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Original Paper

Student Facilitators in Community: Experiences, Insights, and Practice Implications from Theatre for Development in Ghana

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Abstract

Theatre for Development (TfD) scholarship has produced rich accounts of facilitation methodology, community participation, and social change. Yet one group has remained largely invisible in this literature, specifically the student facilitator, the emerging practitioner entering a real community for the first time, with genuine responsibilities and limited field experience. This study addresses that gap. Drawing on field notebooks, project reports, and in-depth interviews with fifteen of thirty student facilitators who completed community-based TfD placements at the University of Education, Winneba (UEW), Ghana, between 2022 and 2025, it documents and analyses what student facilitators experience during their community immersions. Findings reveal a complex and layered picture organised around six themes of the practical realities of community residence; the structural tension of the campus-community shuttle; community entry and the identity crisis; cultural navigation across dimensions of language, gender, and authority; facilitation breakdown and the development of adaptive intelligence; and deep personal and professional transformation. Across all themes, the data reveals important gender-differentiated patterns. Male and female facilitators encounter different forms of challenge, develop different adaptive strategies, and undergo different but equally significant transformations. Together, these findings establish the student facilitator as a distinct and under-studied category whose formation demands more deliberate institutional support, more responsive supervision, and a curriculum that prepares student facilitators honestly for the realities of field practice.

Keywords: Theatre for Development, student facilitators, community immersion, experiential learning, Forum Theatre, Ghana, facilitation pedagogy, scaffolded liminality, gender, field placement

1. Introduction

Imagine being a twenty-two-year-old student, returning to a community you have visited once or twice during a brief scouting exercise, and now moving in to stay. You know the place exists. You have met a few people. But you have never spent a night there, never eaten there, never had to find somewhere to sleep or someone to trust. You are carrying the mandate to facilitate a participatory theatre project on one of the community's most sensitive social issues, and the gap between the community you thought you knew from two brief visits and the community you now have to live and work in opens almost immediately. Or imagine being a female student in that same situation, working hard to establish your authority as a facilitator, only to find that some of the men you most need to engage are interpreting your presence in entirely different terms. These are not hypothetical scenarios. They are the actual starting conditions of a significant number of student facilitators in Ghana's Theatre for Development training programmes. Yet these experiences, the raw, embodied, often disorienting realities of community TfD residence, have never been the subject of a published research study. TfD scholarship knows a great deal about what facilitation should look like when it is done well. It knows very little about what it means to be learning how to do it for the first time, under real conditions, as a resident rather than a visitor, with real people, real power dynamics, and real stakes.

1.1 Context and Background

Theatre for Development (TfD) is a form of participatory theatre that uses performance as a tool for

community dialogue, critical reflection, and social change. Rooted in the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire (1970) and the practice methodology of Augusto Boal (1979), and developed in African contexts by scholars including Mlama (1991), Kerr (1995), Abah (2005), and Mda (1993), TfD has over five decades built a substantial body of knowledge about its values, methods, community outcomes, and ethical demands. Central to this tradition is the facilitator, the person who creates the conditions for community participation, holds the space for difficult conversations, and guides the performance process without directing its outcomes.

In Ghanaian universities, TfD training programmes require student facilitators to undertake extended community field placements as a core component of professional formation. At the University of Education, Winneba (UEW), student facilitators in the Department of Theatre Arts are required to live in assigned communities for a minimum of three months, designing and facilitating participatory theatre projects on identified development issues. These placements are understood as the crucible of professional development, the space in which theoretical knowledge meets practical reality and in which the student facilitator begins the transition into the practitioner. Yet despite their centrality, the experiences of student facilitators during these placements have never been systematically studied or documented. TfD scholarship has focused almost entirely on the accomplished practitioner, theorising facilitation in terms of the ideal toward which training aspires, while leaving unexamined the formative processes through which that ideal is approached. TfD training programmes are consequently designing curricula, placement structures, and supervision systems without an adequate evidence base for what student facilitators encounter in the field.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the central role of community-based practicum in Theatre for Development (TfD) training, the lived experiences of student facilitators during these placements remain largely undocumented and under-theorised. Existing TfD scholarship has focused predominantly on the skilled practitioner, developing models of facilitation based on idealised practice while overlooking the formative processes through which students become facilitators. As a result, there is a significant gap between how TfD is taught and how it is experienced in the field. This gap has important implications. Without a clear understanding of what student facilitators encounter, particularly the practical challenges, identity negotiations, emotional pressures, and gendered dynamics that shape their experiences, training programmes risk being misaligned with the realities of community engagement. Furthermore, the absence of empirical attention to student facilitators limits the development of effective supervision models and weakens the overall preparation of future practitioners.

This study therefore positions the student facilitator as a distinct and analytically significant group within TfD practice. It argues that a systematic examination of their lived experiences is necessary not only to strengthen pedagogical approaches, but also to improve facilitation practice and community engagement outcomes in Ghana and across the African context.

