Sinsai and Self-understanding: Practicing Skills and Learning Isan Local Wisdom through the Process of Making Contemporary Puppet Performance.*

Received: *November 29, 2018*
Revised: *September 2, 2019*
Accepted: *September 3, 2019*

Pachaya Akkapram**

Abstract

This research article aims to explain the process of learning about"self-understanding" of participants (youth and students) through the process and activities of making a contemporary puppet performance titled "Sinsai Dek Thewda–Khonkaen University" as part of a work-in-progress of practice as research (PaR). The author leads participants from the division of dramatic arts, Khonkaen University (youths in urban areas) to study and learn "local wisdom" from Sinsai story, murals, Mor Lum (Isan singing), making basketry, and lifestyle in Nong No Tai community, Na Dun District, Maha Sarakham Province. The research used Isan Puppet Theatre "Hom Thong Sri Uppatham" as the main platform for learning Isan arts, culture, crafts, lifestyles and local wisdom. This process lasted seven months and two facilitators (Authors and Artist-in-residence) collaborated to design the process and activities in the course. Participants learned "Isan being" from practicing together with people, artists and philosophers in the community, as well as created contemporary puppet performance to communicate ideas/issues to the Isan people and society in general. The results found that activities in research process can help participants relearn Isan local wisdom through self-repeating and self-understanding processes to find their "Isan being", as well as discover their reflective voices through the contemporary puppet performance that reflects Isan identities and spirits.

Keywords: Self-understanding, Puppet Performance, Applied Theatre, Practice as Research.

* This research paper was part of the project "Sinsai Dek Thewda-Khon Kaen University: Training Life Skills and Learn Self-understanding through The Process of Making Contemporary Isan Puppet Performance." supported by The Thailand Research Fund (TRF) No. RTA5980010 (2016-2019), I would like to thank Professor Pornrat Damhrung, Department of Dramatic Arts, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Kru Siang Preecha Karun and Dr.Tanatchaporn Kittikong, who are my research assistant and best partner, for helping me in the process of making puppet performance project.

** Pachaya Akkapram, M.A. (Dramatic Arts), Lecturer in the Division of Music and Performing Arts, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Khon Kaen University, Thailand, email: pachak@kku.ac.th.

Introduction

Urbanization is defined to be modernity and redundant in Thai-society, that involve to making variable of behavior patterns. Rama Jitti Institute has manipulated the project of following the situation of youth and children (Child Watch) since 2005, found that the behavior of Thai youth and children (called Thai New-breed) can be distinguished into 2 groups included the first group is "high growth, high increase" refers to children whose characteristics include Night-party/Nightlife, spending much time with mobile phones, truancy, acceptance of sexual relations, drinking, and excessive internet use and the second group is "high growth, high decrease" refers to children whose characteristics include as not going to the monastery, not travelling with the family, not playing sports, not doing housework.

When I look at the youth in urban Khon Kaen province, especially the students of Khonkaen University, I found that they have similar behaviors. I started project by question "What is the value of Thai New-breed?" after that I use two keywords included **"**life-skills and self-understanding**"** lead youth in urban (drama students) to learn and to live in rural areas for creating puppet performance together with local artists of Dek Thewada Puppet Troupe at Nong No Tai village, Na Dun district, Maha Sarakham province.

Research questions

Information is collected in Nong No Tai village through interviews, talking, interrogation, and sharing ideas with the main artist, villagers and children, as well as seeing puppet performance from Dek Thewda for learning thoughts, lifestyle-understanding and attitude of self and society, after that I analyse the information and use it to create research questions such as

- What is the concept of self-understanding?
- Can they find self-understanding through practicing puppet creation?
- How can participants gain essential life-skills for use in daily life from the process of puppet creation together with main artist and villagers?
- Can participants know and understand the way of life or value of self from learning and using local wisdom, cultural capital and community-based arts to create performances?

Questions are then used as starting points for designing the activities in drama-process, during the research process, ideas are exchanged with the main artist to make "Research/Performance" an area of learning and experimenting for creating collaborative puppet performances amongst participants.

Conceptual framework and Tools

To lead the youths from urban areas to learn life-skills for searching and knowing the self through making puppet performances with artist-in-residence is the core of the conceptual framework of research. From the objectives of research, the author has created relevant research tools and studied theories, knowledge and related information as the basis for the research design and research methodology, as follows**:**

Life-skills and self-understanding: these are two words which are related according to Office of the Basic Education Commission: OBEC (2009), *"Life-skills consists of the ability of a person in managing problems in society and preparing for adaptation in the future, and Self-understanding is to know about what oneself, one's worthiness and the ability to present self to others".* This thing leads to the 21st century learning concept as shown below.

