates the role of women theatre-makers who use testimony and verbatim performance practice for generational</p>		

bridge-building in post-conflict or fractured communities. The project was partnered with ARIADNE, an international network of women artists in conflict zones, and involved a seven day residency with 24 artists at the University of Essex. The PaR project involved a series of performances and workshops interrogating Western and non-Western practitioners' testimony and verbatim performance methodologies. Through the PaR practice, residency members presented testimonial performances, (including Lax's play script *Dear Children, Sincerely...*, which was created as part of the residency and presented at the Mercury Theatre in Colchester), and workshops involving diverse international methodologies designed to interrogate and develop innovative strategies for the use of oral testimony in performance for social change.

**[R2]:** Blower, *LIFTED* (2019) Created by Blower in collaboration with cognitive neuroscientist Dr. Nicholas Cooper (Uni of Essex) and chartered psychologist Dr Mark Wheeler (iCarp), this 60min documentary film explores the experience of veterans and their families coping with severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Blower's PaR project investigates strategies to enhance ethical filmmaking practices in trauma victim testimony including 1) actively engaging participants in the direction process (i.e. idea sharing, transparent decision-making); 2) empowering contributors to comment freely on camera about content and to stop filming at any point; 3) innovations in camera framing which allow contributors to move freely and express themselves without inhibitions; 4) enabling unlimited temporal space for the recording of testimonies; 5) avoiding audiences being 'spoon-fed' sound bites of information and emotion by the filmmaker.

**[R3]:** Lax, *Ethical Drift in Reperformances of Testimony* (2016-20) This PaR project interrogates the collection, editing and recontextualization of testimony by INGOs and charities, and examines the ways testimony is valorised, (re-)scripted and repackaged by members of the rights-based corpus such as Amnesty International. Experimenting with playwriting modes and dramaturgical approaches, Lax developed playscripts examining how the charismatic 'I' of testimony might be reconceived to disrupt easy, instrumental designations of victimhood for testifiers. The plays deploy multiple viewpoints and dramatic forms that probe the power and ethical dynamics entailed in the use of testimony. Lax partnered with Amnesty International to catalyse these scripts into films, workshops and interactive performances used for ethical training.

This output is composed of three iterative and interrelated works. Firstly, *Protect the World*<sup>TM</sup> is a collection of ten short plays operating as stand-alone pieces or as an 80- minute play. The second part, *It's Not Enough to be Good*, is a playscript written for young activists through AIUK's 'Rise Up' initiative to explore identity and ethical motivation in advocacy settings, and is embedded within a 120min participatory workshop. The third play, *The Game is On Again* (running time: 120mins), is interactive in form, asking the audience to make decisions for the characters and advocate for their choices.

### 3. References to the research (Available from HEI on request)

**R1.** Blower and Lax (2016 – 2019) *Tales of Spring and Winter*, collaborative project with Dr Liz Kutli. [Theatre & Performance]. Dissemination includes: Artist residency with Ariadne Organisation members (12 participants); *Dear Children, Sincerely* (Lax), original PaR playscript performed at the Mercury Theatre 2017 (130 audience); Research symposium (120 participants); ECR Verbatim Theatre Workshops (12 participants).

**Depository:** [www.theatreconflictchange.com](http://www.theatreconflictchange.com) filmed documentation, and PaR process and outcomes.

**PDF** script of *Dear Children, Sincerely* and Mercury Theatre webpage (available from HEI on request)

**R2.** Blower (2019) *LIFTED* 60 min documentary about veterans' experience of PTSD recovery. Directed, produced and filmed by Nic Blower. Screenings took place at Help for Heroes HQ, Colchester (June 2019), British Army Chetwynd Barracks, Nottingham (Aug 2019), Her Majesty's Prison Hollesby Bay, Suffolk (Aug 2019), Co-op Building Colchester (Sept 2019), Veterans Norfolk (Oct 2019), Colchester Army Barracks (Nov 2019), Clear Cut Pictures, London (Nov 2019), Suffolk Conference Facility (Dec 2019), Essex Fire and Rescue Service HQ, Witham (Dec 2019), Norwich Hospital (March 2020), and University College London (March 2020). Further dissemination has

included showings at Essex DocFest, Colchester (40 audience) and the official launch screening on 5th March 2020 at the Lakeside Theatre, Uni of Essex (150 audience).

Additional dissemination included a screening at Sportvisserij Nederland, Bilthoven, in the Netherlands for 12 members of the Dutch Military, the Dutch Association of Mental Health and Addiction Care (GGZ Nederland), and veterans and staff from Sportvisserij Nederland.

QI: In March 2020, LIFTED won the Exceptional Merit Award at Docs Without Borders film festival, USA.