1.3 Research Objectives

The study is guided by two objectives.

i. To examine the lived experiences of Theatre for Development student facilitators during community placements in Ghana.

ii. To analyse the implications of these experiences for TfD training, supervision, and facilitation practice.

2. Literature Review

The formation of TfD facilitators has been theorised almost entirely in terms of the accomplished practitioner. This review maps that theoretical terrain identifies its structural silences, and makes the case for the student facilitator, the practitioner-in-formation, as a distinct and under-examined analytical subject.

2.1 TfD Facilitation between the Ideal and the Real

The TfD facilitation literature is theoretically rich but consistently oriented toward the accomplished

practitioner. Boal's (1979) concept of the joker remains the most influential account of what TfD facilitation aspires to be. The joker must lead without directing, hold space without filling it, provoke reflection without prescribing outcomes, and sustain both artistic integrity and social responsiveness simultaneously. This demands experience, cultural intelligence, and a quality of reflexive awareness that is not easily transmitted through instruction.

African TfD scholars have elaborated this picture with specific attention to the conditions of facilitation in African community contexts. Mlama (1991) insists that effective TfD facilitation in Africa requires genuine integration into community life, cultural humility, and a willingness to subordinate professional expertise to community knowledge. Kerr (1995) highlights the ethical risks facing TfD facilitators, particularly the danger of inadvertently reproducing the top-down development logics that TfD exists to challenge. Abah (2005) frames the facilitator as a political presence whose arrival carries meaning that must be consciously managed. Mda (1993) draws attention to the tension between artistic quality and social function, a tension student facilitators, still developing in both dimensions, experience with particular intensity. Across this body of work, however, facilitation is consistently theorised in terms of the ideal, that is, what it should be, not how it is learned.

2.2 Experiential Learning and Field-Based Professional Formation

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, moving through concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation, provides a productive framework for understanding how student facilitators develop through community placements. The three-month community residence creates an exceptionally intensive version of this cycle, with all four stages operating simultaneously. Schön's (1983) distinction between reflection-in-action (real-time adjustment of practice as events unfold) and reflection-on-action (retrospective sense-making after the event) is equally central. Field notebooks function as primary sites of reflection-on-action, while interviews gather the further theorisation that comes with hindsight.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation extends this framework importantly; learning happens through participation in communities of practice, as newcomers move from the margins toward fuller membership as competence grows. Student facilitators must navigate this process in two communities of practice simultaneously, the professional TfD community and the host community, making their learning challenge qualitatively more complex than most experiential learning theory anticipates. The authority to facilitate is not conferred by institutional affiliation; it must be earned through demonstrated competence and sustained relational investment in community life.

2.3 Liminality and Transformative Experience

Turner's (1969) anthropological concept of liminality, the in-between state of a ritual passage in which the initiate has left their old identity behind but not yet established a new one, provides a powerful theoretical lens for the student facilitator experience. The community placement strips students of the institutional markers that defined their social identity on campus (academic standing, departmental affiliation, supervisory relationship) and places them in a context where these markers carry no automatic authority. This structural ambiguity is disorienting but also presents a condition of possibility of profound personal transformation. Turner also identifies communitas, the horizontal solidarity forged through shared vulnerability among people navigating a liminal experience together, which is visible among student facilitators working in the same communities and constitutes a pedagogical resource that existing TfD training has not explicitly recognised. Freire's (1970) concept of conscientisation adds a critical dimension. Sustained immersion in community life produces not merely professional skill but a political awakening, a deepened awareness of the structural conditions that shape the lives of the communities students engage with.

2.4 Gender in TfD and Community Development Practice

While TfD scholarship has addressed gender as a theme of community-based practice, particularly the gendered dimensions of the issues that TfD projects address, very little attention has been paid to how gender shapes the experience of the facilitator themselves. Kerr (1995) notes in passing that female TfD practitioners face particular challenges in community authority contexts, and Mlama (1991) acknowledges the importance of gender sensitivity in facilitation practice. However, neither work, nor

the wider TfD literature, provides a systematic account of how male and female student facilitators experience their placements differently, in the different ways they are perceived by communities, the different forms of challenge they face, the different adaptive strategies they develop, and the different dimensions of transformation they undergo. This study addresses that gap directly.

2.5 The Gap This Study Addresses

Across this body of literature, two consistent absences are apparent. The first is the student facilitator as a subject of research, in terms of what facilitation should be and how communities respond, but not the specific experience of the student practitioner-in-formation. The second is an empirically grounded account of gender-differentiated student facilitator experience. This study addresses both absences, providing a systematic documentation of what TfD student facilitators in Ghana go through during their community placements, including the practical hardships, the identity challenges, the cultural negotiations, the gendered dynamics, and the transformations that no existing research has given adequate attention.