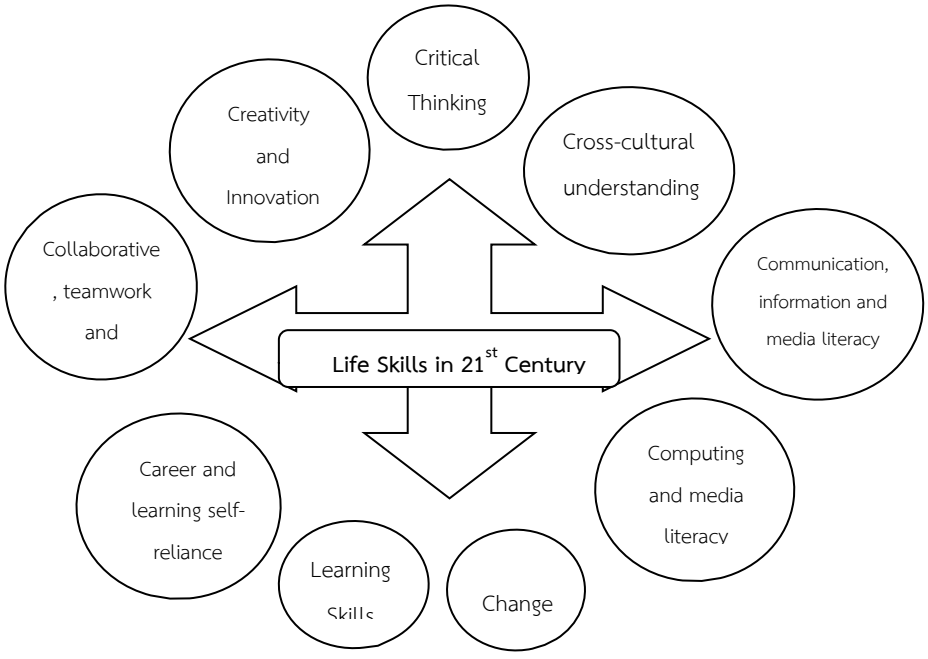


Figure 1 Skills of 21st century learning

Information of life-skills in figure 1 is used to design the process and activities so that the goal of the activities is connected to creating and learning about life-skills and self-understanding in the process of making puppet performance.

Cultural capital is a concept from sociology that explains the phenomenon in society that is directly importance to people and community, Suphang Chantavanich (2015) explains about cultural capital concept of Bourdieu that "The 3 types of Cultural capital are as follows 1) Habitus is presented as habits of the body and mind, embodied through our way of life and experience of culture over a long period of time 2) Objectified state is presentation of cultural capital in the form of objects or medias, collected or inherited by owner 3) Institutionalized state refer to cultural capital in the form of credentials through certification or qualification and being awarded by educational institutes"I choose Nong No Tai village in Nadun district, Maha Sarakham province as the main space for the research because this village has diverse cultural capital such as well-known personalities, various craft tradition and community, as follows:

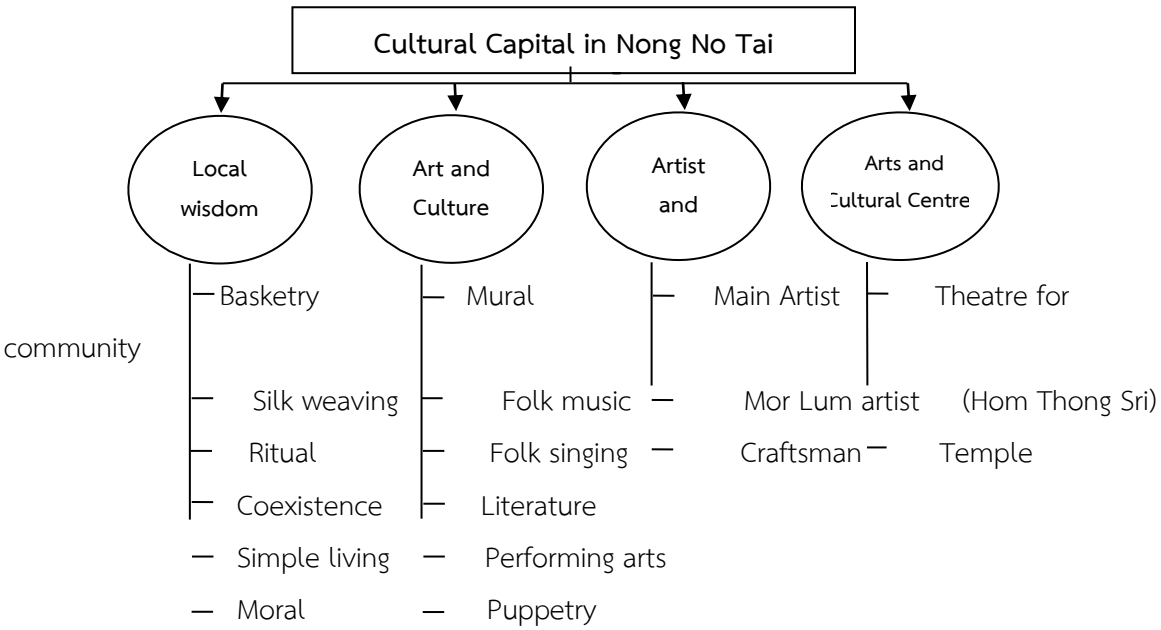


Figure 2 Cultural capital in Nong No Tai village as related to Bourdieu's concept

I lead the urban youth to live in Nong No Tai village and to learn local wisdom, traditional style, art and skills of folk singing (called Mor Lum), murals of Sinsai story on the walls of Buddhist temple hall created by local artist in community, the Sinsai story (as main story in creating a performance), as well as training basket making, weaving and practicing making puppets with main artist and experts in community.

Devising Theatre is a process of creating performance in different approaches from conventional theatrical as explained by Deirdre Heddon (2006), *"devising to describe a mode of work in which no script—neither written play, text nor performance score—exists prior to the work's creation by the company".* Processes of creation focus on collaborative creation of group members rather than individuals, then the collective of various drama/theatre workers participate in a creation process as specified by Pornrat Damrhung (2016), *"[collaborative creation] works through a team of people with different sorts of training and background in theatre, including directors, actors, choreographers, designers, playwrights and/or dramaturges, who create an original performance".*

However, the core of the creation process depends on the state of the environment, context, planning, structure of plot/ situations/ story/ issues as stated by Bicat and Baldwin (2002) who explored this important idea:

devising process is one in which the team must search out the stories that contain interesting or puzzling of the way people interact with another and then locate what we might describe as playable actions (p.18).

Although, creation process do not use play script as traditional theatres do but devising theatre still need to use text in progress work as pre-production: studying, analyzing and making performance structure, or between progress work and throughout rehearsal performance, as Alison Oddey (1994) stated, "devised theatre often occurs in the combination of narrative, "text",... explorations during the devising process" together with visual arts such as painting, sculpture and storytelling in community for searching and developing performance that connected to attitudes, interpretations and issues in community and society".

Devising performance/theatre not only presents subjectivity but the issue or message is derived from the group who tell a story that is related with "community being" as place, story and people, and communicates these main ideas in performance to the villagers who are the audience as Dawid Watt (1991) argued that

The interactions within a group of people who choose to see themselves as community continually alter the nature of community, so that it is always in state of 'becoming', and therefore, growing, and thus avoids the stasis of a 'thing' to be serviced.(p.61)

In the above, I have briefly clarified the concept of Devising Theatre for the show that is used as the basis of making puppet performance. In addition, the research project has directly associated with the local people and the artistic community throughout the progress work. Another main emphasis is the collective creation between the youth and the main artist.

The Research

The research is basically Practice as Research (PaR) as explained by Tanatchaporn Kittikong (2016) that *"Practice is main process to bring new knowledge"*. This means that the research work in the field of art prioritize the creation of art. The creative process becomes part of the research methodology, and the final performance is used as the results of research to gain new knowledge.

In addition, practice-research as a way to extract knowledge in the field of performance is also known as Practice-led Research. The practice-led Researcher, however, is always in a state of unease and confusion. Brad Haseman and Daniel Mae (Smith and Dean 2012) agrees with this though because it always appear in creative arts work, they state that

> *Practice-led Research, particularly for the creative practice-led researcher is unruly, ambiguous and marked by extremes of interpretive anxiety for the reflexive researcher. It is this way because it is deeply emergent in nature and the need to tolerate the ambiguity and make it sensible through heightened reflexivity is a part of what it is to be a successful practice-led researcher kin to the creative art.*

The researcher needs a long time period and participants need to adapt themselves to the particular environment and situation. These factors however, lead to a process of problem-solving in puppet creation and performance development that subsequently leads to new knowledge.

