Drama as Creative Learning:
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_We shall make lively use of all means, old and new, tried and untried, deriving from art and deriving from other sources, in order to put living reality in the hands of living people in such a way that it can be mastered._ (Bertolt Brecht 1938)

Drama education has the potential to be both a discipline in its own right and also to be a concrete and creative process for learning in other disciplinary or curricular settings. Different modalities of function and purpose may encourage different kinds of creative learning in drama, or at least what is most likely to be valued in a particular context as creative learning. This chapter considers drama both as a site and as a process for creative learning and teaching and seeks to define some of its specific creative characteristics. The argument is that all forms of drama and theatre have acting at their heart and that learning to act in both the artistic and social sense increases young people’s capacity to be socially creative.

Public Acts of Social and Artistic Creativity

Drama is considered as site and process because the culture of the drama space itself often has particular physical and psychic qualities which encourage creative processes and interactions. This is most likely to be the case in rehearsal rooms, studios and other places, which become ‘open’ spaces both in terms of how the space itself is used and constantly re-imagined and open also in terms of knowledge and the outcomes of the creative work that goes on in that space. In open space learning there are flexible and less hierarchical uses of space: and knowledge is considered provisional, problematic and unfinished. There is often a ‘dethroning’ of the power of the teacher, leader or director and an expectation that learning, or rehearsal, will be negotiated and co-constructed. Open space learning requires trust and mutuality amongst participants; the circle is its essential shape. Crucially the space is open to others, it is a shared public space constituted in order to negotiate meanings socially and artistically because, as Dewey (2007: 20) put it, ‘things gain meaning by being used in a shared experience or joint action’.

Drama may manifest in different ways for young people; as a curriculum subject in the arts; as an arts process used in other areas of the curriculum; as extra-curricular or community based youth theatre; as rehearsals leading to performance; as entertainment in theatre settings and as vocational training in the skills of acting and directing. It belongs to a group of creative curricular areas young people will encounter over a lifetime, rather than a lesson, in and beyond school and with life-wide impacts.

These different experiences of drama for young people, may be more differentiated by pedagogic variables than by modality and function. In other words the kinds of drama experiences that are available to young people may or may not become ‘creative learning’ dependent on the pedagogic approach and its effects on the quality of
relationships as much as on the quality of learning. Drama is not naturally creative, it has to be processed creatively by teachers and learners.

Because of the dominant tradition of ‘realism’ that runs through the Euro-American models of drama on stage, screen, radio and in classrooms, there are strong potential links between drama as a creative process with learning in the humanities and Language Arts. Young people can, with relative ease, create naturalistic and lived representations of familiar places, settings and characters which can humanise and personalise their understandings of history, cultural learning, literature and poetry by returning curriculum content to authentic contexts.

At the heart of all forms of drama is the behaviour of the actor – one who acts. The centrality of human action to drama is what defines its claim to be a creative art. Ideas that form in the imagination are only given substance when they become material actions. Aristotle defined an action as an intentional behaviour guided by phronein (practical wisdom) which affects the world around us. Mirroring this Aristotelian sense of informed and intentional action, Mason (2003: 232) defines creativity as ‘acting in or on the world in new and significant ways’. This definition foregrounds the capacity for human agency to change the world, by working in and on it; acting to make a difference. It is a reminder that the world is brought into being and shaped by human acts. In this sense, the idea of creativity is released from its sometimes vacuous policy rhetoric (Banaji et al. 2006: 5) and rendered as material actions performed by actors for purposes that are new and significant.

*Totus Mundus Agit Histrionem* was the motto Shakespeare and his partners chose, in 1599, for the entrance to their new theatre – The Globe. The motto is often casually translated as ‘All the world’s a stage/And all the men and women merely players’, but this is a very free translation of the Latin. Perhaps, Shakespeare was aware of the subtle ambiguities of language that make a direct translation very difficult. It is also translatable as *a whole world of players; the world makes players of us all; the world provokes us to be players; our plays are driven by the world; the whole world is a playhouse; everyone is an actor*.

There is an important distinction to be made between these translations. In the alternative set we are not ‘merely players’ we are all social and/or artistic actors driven by events in the world to shape new social and artistic ideas and responses. No-one is personal, we are all social and sociable, acting together in and on the world as well as on the stage.