3. Methodology

This study is concerned with understanding facilitation in Theatre for Development not as a set of techniques, but as a lived, situated practice shaped by experience, context, and reflection. Given this focus, the methodological approach prioritizes depth, meaning, and interpretation over measurement. It seeks to capture how facilitators make sense of their roles, negotiate challenges, and engage with communities in real-world settings. By centering lived experience, the methodology aligns with the participatory and reflective ethos that underpins Theatre for Development itself.

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-case, phenomenological research design. The choice of qualitative methodology is grounded in the research questions. Understanding what student facilitators experience requires methods that capture the depth and texture of lived experience rather than reducing it to measurable outputs (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). A phenomenological orientation is specifically appropriate because the central questions concern experience as it is lived from the inside, specifically what it felt like to be a student facilitator in a Ghanaian community, navigating unfamiliar terrain with real responsibilities and limited experience. The multi-case dimension stems from the selection of thirty student facilitators across multiple communities, issues, and years. This enables both within-case depth and cross-case comparison, allowing patterns that hold across the diversity of the data to be identified with confidence (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014).

3.2 Data Collection Methods

Three complementary data sources were used, constituting a triangulated dataset of substantial depth.

Field Notebooks. Each student kept a field notebook throughout their placement, recording daily observations, reflections, challenges, and decisions. These notebooks are read in this study as real-time accounts of experience as it unfolded, capturing moments of doubt, confusion, frustration, and breakthrough in relatively unguarded language, before retrospective sense-making reshapes them.

Project Reports. Formal project reports submitted at placement completion provided structured retrospective accounts of community entry, facilitation process, challenges, and personal reflection. Analysed alongside the notebooks, they reveal how students impose coherent narrative on raw experience, and where that narrative smooths over difficulties the notebooks recorded more honestly.

Semi-Structured Interviews. In-depth interviews were conducted with fifteen participants after placement completion, lasting sixty to ninety minutes each. Conducted in English with intermittent Ghanaian language, interviews covered community entry and integration; practical challenges including accommodation, safety, and the campus-community shuttle; facilitation difficulties and adaptive responses; the supervisory relationship; and personal and professional change. All were audio-recorded and transcribed in full.

3.3 Participants and Sample

The broader study draws on data from all thirty student facilitators who completed community TfD placements at UEW between 2022 and 2025. Fifteen were selected for in-depth interviews using purposive sampling designed to maximise variation across community type, gender, societal issue and level of facilitation difficulty. Both student facilitators who reported successful placements and those who encountered serious difficulties were deliberately included. It is important to note that placement arrangements across the dataset were not uniform. While some student facilitators were placed individually in their communities, others were paired or organised into small groups of two to three student facilitators working together in the same community on the same project. This variation in placement structure is analytically significant, as it shaped the dynamics of community entry, authority negotiation, and team functioning in distinct ways that are documented in the findings. Where differences between individual and group placements are relevant to the analysis, they are noted explicitly. Table 1 presents ten representative projects, selected to illustrate the diversity of communities, issues, approaches, and outcomes across the broader cohort.

Table 1. Overview of Selected TfD Community Projects (2022–2025)

Pseudonym	Gender	Community	Societal Issue	TfD Approach	Duration	Outcome
Biney	Female	Winneba	Malaria-free environment	Forum Theatre	3 months	Challenging
KB	Male	Gomoa Akramang	Environmental health & sanitation	Community Theatre	3 months	Successful
Dromo	Male	Apam	Teenage pregnancy	Playback Theatre	3 months	Successful
Ataa	Female	Ekumfi Otuam	Fostering entrepreneurship	Forum Theatre	3 months	Successful
Bombola	Male	Gomoa Awomerew	Girl child education	Forum Theatre	4 months	Successful
OPK	Male	Gomoa Mankoadze	Curbing school truancy	Popular Theatre	3 months	Challenging
Baba	Male	Winneba	Civil education	Forum Theatre	3 months	Challenging
Bee	Female	Awutu Senya	Child trafficking	Invisible/Forum Theatre	4 months	Successful
Akosua	Female	Gomoa Okyereko	Local rice rebranding	Community Theatre	3 months	Successful
Edubiase	Female	Gomoa Akotsi	Promoting recycling	Forum Theatre	3 months	Successful

The ten projects span rural, peri-urban, and coastal communities across the Central region of Ghana, addressing issues from public health and gender to civic engagement, economic empowerment, and environmental sustainability. Five facilitators were female and five male; placements ranged from three to four months. Among the ten projects, some involved individual student facilitators working alone in

their communities, while others involved pairs or small groups working collaboratively, a distinction that shaped the character of each placement experience in ways the findings explore in detail.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2019) six-phase framework comprising familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition and naming, and write-up. Analysis worked across all three data sources simultaneously, enabling triangulation from the earliest stages. Where all three sources converged, evidential weight was treated as strong; divergences were analysed as meaningful in their own right. The theoretical frameworks outlined in the literature review functioned as sensitising concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019) that guided analytical attention without foreclosing emergent themes. The researcher's dual role as supervisor and investigator is acknowledged as a positional complexity managed through anonymisation, assurances of academic independence, and triangulation with documents predating the research relationship. Informed and retrospective consent was obtained from all thirty participants.