Research Methodology

Practice-led Research as the basic concept is used for designing research methodology and divided into three phases as following

1. Phase 1 (work-in-progress between October-December 2016): Document Collection and Information Analysis, Drama-Process Designing and Bringing The Participants to Learning Arts and Life Styles of Isan Rural at Nong No Tai Village.

First step, I talk to the main artist in rural areas to familiarize myself with the underlying thoughts, attitudes and concepts of puppet performance work as well as exchange ideas that lead to creating the research methodology such as

- To search storytelling from local artists in community.
- Painting practice and use murals on church walls as prototypes for learning of Isan identity through study of shape, line, pattern, figure and color.
- To learn storytelling approach, language and poets from local artists.
- Learning and listening to rhythms of folk music in original styles and experiment to create new-sound for use in performance.
- Creating puppets and manipulating puppets by traditional techniques and collaborative work with contemporary puppeteer-artist.

Research focuses on youth development. Puppet creation and performance are not only useful in art practice but can teach one about collaborative work in groups such as sharing of opinions/thought/ideas, reflection and conclusion after completion, that helps youth learn different ideas, listen carefully to feedback from others and transform through coexistence with others through this drama-process. The process is summarized as follows:

- Searching and analyzing community for finding advantages
- Creating puppets and performance
- Brainstorming and exchanging ideas amongst participants in group for creating leader and problems management
- Selecting story/issues that imply good morals and philosophy to cultivate discernment between good and bad morals in youth

Creative research/Practice as Research focuses on action, practicum is core of the research method that leads participants to ***practice*** → ***improve*** → ***repeat action*** to gain life-skills and self-understanding, therefore the research gets rid of longstanding methods. Working in this way is not always simple and requires methodological flexibility and sensitivity (Peter O'Connor and Michael Anderson 2015, 46) managing activities will happen "day-to-day"

because the researcher must know the learning outcome of participants, and deliver activities designed for youth development.

Objectives in phase 1 consist of leading the urban youth to learn and know rural life. They are orientated by learning the lifestyle, tradition, worship, local arts, agricultural experience, avoiding the materialistic, training tolerance through work hard, and perceiving spirits of Isan from simplicity and broad-mindedness of villagers such as Bai Sri Su Kwan (doing through relationship and morale), going into the forest to search for barks and collecting dyeing-coloring from natural sources, mowing and crating house roof, studying Sinsai's murals at Photharam temple and training Mor Lum (folk singing) with artist in community.

2. Phase 2 (work-in-progress between January-May 2017): Making Puppets and Performing Puppet in Educational Institutes and Communities.

Puppets in projects differ from the original. Participants study the structure and performing method of Dek Thewda puppets, which lack a core inside the puppets, having only two handles from behind the head and back that puppeteer must hold unto while performing. A variety of parts such as hands, arms and legs can move independently except the mouth. Puppets are moved according to the music and the directions of movement is always straight line. 1-2 persons manipulate the puppets but do not interact with each other. The puppeteer must sing and speak dialogues besides manipulating the puppet. Main musical instruments are Kaen **(**woodwind instrument), drums and cymbals.

The process consists of collective creation between participants, main artist and villagers who are experts in basket making. In the beginning of creation, the experiment using sedges as material for making head and body of puppet was problematic because it was difficult to weave and took a long time. Due to this, we changed to bamboo and sticky-rice baskets to make puppets like the originals but having different specifications in costume, accessories, surface and techniques of movement.

On the other hand, participants were trained in Mor Lum singing by local artist. This includes voicing, pitch, comparing voicing with Kane, sounding, techniques of using high-pitched and low-pitched, and understanding tempo and melody of Kaen. Local artist acts as trainer to participants for Mor Lum singing.

The Creation and Recommencement are mainly methods in process of making puppet and performance rehearsal. They are procedures to develop puppets, performance text and movement techniques of puppet performance. To renew and repeatedly practice are importantly tools to get participants to learn from practice-based methods by confronting

problems with action and brainstorming to problem-solve. This helps them understand that practice is the way to find “knowledge”.