Castoriadis (1997) argues that the germ of democracy that was fermented in 5th Century BCE Athens was based in the ideal that a society could continually re-invent itself and the ways in which people lived together through engaging the public imagination leading to public action based on the principles of equity, fairness and necessary participation. For Castoriadis, the theatre of Athens was a reminder of the imaginary nature of social life and the possibility of social transformations on the scale of the artistic transformations of the stage. This connection between drama and authentic democracy is critical of course in any discussion of its creative potential for young people facing an uncertain future.
In the *Fall of Public Man*, Sennett (1993) charts the demise of the idea and expectation that we are all social actors, performing within the polity of the public sphere. He argues that during the 19th Century, and particularly after the failed European revolutions of 1848, public man withdrew from public life into the intimacies of the private and personal. This turning away from public action and life was mirrored in a growing fear and awe for ‘performers’ and performing artists and those who dared to act in public. The idea of the actor and acting became reserved for the ‘unreal’ world of the stage becoming associated with artificial and fake responses, in comparison with the authenticity of an interior life of reaction, contemplation and thought.

Many of us are still wary of doing ‘drama’ or being made to ‘act’ because of self-consciousness and a sense that ‘acting’ is at best foolish and at worst deceptive. And yet, as professionals we consider ‘performance data’ and expect the minutes of our meetings to include ‘action points’ which will require social actors to act. In the smallness of these worlds we are still able to recognise the need and responsibility for us to act in new and significant ways in order to create new ways of doing things or to make what we do more ethical, efficient and effective. It is only when we turn to the wider public sphere that we seem to lose confidence in the idea of ourselves as actors whose actions can make a difference to the world we share.

Sennett and Castoriadis describe a historical trajectory away from participation to representation in the life of the society. A loss of faith in the creative potential of society to act together in order to change the ways in which we live together and with the natural world we depend on.

**Participation and improvisation – playing the public**

However in many places, there is a tradition of drama education, which stresses active participation and the vitality of human action as a means of transforming both imagined and real worlds. This tradition has its roots in the imaginative and role taking play of young children and the artistic and educational developments of play into drama which find practical and theoretical expression in the work of the English Drama Educator, Dorothy Heathcote, in particular.

In this form of drama the emphasis is on the orchestration of the ‘human voices and movements’ (Williams 1954: 183) within the study-space to co-create an imagined world or context that determines the language and actions of the drama. All present are assumed to be ‘players’ as well as spectators to their own and others’ acting in response to the demands of the imagined world. It is not a form of drama in which it is assumed that only some of us can act whilst the rest can only watch and react. It is a direct rather than directed form of drama that requires social and artistic acting together in order to create imagined worlds and events. Without the social and artistic actions of those present nothing happens and nothing is made.

The emphasis is on ‘acting’ to make a difference within the dramatised context in order to illuminate how and why we ‘act’ in the real world now, historically and in other places different from our own. Young people take on the responsibility of role and respond to the given and virtual circumstances of the drama as-if they were actually inhabiting the
situation. The defining, or unique, characteristic of drama as creative learning is that we imagine ourselves differently.

In process drama (O'Neill, 1995), young people are often asked to take on roles in order to solve problems or dilemmas, they are being asked to imagine themselves differently; to re-frame or to re-create themselves as 'others'.

Imagining oneself as the other; trying to find oneself in the other and in so doing to recognise the other in oneself is the crucial and irreducible bridge between all forms of drama and theatre work. Through role-taking young people develop their empathetic imagination and are invited to imagine themselves in new ways – as being confident; assertive; in charge; public; important.

The opportunity to improvise in role in order to bring an imagined world or context into dramatised action and discover what social actions might shape and change whatever problems and dilemmas are presented, is inherently creative in a number of ways.

At a personal level, young people are invited to participate in the acts of creation required to construct an imagined world or context. The space and time of the classroom may be transformed through acts of social imagination into other places and times. Through taking on and participating in role, young people are encouraged to look at the world from other perspectives and to consider new alternatives and interpretive choices. Through this activity they may come to be creative in terms of their own personal and social identities – to begin to imagine themselves differently and to find the confidence and imaginative potential to change themselves and the world in actuality not just in the artistic zone.