The researcher's dual role as both supervisor and investigator requires transparent methodological disclosure. Three specific risks were identified and addressed. First, regarding recruitment and academic standing, all thirty student facilitators had completed their placements and received final grades before being invited to participate in the study. Participation was voluntary and entirely unconnected to academic assessment; this was communicated in writing at the point of invitation, and student facilitators were explicitly informed that non-participation carried no academic consequence. Second, regarding freedom to disclose, interviews were conducted after the supervisory relationship had formally concluded, pseudonymisation was guaranteed from the outset, and participants were encouraged to report negative and critical experiences rather than only successes. The near-total absence of harassment disclosures in field notebooks compared with interview data illustrates both the structural barriers to disclosure that this study sought to bypass and the partial success of the anonymised interview in doing so. Third, regarding interpretive risk, where analysis focused on cross-case patterns rather than individual cases, reducing the risk of the researcher confirming his own pedagogical assumptions.

4. Findings. Practical Experiences of Student Facilitators in Communities

The researcher entered this analysis as the supervisor of the student facilitators whose experiences are documented here. That position is both an asset and a risk. As an asset, it provided contextual knowledge that informed question design and interpretive sensitivity. As a risk, it created the possibility of reading the data in ways that confirmed rather than interrogated the researcher's pedagogical assumptions. Six major thematic findings emerged from analysis of the complete dataset. These themes overlap and build on each other, together producing a portrait of student facilitator experience significantly more complex and significantly more gender-differentiated than existing TfD training literature anticipates. A recurring analytical pattern is worth noting. Field notebooks captured experience with raw urgency; project reports imposed retrospective coherence; and interview accounts provided theorisation with the benefit of distance. Where all three converged, evidential weight was strong.

4.1 Finding 1. The Practical Realities of Community Residence

Before any facilitation could begin, student facilitators encountered a set of practical challenges that the TfD literature has not given much attention. The most consistently reported was finding suitable accommodation. Unlike short-term visits, the extended residential nature of TfD placements required student facilitators to secure housing in communities that were often unprepared for hosting university residents. Many arrived to find that prior arrangements were incomplete, promised accommodation unavailable, or the housing offered insufficient for a three-month stay. The absence of any formal institutional mechanism for securing student facilitator accommodation in advance meant that student facilitators frequently had to solve this problem alone, in an unfamiliar community, at the very moment when their psychological and relational resources were most stretched.

"I arrived on a Sunday evening and the person who was supposed to host me had travelled. I

> *slept in a small room in the community centre for three days before I found a room. I didn't tell my supervisor because I was embarrassed" — OPK*

The accommodation challenge carried consequences beyond logistical. Student facilitators who could not find stable housing struggled to establish the settled community presence that TfD facilitation requires. Moving between temporary arrangements disrupted the continuity of community relationships still being built, and the anxiety of housing insecurity consumed energy that should have been available for facilitation work.

A second and deeply serious challenge was the sexual harassment experienced by female facilitators. Multiple female student facilitators reported persistent and unwarranted sexual advances from community men sometimes including individuals formally supporting the project. This was not an isolated case. It recurred across different communities, issues, and years of the study, making it a structural feature of female student facilitator experience rather than an exceptional incident.

> *"Almost every week, some man in the community would approach me. Some were gentle about it, some were not. I was alone, far from home, and I didn't know how to handle it without making enemies in a community I needed to work in". — Bee*

The professional consequences were direct and measurable. Female student facilitators described modifying their behaviour in ways that compromised their effectiveness. They avoided evening community events where important informal relationships are built, limited their movement within the community, and maintained a guard in community relationships that TfD facilitation requires to be open and trusting. Several reported withholding the harassment from their supervisors out of fear of being relocated to different communities or of having their competency questioned. The near-total absence of this issue from field notebooks and project reports, compared with its prominence in anonymised interview data, reveals a structural failure where female student facilitators are not finding safe channels through which to seek support without professional penalty.

4.2 Finding 2. The Campus-Community Shuttle and Its Consequences

The most consistently and forcefully expressed concern across the entire dataset was the structural tension between community residence and continuing academic obligations on campus. Because student facilitators remain active degree candidates during their placements, they are required to attend lectures, seminars, and other academic activities on campus even while living in their communities. In practice, this requires regular travel between the project community and the campus to fulfil requirements that cannot be deferred.

For community integration, the most immediate casualty was continuity, the slow work of becoming genuinely part of a community's daily life, which is the foundation of effective TfD facilitation. Regular absences disrupted this process significantly, resetting relational ground built during periods of residence and communicating to community members that the facilitator's commitment was conditional.