3. **Phase 3 (work-in-progress between June-August 2017): Performance Developed as Theatre Arts and Performing in The Theatre**

At the end of the journey of performing in many different areas, I develop the performance as Theatre arts by changing the role from researcher-practitioner to be a director, and change of main area from the community to the Khon Kaen University. Group and participants comprised all students from Division of Music and Performing Arts. Both the puppeteer and musicians improved the performance by adapting a new storyline in order to present about the research project. It raises the question "What was discovered?" and was titled “Sinsai and self-understanding” which was the final edition of the puppet performance.

Plots with conflict and character requirements were clearly based on methods of Western drama. The essence of the main idea was expanded and emphasized by alternating cutting events. Lyrics were adjusted to suit the narrative and the storytelling process and to make the characters’ dialogue brief. Through brainstorming, some changes were made to the scenes to connect the events effectively in order to communicate what the participants have discovered and nearly forgotten after the end of the second phase.

The participants that involved in the project since the beginning are trained to convey to new members, breathing exercises, visual display, natural gesture and movement, experimental manipulation with dual or three puppeteers, division of roles in the manipulation, concentration, imagination, interactive communication, rhythmic, realistic-natural movement, including rehearsal performance and development process to enable a convincing and entertaining performance.

The first problem encountered during rehearsal is that the musicians do not understand how to create music for the dramatic. I used interpretation approach with the musicians to improvise for the creating of sounds that are related to performance during rehearsals – melody appropriate to the situation and the mood of the story. The interpretation allows musicians to understand the meaning of the characters, situations, and various symbols that appear in the story. The main instruments consist of Kaen, folk drums, cymbals, and other folk instruments joined together to make music with diversity, such as fiddle, woodwind, and folk drums to create music/sound in performance that uses a mix of schemes with Western theatre methods to create sounds appropriately, and in relation to the show.

The presentations style is a full version performance in the theater that includes the perfect technical lighting and sound. It is different from performance outside of the theater, so it was possible to create special effects in the performance imagined by the director, such as backtracking, or creating fantastic scenes such as the forest and the stars. Playing live music makes the performance and music combine perfectly. The performance can lead audiences to interact with the story emotionally and intellectually, as well as appreciate the puppet performance as realistic, fun and artistic.

Evaluation

Evaluative research consists of two parts: activities during the research process and work performance.

During the research process, evaluative research consists of, writing personal notes of participants through a notebook, personal video recorder, and taking lessons after completion of activities. The reading notes reveal personal views that are not revealed in the group. The video shows the expression, emotion and communication of ideas that occurs after the activity. In addition, the researcher observed that the dynamics of development contributes to the behavior, commitment, patience and willingness to be involved in the process.

This measurement makes it possible to track and compare ideas, attitudes and behaviors of the participants before enrollment that gradually changes during the process. Talking informally and recording conversations make the researcher able to review the results that change frequently. It also ensures that activities-processes can contribute to the goal defined in practical terms, and the indicators continue to contribute to research as well.

Performance is the result of practices which led to the discovery of new knowledge. The creation of puppets and puppet shows created and developed by the participants show that the results of the study are substantial. It also demonstrates the changing needs of the participants, according to the researcher question before the operation. For example, 1. Expression of life skills, including the creation and development of Puppet Theater, singing, puppetry and developing a quality-artistic values of the performance. Adapting to the rural society, and simple living. 2. Self-esteem, understanding their ability and skills such as self-discovery and creativity in art. Participants can describe the discovery process and the changes that occur on their own and this was demonstrated when they answered questions after the show. These are the indicators and evidence that the research could lead to a successful result based on objective of research.

Sinsai: New Interpretation for Creating Performance Text

A new story of Sinsai was created after collecting information from the main artist, the elderly in the community, various murals and texts. Then the participants go through a process of brainstorming, analysis and interpretation. This main idea that resulted from this process is "Morality Ethics and Intellect are the basis of humanity's way of life". Characters in the Sinsai story struggle through difficult situations in life and use morality/ethics/intellect to reach the goal of life. Performance text used interpretation, adaptation and amplifying characters, situations and conflicts, as well as collocate incidences to creating a new plot, then use devising theatre process and improvisation techniques to create dialogues, and Mor Lum lyrics created by local artist.

The Difference Puppetry: Dek Thewda's Puppets VS Puppets of Research Project

The puppets have a physical appearance and movement that is similar to the human body. The body parts consist of the shoulder, elbow, wrist, and knee. The upper and lower body of puppets are separated. The limbs are connected by spring, wire, tendon and dry feces of buffalo and hot glue are used to help hold the material firmly and durably. PVC pipe was used as the core of the puppets for balancing and as a handle to perform the body. These new puppets were built through the exchange of ideas amongst artists, craftsman in community and participants. The knowledge from different people enable new puppets to move their limbs differently from old puppets.