**Depository:** Private Vimeo link: [LIFTED](#)

**PDF** selected screenshots of LIFTED (available from HEI on request if link not working).

**R3.** Lax (2016-20) *Ethical Drift in Re-performances of Testimony* [Theatre & Performance and Film]. UK.

**Part 1:** Lax (2016 -2017) *Protect the World™* - Series of performance scripts and film scripts. Live performances at London Amnesty HQ (50 audience) staff of AIUK, then London Amnesty HQ Oct 2016 (100 audience) staff + members, York Nov 2016 (200) members + activists, Reading Nov 2016 (200) members + activists, Bristol Dec 2016 (150) students' skills-share, London AI Dec 2016 (250) for a students' skills-share event.

**Part 2:** Lax (2018-19) *It's Not Enough to Be Good* – Participatory, scripted theatre session with a 120 min wrap-around workshop, previewed in Oct 2018 and delivered in Sept 2019, with 30 members of RISE UP, Amnesty International UK's initiative to train and develop young activists.

**Part 3:** Lax (2019-20) *The Game is On Again* – Interactive, 20hr performance script and semi-scripted workshop. Presented at London Amnesty HQ (280 audience) members and staff of AIUK. Further performance/workshops with 30 members of RISE UP initiative to develop young activists, previewed in August 2019 and delivered in December 2019 and February 2020.

**PDF** Portfolio of multi-component play script and theatre workshop plans (available from HEI on request).

**G1.** Kuti (PI), Lax (Co-I) *Tales of Spring and Winter: Gender, Histories and Intergenerational Exchange in Global Theatre*, AHRC/GCRF, Nov 2016- Aug 2018, (£80,759).

#### 4. Details of the impact

##### **IMPACT 1: Influencing the approach of a leading INGO on the ethical use of testimony; impacts on organisational policy, services, and staff training.**

During a 12-month research and development phase involving close observation of AI's processes, Lax iteratively produced testimony-based performance scripts staged at a series of events for AI staff and members across the UK and deployed in training sessions for AI staff and members. AI reported that Lax's practice-as-research allowed them to broach conversations about difficult and challenging topics, acknowledging that *'they could not take the training forward without it'* [S1].

These performance pieces were subsequently re-scripted and produced as films for wider dissemination within the organisation. In a report compiled by AI reviewing the pilot training, it was noted by one attendee that: *'when you watch the films, you think I've done that, or I've seen that. I like the way you say there is no right or wrong about how people respond to it. Whatever level you're at it encourages really valuable conversations.'* [S2].

The impact of Lax's research evidences the potential for creative intervention to effect behavioural change and contribute to a paradigm shift within a complex organisation; AI recognised that the impact of Lax's work helped people to recognise *'the ethical issues we might have created unwittingly and unintentionally'* [S1]. Attendees reported that the training helped them recognise identify the negative impact of a testimony-gathering process in which the campaign message or outcome was emphasised over the effect on the (often vulnerable) person providing the story. For AI as a whole it has helped them to build on the success of the organisation's deployment of drama and other creative interventions, developing a toolkit to help to address such challenging issues and to hone and champion ethical behaviour in their practice [S1]. This allows for more nuanced thinking across the organisation, and as such will guide the organisation's future work in this area [S3].

**IMPACT 2: Influencing the creative and professional development of testimony and verbatim theatre methodologies for PaR residency participants including the conversion of ARIADNE into an organised international network for shared practice.**

The PaR residency of artists at the University of Essex, led by Lax and involving the generation of the playscript and production of *Dear Children, Sincerely...* has had a transformative impact on the creative and professional direction of those involved from Serbia, Sri Lanka, Palestine, Belgium and Rwanda [S4]. From this methodologically disparate and geographically dispersed group of artists united principally by an interest in social and political change, ARIADNE's engagement with the residency and with Lax's PaR enabled development of a synthesised approach to the ethical use of testimony and borrowed stories. Lax's PaR and the supporting residency enabled a paradigm shift, strengthening the strategy of the ARIADNE network, allowing them to identify the way forward for the next five years [S4.1]. The shared practices developed in the residency fostered mutual support, collaborative production, and professional development for an international cohort of theatre-makers in the use of testimony and verbatim theatre practice. One member identified the value of meeting and being supported by others from around the world who shared the same goals, when one feels trapped in one's own country [S4.3]. The residency has gone on to generate new ways of thinking that has influenced, and continues to influence, the organisational development and direction of ARIADNE, inspiring further intercultural exchange for the group (Palestine 2017, Rwanda 2018, Serbia 2019) and new routes to artistic expression for individual members of the international group. One participant from Sri Lanka particularly valued the opportunity to forge links with the UK and start to develop new joint projects [S4.2].

The residency and PaR project also strengthened the understanding, learning and capabilities of twelve early career practitioners working with arts-led testimony practice, participants identifying the experience as inspiring: challenging and changing the directions of their lives [S5.1]. As a direct result of this collaboration, follow-on projects took place between these young artists and Ashtar Theatre in Ramallah (2017), at the Ubumuntu Festival in Kigali (2018) and with the delegate from Sri Lanka at an international human rights conference in The Hague (2019) [S5].