> *"Every time I came back from campus, it felt like starting over. The women I had been building relationships with had moved on. I had to re-introduce myself emotionally, not just physically". — Baba*

> *"The movement between campus and the community really affected rehearsals in the community. Community members will be ready but as a facilitator I will be away"-Akosua*

For the facilitation process itself, the shuttle disrupted the momentum of TfD work that depends on consistent presence. Forum Theatre processes, community diagnosis, and performance rehearsals all require continuity; absences created gaps in community confidence and occasionally allowed tensions to escalate without the facilitator present to manage them. For the student facilitators themselves, the shuttle produced chronic role conflict, never fully present in either place, carrying the weight of competing obligations in both.

> *"I was never fully in either place. On campus I was thinking about the community. In the community I was worrying about what I was missing on campus. I felt pulled apart the whole*

time. It was stressful and financially draining" — Edubiase

"As for me, I had an issue with one lecturer because I couldn't fulfil a presentation requirement. I left my community very early in the morning but I still got to campus late. The lecturer would not listen to my excuse. Later in the evening when I returned to the community, I had also missed an appointment with the Odikro of the community. That day was a hell for me"—Bombola

Understood through Turner's (1969) framework, the campus-community shuttle represents an institutional interruption of the liminal passage at precisely its most fragile stages. It repeatedly pulls student facilitators back across the threshold before the transformative work of community immersion can be completed. It is, furthermore, a problem entirely within institutional power to address.

4.3 Finding 3. Community Entry, Identity Crisis, and the Negotiation of Legitimacy

Beyond practical hardships, student facilitators consistently described community entry as a moment of identity disruption. Upon arrival, they were confronted with a central question of *Who am I in this space?* Their role, positioned between teacher, facilitator, and learner, was unclear, creating both practical and personal uncertainty. Many expected that their university status would automatically give them authority, but this assumption quickly broke down.

"When I arrived, nobody cared that I was from UEW. They just saw a young person who didn't know anything about their community. I had to start from zero." — Baba

"We thought because we came from the university, they would see us as people who know what we are doing. But in the community, you have to prove yourself before they accept you" — KB

"At first, I didn't even know whether I should be teaching them or learning from them. It was confusing"— Biney

This experience reflects Turner's (1969) idea of liminality, where individuals are stripped of familiar identity markers. Early field notes show feelings of vulnerability and inadequacy, as student facilitators realised that knowing *what to do* was not enough. They first had to earn the right to act.

Gender differences were clear in how this identity shock was experienced. Male student facilitators were often given initial authority simply because of their gender. Communities tended to see them as leaders or teachers before they had proven themselves. However, this created pressure to perform authority too early, leading some to become overly directive.

Female student facilitators reported the opposite experience. They were more likely to be questioned and had to prove themselves before being taken seriously. At the same time, they were expected to remain polite and deferential, creating a tension between cultural expectations and facilitative leadership.

"The chief called me teacher and expected me to know everything. But the women I was working with treated me like a child because I was younger. I didn't know which one I was supposed to be". — Ataa

Across both groups, a key insight emerged. Authority is not given but must be negotiated. It cannot be claimed through institutional status or training alone. It must be built gradually through listening, presence, and genuine engagement. Student facilitators who focused on building relationships developed stronger facilitative foundations than those who relied on their training.

The most effective approach to community entry involved setting aside project plans and prioritising presence. Student facilitators who participated in everyday community life, attending funerals, helping with farming or household tasks, and joining informal conversations, were more readily accepted.

"The first month, I stopped thinking about the project. I just tried to be there. I went to the farm with them, I helped with water, playing football with the young men, I attended funerals. And slowly they started opening up to me" — Kwaku

For student facilitators placed in pairs or groups, this process involved an additional layer of negotiation. They had to establish authority not only in the community but also within their teams.

Questions of leadership emerged early, specifically who speaks, who leads, and whose approach is followed. In mixed groups, male student facilitators often assumed leadership roles by default, while female student facilitators had to assert their positions.

Where teams agreed on roles early, community entry was smoother. The community responded better to a clear and coordinated group. Where this was absent, internal tensions affected facilitation. At the same time, group placement offered important support. Student facilitators value having peers to reflect with, share challenges, and support each other emotionally, something individually placed student facilitators often lacked.

4.4 Finding 4. Cultural Navigation through Language, Gender Norms, Authority Structures, and Communication

Student facilitators encountered complex cultural dynamics that their classroom training had not fully prepared them for. These experiences can be understood across three key areas of language, gender norms, and authority structures. Each of these shaped how student facilitators engaged with the community, and in many cases, required them to learn new skills through practice rather than prior instruction.

Language emerged as one of the most immediate and influential challenges. For many student facilitators, working in communities where local languages dominated meant that communication was not straightforward. Student facilitators quickly realised that language was not just a tool for communication, but a marker of belonging. Communities responded positively when student facilitators made an effort to speak the local language, even imperfectly, and withdrew when student facilitators relied solely on English.

> *"When we tried to speak their language, even if we made mistakes, they appreciated it. But when we spoke only English, they became quiet and less involved"-Dromo*

Beyond basic communication, student facilitators also had to adapt to local ways of speaking and storytelling. The use of proverbs, indirect communication, and communal storytelling proved far more effective than the structured workshop formats they had learned in class. Translating TfD concepts into locally meaningful expressions required creativity and sensitivity. As a result, both male and female student facilitators reported significant growth in listening and non-verbal communication skills.