Improvisation is itself a generic creative activity that in drama requires young people to imagine and respond to the immediate in ways that are authentic and existential. It is a crucible for the creative exploration of the centrality of social context in determining human agency and capacity. To be authentic, young people must bring what they collectively know about human behaviour (phronein) to a newly created situation which requires their verbal and physical responses. These responses, shaped by prior experience, must be ‘truthful’ to the situation – to the social and cultural conventions and codes that determine the context. Improvisation flexes the muscles of young people’s potential to act on and within the constraints or structure of the imagined situation. It provides the direct lived experience of the tension between social and cultural structures and the capacity for human action. The given circumstances of the improvisation determine the authenticity of what can be said and done. Given these circumstances what can I do and say? How creative can I be within the constraints of the social, cultural and historical protocols associated with the imagined event? Moffett (1994: 60) has described improvised drama in classrooms in this way:

No other activity – except game playing perhaps – puts such constant pressure on the participants to think on their feet, make spontaneous decisions, exercise independence, and respond to the unexpected in a flexible, creative way as dramatic invention does. Drama integrates physical, social, and intellectual forces and undergirds the language arts curriculum because drama is life made conscious.
Thinking on one’s feet, making spontaneous decisions and responding to the unexpected might be considered generic creative behaviours, essential to a wide variety of creative processes in the arts, sciences and most importantly in life. Moffett also draws a parallel with games and playing more generally. There would, I’m sure, be a general agreement amongst other contributors to this Handbook that ‘play’ and ‘playfulness’ are essential to creativity.

The conditions of play

However, in some institutional contexts, play as one of the concepts associated with creativity is considered problematic. Along with the ideas of ‘flow’ (Cziksentmihalyi 1990), risk, celebration of failure and discipline specific creative acts, play challenges the normalities of schooling. How are young people to become absorbed and ‘lost’ in creative work in a system of short time intervals, changes of space and a prescribed outcomes based valuation system? How can ‘risk’ be afforded in a hyper-accountable system? How can failure be rewarded in a system that only seeks and rewards moderate(d) success? How can ‘fooling around’ however purposeful be seen as legitimate classroom activity?

In his classic analysis of Homo Ludens, Huizinga (1978: 26) described the conditions of play as:

An activity, which proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules freely accepted, and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility. The play mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm, and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion. A feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action, mirth and relaxation follow

The first condition refers to the ‘bracketing off’ of play episodes from other everyday experiences. Play which is freely and knowingly entered into is time and space limited or at least requires, as in drama and theatre, that for a determined period in a determined space there will be the experiencing of reality as play(ed) rather than as continuous everyday experience. The distinction here is to do with the ontological and epistemological shift that occurs in play episodes where meanings, relationships of power and symbolic systems are disrupted and re-created. We imagine ourselves differently, we ascribe new and sometimes radical meanings to signs and objects, and we alter normative ways of seeing and experiencing. We transform time and place into other times and places. Our relationships become ‘playful’ rather than determined and fixed. A ‘visible order’ refers to the ‘turn taking’ of participation associated with many playful activities as well as to the agreed structure of play episodes.

In pro-social genres of play, as Huizinga suggests, rules must be freely accepted by those taking part. Drama in schools in particular often requires the taking of extraordinary risks for all involved. The teacher is taking risks in seeking a shift in the normative power relations within the class and between the class and the teacher and by even moving back the desks in some cases. Young people must make themselves vulnerable and visible in order to participate and must know that there is protection and mutual respect for difference from within the group to match the personal and social challenges of taking a part in the action.
In every drama class students have to make a positive choice to join in or not; without this willingness bred of interest and engagement there can be no active drama. Classroom drama has to be by choice. For this reason, drama has often been associated with a rich and engaging pedagogy, based on the open negotiation or contracting of ‘rules’ which are freely accepted and maintained as a pre-requisite for artistic work. These subtle negotiations are in themselves a modelling of direct democracy in which the class as a potential polis imagine and create the conditions needed for their full and meaningful participation in the social as well as artistic life of the class as community.

But the other conditions of play, which are also closely associated with process drama, may explain why drama often finds itself outside the formal curriculum. It is outside the ‘sphere of necessity or material utility’ - it is not necessary work with hard outcomes. Nothing is made or produced that could be of material value. But humans seek the play experience because it produces desirable states of rapture (creative flow) and enthusiasm as well as feelings of exaltation and tension, mirth and relaxation. How many classrooms are ready to embrace this range of emotions as legitimate to the processes of schooling?

