

Diane Conrad

Author of *Youth, Power, Performance: Applied Theatre with Systematically Marginalized Youth*

Q & A



Diane Conrad is professor of drama and theatre education in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta, Canada. Her participatory, arts-based research involves work with high-risk and incarcerated youth. She is the director of the Arts-Based Research Studio at the University of Alberta. The studio is a state-of-the-art research facility dedicated to the creation and dissemination of arts-based research.

Can you tell us a little about your background and what first drew you to applied theatre research?

I was a disillusioned theatre student. Disillusioned by the elitism I experienced in the art world. I felt that theatre had more power than merely its entertainment value or to uplift a few individuals seen to have some special talent. I felt theatre had potential to really make a difference in people's lives. Applied theatre is for everyone. When I began doing research, applied theatre was a way for me to make some space for that to happen.

How did your journey lead you to working with marginalized youth?

My work with marginalized youth began because I was trying to understand my own risky experiences as a youth. I wondered about how I managed to successfully navigate those tumultuous times, and about the obstacles that prevent some youth from thriving.

For readers new to the book, how would you describe *Youth, Power and Performance*?

The book shares my experiences and my learning from 20 plus years of doing applied theatre research with marginalized youth.

The book draws on twenty years of research and practice. What was the experience of bringing that work together in one volume?

Since my 20 plus years of work all followed the same thread, it made sense at the end of my career to bring it all together in a book. My work was cumulative, with a new project being informed by the previous one. For example, youth in school told me school was like prison, so my next project worked with youth in jail to compare those two contexts. After working within the constraints of those two institutions, working with a non-profit organization serving street-involved youth was a breath of fresh air.

Over your years of working with young people, what are some of the biggest changes you have seen?

There have been too few big changes, unfortunately. One change that I have experienced within the education system and in our society in general, following from the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and then the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, is the acknowledgement that Indigenous peoples were terribly wronged, that we have work to do to make up for all that wrong and that Indigenous peoples and communities have knowledge that we can all learn from.

Can you share one unexpected lesson you have learned through this work?

I really learned to trust the process. There were times in my work with youth when I felt, oh no, this isn't working, we've got nothing, but when push came to shove – when it came time to perform, for example – the youth always really came through. They knew exactly what had to happen and were able to showcase their knowledge, talent and energy.

Do you think theatre can play a role in advancing social justice? If so, how?

Absolutely. Applied theatre is all about people telling their stories – often difficult stories. Just having the chance to tell those stories is itself a powerfully liberating experience. When others listen that power is amplified – creating empathy that has ripple effects in peoples' attitudes and behaviours.

Youth, Power and Performance recently won the ATHE Outstanding Book Award. What does this recognition mean to you?

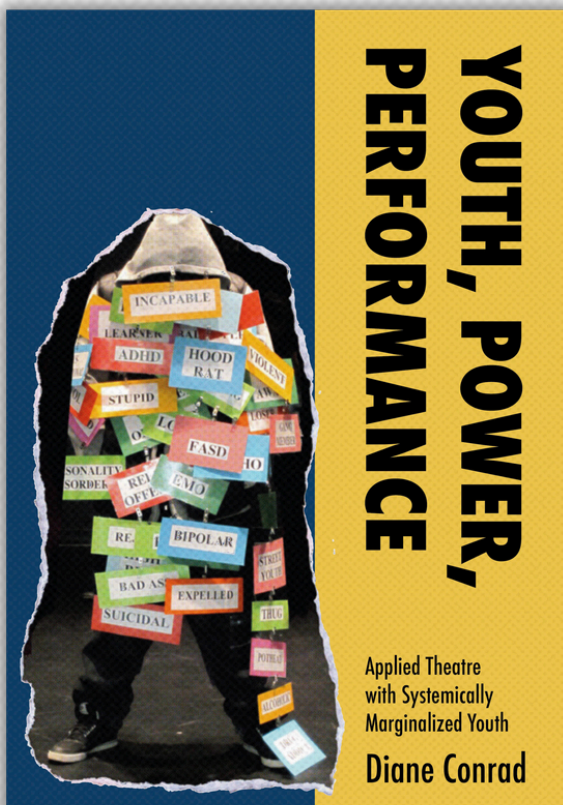
I'm proud that the book won the award. Hopefully, it means more people will learn about the book, which means greater recognition for the work, for the youths' voices and insights to get out there into the world. If it helps to advance the work, to get more people doing applied theatre, that would be amazing.

What advice would you give to people interested in applied theatre, particularly those working with marginalized communities?

The first thing is that you have to come to the work with a non-judgemental attitude. Don't assume that you know what people need or how to solve their problems. You have to be open to really listening and making the space for people to find their own power.

What do you hope readers take away from *Youth, Power and Performance*?

I hope readers will understand that youth have important insights. Space needs to be created for youth to share those insights. And they need to be listened to and to be taken seriously.



*Youth, Power, Performance:
Applied Theatre with
Systemically Marginalized
Youth*

By Diane Conrad

**Winner of the 2026
ATHE Outstanding Book Award**