> *"I learned more about listening than talking. Sometimes you don't need many words; you just need to understand how people express themselves" — Ataa*

Gender norms created another layer of complexity, with notable differences between male and female facilitators. Female student facilitators faced multiple constraints. In addition to the harassment described earlier, they encountered more subtle forms of resistance. These included being interrupted during discussions, having their ideas redirected to male participants, and being informally assigned more passive or domestic roles within the community.

> *"Sometimes when I spoke, they would respond to a male colleague instead, as if I was not the one who made the point".* —Biney

To navigate this, many female student facilitators developed strategic approaches. One of the most effective strategies discovered independently by several participants was to build relationships with respected women in the community. By working through these women, student facilitators were able to extend their influence in culturally acceptable ways.

> *Some men would not take instructions from me. I had to work with the elder women, so that they will be speaking for me. One woman helped me a lot.*— Ataa

This strategy was not taught in any formal training. It emerged from experience, highlighting the importance of adaptive, context-driven facilitation.

Male student facilitators encountered a different set of gender-related challenges. While they were more readily accepted as authority figures, this came with expectations. Communities often expected them to be directive, decisive, and authoritative traits that conflicted with the participatory principles of TfD.

> *"They expected me to be in charge and give instructions, but TfD is not about commanding people. Sometimes when I invite the children and they don't come, their parents will tell me to beat them. It was difficult explaining to them my role in the community"-Kwaku*

Male student facilitators working on sensitive issues such as gender-based violence or teenage pregnancy also reported suspicion from community members.

> *"Some community members were wondering why I, as a man, was talking about teenage pregnancy and calling their young girls out for rehearsals. It made them question my intentions" —Dromo*

This situation required them to carefully negotiate their role and approach, balancing authority with sensitivity.

Finally, traditional and religious authority structures played a critical role in shaping student experiences, regardless of gender. Chiefs, elders, and religious leaders were not simply formal figures; they were central to community legitimacy. Their support often determined whether a project would succeed or fail. Student facilitators who followed proper protocols—such as introducing themselves formally, seeking permission, and involving leaders in their work—reported smoother engagement.

> *"When we involved the chief from the beginning, everything became easier. He even gave us accommodation. He also introduced us to the community and so they trusted us more" — Bombola*

> *"The involvement of the Assembly member was our breakthrough. He helped us to get all the support we needed in the community. On the final day of performance, he even gave us the sound systems for free"—OPK*

In contrast, those who overlooked these structures faced resistance.

> *"We didn't take the leadership seriously at first, and later it affected participation. People were not fully cooperating. We chased the Unit Assembly member for some time and we stopped since it was proving difficult. We thought we could do our own thing, but the story was different. until a pastor came to support us"—Edubiase*

Across all three areas, cultural navigation required student facilitators to move beyond theoretical knowledge and develop practical, context-sensitive skills. Language, gender expectations, and authority structures were not obstacles to be avoided, but realities to be understood and worked within. Effective facilitation, student facilitators learned, depends not only on what you know but on how well you can read, respect, and respond to the cultural environment you are working in.

4.5 Finding 5. Moments of Breakdown, Emotional Strain, and Adaptive Learning

Every student facilitator in this study encountered moments, often several, where things went wrong. Breakdown was not occasional; it was a normal part of community TfD placement. What differed was not whether student facilitators experienced it, but how they responded.

Breakdown took different forms. Some student facilitators saw participation decline over time. Others faced refusal from community members, including parents withdrawing their children. In some cases, chiefs, elders, or religious leaders withdrew support or discouraged participation. Group tensions within the community also disrupted facilitation. At times, the student facilitators themselves were part of the problem, as fatigue and emotional exhaustion reduced their effectiveness.

A major dimension of breakdown was financial and logistical strain. Most student facilitators worked with limited resources, covering accommodation, food, transport, and project materials on their own. Many reported running out of money, borrowing from others, or making difficult choices between personal needs and project demands. Some attempted to seek sponsorship from local organisations, churches, or individuals, but this process was often slow, uncertain, and emotionally draining.

> *"There were days I did not have transport money to go to the far end of the community. I had to borrow from my landlady, a community member. It was embarrassing. You come to help people but you are the one who needs help" —* Kwaku

> *"There were times we needed to provide water to participants during rehearsal but we didn't have money. It was very embarrassing as they kept asking for water"* — Bee

> *"Most of the community members felt we have money because we came from the University. Others also felt we had sponsorship because they always asked for money from us"* — Dromo

Financial pressure added to the emotional burden student facilitators were already carrying. Many felt embarrassed to ask for help, hesitant to inform supervisors, and uncertain about completing their projects. In group placements, differences in financial support among team members sometimes created tension.