Individual Development and Transformation of Participants

Bringing the youth from urban areas to learn about life-skills and self-esteem in rural areas needs adjustment and familiarization over a long period of time. The researcher notices and evaluates participants periodically, and found that development occurs at the individual level and resulted from the 'Puppet Show'. Before the research, participants (referred to as "New Thai Youth" in urban contexts) in the first phase, found that they understood the agricultural way of life. The daily life with the farm and a simple life with no luxuries and no hustle enables them to understand and appreciate "time".

Without prior experience or basic training, the participants were able to learn northeastern-style singing, basket making, dyeing and weaving. The seriousness of the activities reduces the use of mobile phones and online game playing. Participants were able to concentration and show creativity in the workplace, overcome the fear of making art, open their minds to learn from innovative-new methods, change their opinions about social and

teen issues that are the result of materialism, and improve their communication, leadership and teamwork skills.

Conclusion

Roselina Johari Md. Khir (2017) states that *"The best thing that folklore teaches people is their common humanity".* The choice of rural area as the main area of this research help participants learn about local wisdom and the "cultural capital" of Isan Identity that reflect simplicity, and lead them to improve their "self-esteem" in the following ways:

Participants discover the humble, orderly life, the generosity and sacrifice of rural communities through the artists in community who learn by practice, the researcher accumulates local wisdom. This knowledge shows faith and belief-based creativity that is simple but is full of esthetic value.

Sinsai contemporary puppet performance includes the participation of several groups that work together to create the puppets. It has the distinction of Dek Thewda Puppet Group. It includes the design and development of puppet techniques that combines both Puppet Theater and Creative Puppet styles. Script creation comes from a new interpretation of folk literature and communication on social issues. The verse and Phaya **(**Isan Proverb) is used to establish a dialogue with the Isan dialect and create music with folk instruments. The puppet show is the creative capital of culture and wisdom of a community that expresses "Isan being".

The story of **Sinsai and Self-understanding** show that "practice-led" research can be effectively presented to see the changes and discovery in terms of "skills and self", of participants, according to the research **question**, before the design and implementations of research finding.

Therefore, the findings from the research process include the strategies of creating contemporary puppet from folk literature, cultural capital, and local wisdom. In addition, it also offers new methods of puppet creation and discovery a way of life in the rural areas as an approach to provide "New Knowledge" to the urban youth. Exactly, these findings are useful for the future development of performing arts and to the communities of performers that interested to working outside the theatre.

References

Asmawi, Adelina, ed. (2017). *The Art of Creative Research*. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press.

Barrett, E., Bold, B., ed. (2007). *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bicat., T., and Chris B., ed. (2002). *Devised and Collaborative Theatre: A Practical Guide*. United Kingdom: Crowood.

Chantavanich, S. (2015). *Theories of Sociology* (in Thai). Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press.

Connor'O, P., Anderson, M. (2015). *Applied Theatre Research Radical Departures*. United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

Damrhung, P. (2014). *Applied Drama: Using Drama Process as Tool for Development* (in Thai). Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press.

Heddon, D, and Jane M. (2005). *Devising Performance: A Critical History*. United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan.

Karoon, P. (2016). October 21, 2016. Interview with autor. Hom Thong Sri Theatre, Maha Sarakham.

Kittikong, T., (2016). Practice as Research in Performance (in Thai). *Journal of Fine and Applied Arts, Khon Kaen University, Volume 8,* 107-130.

Kershaw, B., Nicholson, H., ed. (2011). *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*. United Kingdom: Edinburgh University Press.

Mercer, Robson, and Fenton,. (2012). Live Research: Methods of Practice-Led Inquiry in Performance*. Australia: Lady Finger.*

Oddey, A. (1994). *Devising Theatre*. New York: Routledge.

Office of the Basic Education Commission. (2009). *Strengthening Life Skills Focused on Qualities of Learner Development* (in Thai). Bangkok: Ministry of Education.

Promphakping, B. (2014). *Concepts and Theories of Development from Material Wealth to the Wellbeing of Nation* (in Thai). Khon Kaen: Khon Kaen University Press.

Smith, H., Dean., T., R. ed. (2012). *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*. United Kingdom: Edinburgh University Press.