Drama as authentic learning

However, there are at least two main pathways to articulating drama and dramatic play as legitimate and necessary creative learning activities; as a means of humanising and connecting curriculum and as the practice of and for life. The first relates to the highly contextual nature of process drama, which we have discussed. Learning in drama is situational and experienced. In Children’s Minds, Margaret Donaldson (1987: 121) claims that:

Here is the heart of the matter. By the time they come to school, all normal children can show skill as thinkers and language users to a degree which must compel our respect, so long as they are dealing with real life meaningful situations in which they have purposes and intentions and in which they can recognise and respond to similar purposes and intentions in others

Drama makes the abstract concrete and the unfamiliar familiar by embedding the facts and figures of the curriculum into ‘real life meaningful situations’. Living and lived human experiences require these facts and figures for human purposes and motives. Slavery is existentially and experientially, known and felt to be a dehumanising and degrading experience for its human cargo. Shopkeepers need maths in order to do business.

Donaldson acknowledges that all of our pre-school and much other human learning is embedded in the situation of use. But of course the range of real-life meaningful situations that can be created in school by teachers and children is limited. Unless, these situations are imagined of course. Learning through co-created imagined experience allows teachers and learners to negotiate any context of their choosing and to take on roles and exercise power relationships that are outside of their normative range.

This idea that ‘real-life meaningful situations’ help young people to think and act beyond their level is at the core of Heathcote’s Mantle of the Expert model of drama education in
which young people imagine themselves in expert roles in order to deal with real world and adult tasks and dilemmas (Heathcote and Bolton 1996). For instance, a class of urban eight year olds in role as 'landscape gardeners' are asked by the teacher-in-role as the Head Teacher of a Special School, to create a garden for her pupils some of whom are visually impaired and some of whom use wheelchairs. The pupils are asked to use their 'expert' knowledge to negotiate and design together a suitable landscape for the garden and suggest appropriate planting so that all of the pupils can get enjoyment and access the garden. The Head Teacher also wants her pupils to be involved in looking after the garden.

In order for the landscape gardeners to present their plan to the Head Teacher, they research: the needs of visually impaired and wheelchair-bound children; which flowers and plants might offer textures and smells for visually impaired people; how to design the garden so that it is interesting and accessible for wheelchair users; how sounds and textures might be used; and how to design and build paths and beds so that wheelchair users can do some gardening themselves. This is authentic creative work task-led by the demands of the situation but also motivated by compassion and a willingness by non-disabled young people to imagine the world from the perspective of those with disabilities. They are becoming ‘intellectually responsible’ in John Dewey's sense (Dewey, 1938).

The Mantle of the Expert approach is resonant with other creative pedagogical positions. In the introduction to Authentic Achievement, Newmann et al. (1995: 26) preface the findings of large scale empirical research into effective pedagogy with these words:

…..the absence of meaning breeds low student engagement in school work. Meaningless schoolwork is a consequence of a number of factors but especially curriculum that emphasises superficial exposure to hundreds of isolated pieces of knowledge. The term authentic achievement thus stands for intellectual accomplishments that are worthwhile, significant and meaningful, such as those undertaken by successful adults: scientists, musicians, entrepreneurs, politicians

Role –taking allows young people to work as, rather than learn about. To work as scientists rather than learn about science. To act in and on the world in new and significant ways as creative scientists do, as creative mathematicians do, as creative artists do. The work is creative because it becomes an authentic response to real-world tasks. It requires young people to act on the world informed by their curriculum experiences and active inquiry rather than passively, to receive and repeat inert slabs of knowledge.

This participatory, agentive and situated model of drama in education contains with in it a strong model of ‘co-constructed’ teaching and learning that characterises other genres and modes of drama work with young people. For instance, Joe Arkley, an actor in the RSC ensemble, who is training for a Postgraduate Award in Teaching Shakespeare for Actors, is in role as Antigonus from The Winter's Tale cruelly and wrongly ordered by King Laertes to abandon the baby Perdita to the wolves. A class of ten and eleven year olds are in role as fellow courtiers and advisors on board the ship that carries them to Bohemia. In role, they discuss his options; publicly questioning and challenging Antigonus and each other; imagining what the outcomes for Perdita and Antigonus will be; exploring and critically reflecting on the shared ideas, proposed actions and their
outcomes. The class move around creatively within the given circumstances of the
script, struggling purposefully to find the rightness of actions for Antigonus to take that
will shape Perdita’s future in different ways from her father’s intentions.