The emotional impact of breakdown was significant. Student facilitators described frustration, self-doubt, embarrassment, and, in some cases, a loss of confidence strong enough to make them consider leaving the placement. These feelings were not temporary. Several student facilitators spoke about staying awake at night, reflecting on what had gone wrong.

> *"When things went wrong, I kept thinking it was me. That, maybe I wasn't good enough. The guys in my group seemed to just move on. I stayed up at night going over what I had done wrong"*— Biney

Despite these challenges, student facilitators did not remain stuck. Two main patterns of response emerged.

The first was *reactive adaptation*, making immediate adjustments to keep the process going. This reflects Schön's (1983) idea of reflection-in-action. Student facilitators changed their approach in the moment when activities failed. When verbal methods did not work, they used songs and dance. When formal spaces felt ineffective, they moved to informal settings such as under trees, in churches, or after community gatherings. They also shifted to local language, proverbs, and storytelling to improve engagement.

> *"We were having a rehearsal in the open space and the rain came and scattered everyone. We moved under the one small hut and started jama. Before we realised, the whole place was full again. Since then, we added jama singing to our activities"*— Bombola

The second pattern was *reflection on action*, a deeper response in which student facilitators stepped back and rethought their approach. This involved recognising that their original plans did not fully align with community realities and make fundamental changes.

> *"I sat with my field notebook for a whole day and read everything from the beginning. I realised I had been a leader but not a facilitator for my project, I was not involving the community. I had to start again to actually engage them".*— Baba

> *"Initially we used to meet in a school. But when the children closed from school and went home, it was difficult for them to come back. I changed the venue to a church which was more convenient and they came. The church was also a neutral space for children from different schools"*— Estee

Across the dataset, this ability to reflect and rethink was the strongest indicator of successful projects. Student facilitators who moved beyond immediate reactions and adjusted their work to fit community realities achieved deeper engagement and more meaningful outcomes.

4.6 Finding 6. Emotional Experiences, Team Dynamics, and Professional Transformation

The most consistent finding of this study concerns the transformation student facilitators experienced during their community placements. These changes affected their professional identity, social awareness, and personal character. Before discussing these transformations, two important aspects of the experience must be noted, specifically the emotional impact of encountering community realities and the dynamics of working in student teams.

Students from urban and peri-urban backgrounds described a strong emotional shock when confronted with rural community life. They encountered poverty, gender inequality, child labour, and limited access to healthcare in ways that were immediate and personal. These experiences produced empathy,

discomfort, and sometimes a sense of helplessness.

> *"I did not expect to feel what I felt. I knew poverty existed. But living in it, eating with families who had very little, watching children work instead of going to school and sometimes going to school without eating; that is different from knowing about it."* — Bee

Female student facilitators often reported deeper emotional connections, especially with women and girls in the community. Male student facilitators, on the other hand, described starting with some emotional distance, which gradually changed as they built relationships over time.

Where student facilitators worked in pairs or groups, team dynamics became another important part of the experience. Student facilitators had to negotiate roles, share responsibilities, and agree on how to facilitate activities. Conflicts sometimes arose over leadership, decision-making, and unequal participation.

Some student facilitators reported carrying more of the workload than others, which created tension within the group. In mixed groups, male student facilitators often dominated early discussions, while female student facilitators sometimes withdrew at first. Over time, however, many female student facilitators developed what they described as *quiet leadership*, building relationships and influencing decisions behind the scenes.

Despite these challenges, group work also provided strong support systems. Students value having peers to share experiences with, reflect on challenges, and support each other emotionally.

> *"Having someone to talk to after a difficult day helped a lot. You realise you are not alone". —Ataa*

This shared experience created a sense of solidarity that supported learning, even when group tensions existed. Professionally, all student facilitators described a shift in how they understood facilitation. They moved from seeing it as a set of techniques to understanding it as a relational process based on presence and connection.

> *"I came in thinking facilitation was about what you do. I left knowing it is about who you are when you are with people"* — OPK

Socially, student facilitators developed a deeper awareness of the structural conditions shaping community life. Through sustained engagement, they began to understand issues such as poverty and gender inequality not as individual problems but as systemic ones. This shift reflects a form of critical consciousness developed through experience rather than classroom learning.

Personally, student facilitators reported significant growth. They became more patient, more comfortable with uncertainty, and more empathetic. Their understanding of failure also changed.

> *"Before, I was afraid of making mistakes. In the community, I made so many mistakes that I stopped being afraid. Mistakes became information. That changed everything. Initially, I was too careful but when I accepted that it was normal to make mistakes, the tension on me came a little down and I was able to work"* — Baba

Gender differences in transformation were also evident. Female student facilitators often described gaining confidence and discovering their ability to lead in challenging environments. Male student facilitators described learning to shift from directive leadership to more participatory approaches.

Importantly, female student facilitators who had faced harassment, gender constraints, and self-doubt reported some of the deepest transformations. Their success in these conditions led to strong professional resilience and practical intelligence.