**IMPACT 3: Impact on health and wellbeing of veterans dealing with PTSD and their families.**

Targeted dissemination has reached over 405 audience members and involved 13 screenings and Q&A sessions for approximately 203 hard-to-reach participants in the East of England including military personal, veterans with PTSD, family support groups, charities, prisoners, and medical staff across organisations such as Help For Heroes, Essex County Fire and Rescue Service, Norwich and Suffolk NHS, SAFFA & Project Nova charities, and the British Army [S6].

*LIFTED* has impacted the health and wellbeing of the veterans and families that participated in making the documentary, and on those veterans who have engaged with the film through hosted screenings and Q&As. Blower's PaR filmmaking strategies facilitate a safe environment for participant contribution and a sense of shared ownership, which have impacted participants ability to express their experiences in new ways and further the healing process. Blower's strategies allowed the film to incorporate voices not normally heard in films about PTSD: Veteran #2's partner noted: '*It was good to be able to discuss how PTSD affects the family. Family members don't always have a voice*' [S7.3].

The contributors' involvement in the Q&A sessions following screenings has had further beneficial effects. Witnessing and processing the film in a screening scenario for people with PTSD validated their experience. In the Q&A sessions an enhanced level of ownership of their stories is apparent. Ethically this addresses one of the key concerns in conventional documentary that one's story is co-opted by the film-maker. The empowerment of the contributors through sharing is evidenced by Veteran #2: '*The feedback at the viewings has been very welcome...Having seen the documentary a few times has made me realise how far I have now come on my journey to recovery.*' [S7.7]. An audience member observed that they were: '*...interested how the Q&A sessions form part of the participants' recovery*', [S6.10.69].



For military veterans, attending screenings has improved wellbeing: *'my own experience of bad dreams, lack of sleep, anger issues, social isolation, depression, flashbacks etc. were brought more clearly into focus ... it also gave me hope...'* [S6.2.13]. One even came to the realisation: *'that I need to engage with PTSD treatment'* [S6.9.11]. The Chair of the Norfolk Veterans' Association acknowledged that the film helped those attending their 2020 AGM to *'properly appreciate the full impact upon the family living with the PTSD sufferer.'* [S8].

#### **IMPACT 4: Informative insight into PTSD offered to mental health and affiliated practitioners in the UK and Holland**

The screenings have enhanced understanding of PTSD for British Army mental health practitioners. The specificity of the dissemination permitted mental health staff to view the film in their workplace with a contributor with PTSD present in the room. One member of the Mental Health Inreach team from HMP and YOI Hollesley Bay writes that the *'film provided a good understanding to non-specialists about PTSD and allowed them a knowledge in which they could identify and refer the presentation onwards'* as well as giving *'a focus to the Veteran's group ...slowed only by the recent pandemic.'*[S9]. The film has also had a positive impact on NHS medical professionals attending public screenings. For example, one reported that: *'I know this will help me at work when I meet people with PTSD'* [S6.7.6]. Another writes about the significance of the portrayal of family: *'...it is our duty as professionals to look into this area carefully and refer to the appropriate service if possible...This was very educational'* [S6.9.4].

In August 2020 *LIFTED* was screened at the headquarters of the Dutch fishing agency (Sportvisserij Nederland) in Bilthoven, Utrecht to the Dutch military and GGZ Nederland, who provide government care for PTSS and veterans, with a view to *'stimulate national policy change'*. [S10]. They have *'subtitled the full-length documentary film in Dutch so it can be featured at a symposium as soon as COVID measures allow'*, hoping to *'connect and enthuse the worlds of military and mental health service[s]'* [S10]. This initiative in the Netherlands regards the film as a *'crucial part to connect internally within the organised fishery sector as with key partners (veteran organisations, the Dutch military, Dutch Health care Services).'* [S10]. The film and screenings will enable Sportvisserij Nederland to *'improve social and educational inclusion of veterans living with PTSD and their families'*; drawing on the key themes that *LIFTED* presents [S10].

#### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

- S1.** Testimonial - Communications Director, Amnesty International (AI) UK. (Claim 1)
- S2.** Data and qualitative report gained from Amnesty Training, Priority Campaigns & Individuals at Risk Team, AI UK. (Claim 1)
- S3.** Testimonial - RISE UP Coordinator, AI UK. (Claim 1)
- S4.** ARIADNE Combined reflective testimony (S4.1 – S4. 5) from Serbia, Sri Lanka, Palestine, Belgium, Rwanda. (Claim 2).
- S5.** Combined reflective feedback from early career artists participating in ARIADNE. (Claim 2).
- S6.** Screening Audience Questionnaires (Claims 3 & 4)
- S7.** Contributor Questionnaires (Claims 3 & 4).
- S8.** Testimonial from Chair of Norfolk Veterans Association (Claims 3 & 4).
- S9.** Testimonial from Mental Health Inreach Team, HMP Warren Hill (Claims 3 & 4).
- S10.** Testimonial from Dutch fishing agency (Sportvisserij Nederland) in Bilthoven, Utrecht (Claim 4).