But Joe, also recognises that every drama ‘lesson’ should be an artistic as well as an
educational journey – his playing of Antigonus in a darkened candle lit studio, clutching a
baby in a basket, is intended to create an authentic and felt theatre experience for the
students. They are motivated to engage with Shakespeare’s language through their
existential engagement with the dilemma of the cruelly abandoned child. Joe’s work is
influenced by the RSC Education Department’s ensemble and rehearsal room based
approach to teaching Shakespeare, summarised on the RSC web site as:

Young people are up on their feet, moving around, saying the text aloud,
exploring the feelings and ideas that emerge. There is a focus on physical and
emotional responses, as well as intellectual, responses to the text. Active
approaches are used to inform and test critical analysis. Pupils investigate a
range of interpretive choices in the text and negotiate these with their teacher.
Drama techniques are used to explore language, meaning, character and
motivation

This is a very different approach to teaching Shakespeare from sitting at desks reading
painfully round the class and being told what the language means and how it is to be
understood. The stress on ‘active, exploratory and problem solving methods’ suggests
that young people are being encouraged and given the open space to make their own
connections, discoveries and journeys. The plays become scripts for action rather than
texts for contemplation.

In the RSC approach, the focus is on young people making and negotiating ‘interpretive
choices’ – will these words be spoken softly? Shouted? Shall we move or stand still?
Where is this scene taking place and how does that affect our playing of it?
Shakespeare does not provide these answers – there are so many possibles for young
people to explore and re-invent. In making these choices creatively, they come to ‘own’
their own versions of the plays and to realise that they are changeable. Perhaps in doing
this they might also come closer to realising their own lives and destinies are not fixed.
Interpretative choices can be made in life as well as in drama. The structures within
which we live and learn are not immoveable and inert obstacles, they are open to
personal and social re-imagining and re-creation.

Drama and the development of necessary social intelligence

What is critical and essential to all forms of drama as creative learning is that it occurs
socially. Much of the literature on creative learning identifies and assesses personalised
and individualised characteristics of creativity – asking questions, making connections
for instance (Jeffrey & Woods 2009, Lloyd & Smith 2004, 2. Having the confidence to ask

1 http://www.rsc.org.uk/standupforshakespeare/content/manifesto_online.aspx
2 In terms of policy, see for instance: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)
questions in public and negotiating connections in social learning contexts can be another matter. In drama, the emphasis is on the creative potential of the group, the sharing of experiences, the co-construction of journeys into meaning. All actions have to be negotiated and will have social as well as artistic consequences.

In facing our social, economic and educational priorities we now recognize that the future will require these forms of socially negotiated action rather than individual responses and creative actions. The global problems of societies split by irreconcilable differences of belief and ideology, environmental collapse and the increasing gulf between those who have and those who have not cannot be resolved at an individual level, or by Super Heroes. They require new and re-invented forms of social creativity – critical hope based in collective action. The greatest challenge that young people face in drama is learning to work cooperatively with a shared purpose and learning to be mindful of self and others in the social as well as artistic dimensions of the drama work. For this reason drama can be the site where young people discover their creative power of collective action as well as how to rise to the challenges of working with multiple interests, perspectives and other differences.

**Ensemble as a bridging metaphor between the social and the artistic**

Michael Boyd, Artistic Director of the RSC, captures this duality in his support for ensemble based theatre:

> We've never had more cause to realise the grave importance of our interdependence as humans and yet we seem ever more incapable of acting on that realisation with the same urgency that we all still give to the pursuit of self interest. Theatre does have a very important role because it is such a quintessentially collaborative art form. *(Cited in Neelands 2009: 173)*

The ensemble provides the basis for young people to develop the complex levels of social intelligence (Gardner 1988) needed to embrace the challenges of the future, whilst also developing the social imagination required to produce collaborative social art which reflects, energises and focuses the world for young people. The social knowing which comes from acting together in an ensemble mirrors Freire’s concept of ‘indispensable’ knowledge:

> The kind of knowledge that becomes solidarity, becomes a ‘being with’. In that context, the future is seen, not as inexorable but as something that is constructed by people engaged together in life, in history. It’s the knowledge that sees history as possibility and not as already determined - the world is not finished. It is always in the process of becoming. *(Freire 1998:72)*

Working together in the social and egalitarian conditions of the ensemble, young people have the opportunity to struggle with the demands of becoming, like the Athenian polis, a self-managing, self-governing, self-regulating social group who co-create artistically and socially. The social experience of acting as an ensemble, making drama and theatre that reflects and suggests how the world might become in the hope that it is not finished is of course of paramount importance to our young. We pass them the burden of the world that we have made in the hope that they will in turn have a world to pass on to their children.

References

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