This final point is very significant; these transformations occurred largely through student facilitators' own efforts, often despite limited institutional support. This suggests the need for stronger systems to support student facilitators during their community placements. Taken together, these findings reveal that student facilitator experience is structured, demanding, and deeply shaped by both institutional conditions and gendered realities.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study advance four interconnected arguments that extend and enrich existing Theatre for Development (TfD) scholarship.

The first and central argument is that the student facilitator in community is a distinct analytical category that has not been adequately theorised. The path to becoming a facilitator is shaped by a set of recurring experiences, including practical hardship, identity disorientation, gendered negotiation of authority, cultural navigation, emotional encounters, team conflict, breakdown, and transformation. These are not isolated events but structural features of community-based TfD placements. They appear across different communities and cohorts, and their intensity varies significantly by gender. Recognising these patterns is essential for designing training programmes that properly prepare and support student facilitators.

The second argument concerns the campus to community shuttle, the most consistently reported challenge in the dataset and the most directly within institutional power to address. Student facilitators are expected to maintain full academic engagement on campus while simultaneously pursuing community immersion, an institutional contradiction with predictable consequences. Turner's (1969) concept of liminality clarifies why these matters. The shuttle interrupts community integration and impedes the transformative work of field placement. Practical solutions exist, including adjusted academic schedules, flexible assessment arrangements, and an institutional acknowledgment that community immersion is the primary obligation of the placement period.

The third argument establishes gender as a central organising factor in student facilitator experience, not a supplementary dimension of it. Gender differences appeared consistently across all six findings, in how authority is assigned and negotiated, how breakdown is experienced, what types of challenges are encountered, what adaptive strategies are developed, and what forms of transformation are achieved. Female student facilitators faced additional structural burdens of harassment, heightened scrutiny, and a tendency to internalise failure that require institutional rather than individual responses. Significantly, female student facilitators who navigated these conditions often demonstrated the deepest transformations, a finding that reflects both remarkable individual resilience and the unequal conditions under which it was required.

The fourth argument concerns placement structure. Whether student facilitators are placed individually or in groups is not merely a logistical decision. It shapes the entire learning experience. Group placements introduced role conflict, uneven participation, and internal tensions; they also provided peer support, shared reflection, and emotional solidarity. Turner's (1969) concept of communitas captures this; bonds formed through shared liminal experience produce a pedagogical resource that individual placements cannot replicate. Placement structure should be treated as a deliberate pedagogical decision and actively designed rather than defaulted into.

This study has some limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the data is drawn from a single institution (UEW), which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other TfD programmes or contexts. Second, the researcher's dual role as supervisor and investigator, while carefully managed, may have influenced how participants framed their experiences. Third, although the study draws on multiple data sources, it focuses on student facilitators' perspectives and does not include the views of community members, which would provide a fuller picture of the facilitation process. These limitations do not reduce the value of the findings but point to areas for further research.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study set out to demonstrate that the student facilitator in community is a distinct and under-examined category in Theatre for Development (TfD) practice, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. The findings confirm this position and extend it significantly. Student facilitators operate within a space shaped by institutional expectations and community realities, practical hardship and personal vulnerability, cultural negotiation and adaptive learning. This experience is not uniform. It is structured, recurring, and distinctly shaped by gender.

The evidence assembled across these six findings converges on a clear analytical conclusion. TfD

community placement, as currently structured, produces recurring patterns of challenge that are systematically under-prepared for, under-supported, and distinctly shaped by gender. Student facilitators navigate a structured sequence of hardship, identity disorientation, cultural negotiation, facilitation breakdown, and eventual transformation whose contours are predictable enough to be prepared for, and who's most damaging features are amenable to institutional remedy.

The study makes four key contributions. It provides one of the first sustained empirical accounts of student facilitators in community-based TfD practice in Ghana. It introduces scaffolded liminality as a conceptual tool for understanding supervision in field-based learning. It offers a clear gendered analysis of student experience. Finally, it identifies community placement structure, individual versus group, as a meaningful pedagogical factor rather than a logistical choice.

The implications are direct. TfD training must prepare student facilitators for the realities of community engagement, including disorientation, authority negotiation, and gendered challenges. Assessment should prioritise the process of reflection, adaptation, and community integration rather than only outcomes. The campus to community tension requires institutional reform through flexible scheduling and clear prioritisation of field engagement. Female student facilitators must be supported through safe, confidential systems that address harassment and vulnerability. Supervision must be more structured, responsive, and aligned with the stages of student facilitator experience. Where group placements are used, student facilitators should be mentally prepared for the demands of collaborative work, and supervisors should actively engage with team dynamics.

At its core, TfD insists that meaningful learning happens in the encounter between performance and community life. This study shows that this encounter is not only transformative but demanding, uneven, and deeply structured by context and gender. Student facilitators do not simply apply knowledge in this space. They are reshaped by it. The making of a competent TfD facilitator does not begin with theory, but in the lived encounter where knowledge is tested, unsettled, and remade.

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