The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education

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We contain multitudes

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WE CONTAIN MULTITUDES
An introduction

Mary McAvoy and Peter O’Connor

A glimpse into contemporary Drama in Education

Being responsible for transporting dreams across a city during a pandemic is a difficult but rewarding job. Especially when you are working with 11 years olds and you’ve just returned to school after one of the strictest lockdowns in the world. The job is made even trickier because the dreams are fragile, some of them are recovered from people who have lost them. As a dream repairer too I learn with the others in our class how to carry other people’s dreams with care and love. In our role as dream repairers we get the chance to build containers to hold people’s dreams, we design passports so dream repairers can move more easily across the city and quarantined areas. We get to design the logo on the side of the dream repair van that expedites our travel. We work with a really tricky customer whose dreams are fading and we help her by painting them for her. We meet her on Zoom. It is a kind of zoom-in role for another teacher friend of mine. Finally when the drama is finished, I dare to wonder if we have built a way of holding on to dreams. My teaching doesn’t change anything in the real world, for drama is never that powerful. But for a few moments we feel like we are actors on, with and for the world, not just spectators and that the work we do might be the difference, however small.

Reflections on Te Rito Toi

Drama in Education is a unique performance and pedagogical discipline focused on process-oriented theatrical techniques designed to engage a broad spectrum of learners. It is an engaging, theoretically significant, and historically rooted field of inquiry and genre of transdisciplinary practice. The practice of DE occurs not only in schools and classrooms but also increasingly in community spaces and in professional theaters, and with populations of all ages. This diversification of DE practice reflects the discipline’s relative youth, although John O’Toole points out DE has been part and parcel of learning for centuries as audiences and students of all sorts have learned via drama throughout time. The past 100 years have been pivotal to the development of professional and artistic practices, research endeavors,
theoretical conversations, and policy initiatives. These support the notion that learning can occur when approaching a concept through the lens of performance. As such, DE is delightfully elusive in its definition despite the robust communities of practitioners, researchers, and artists invested in it. DE is ever-evolving, hotly debated, and highly mutable, realities of which are documented throughout this Companion. For example, some readers might find it helpful to think of drama as more process-oriented than its artistic product- and performance-focused counterpart, theater. For others, the process/product delineation might be stifling. The term “education” might refer to a primary school classroom where six-year olds take on the role of advisors to a sad king. It could mean a group of adolescents acquainting themselves with one another by playing physical games, laughing and moving with no clear articulation of a learning goal even though learning no doubt occurs. When it comes to DE impact and practice, some educators, researchers, or artists might be highly motivated to track learning outcomes that result from a DE intervention. Others might suggest that DE resists some of the more institutionalized learning paradigms like objective tests and coded rubrics. All of these realities exist both in concert and in tension with one another, often simultaneously. These exciting ideas and conversations lie at the heart of this Companion, and we have intentionally attended to the disciplinary slipperiness of this field.

While we make an effort to define these practices in this brief contextualizing chapter, we also acknowledge how different understandings of DE help make this discipline ripe for pedagogical, artistic, and scholarly experimentation and invention, many examples of which are documented throughout the various subsequent essays and case studies. This Companion is clear evidence of hard work, excellent research, important and impassioned debate, a great deal of experimentation, a requisite amount of failure, and ample pleasure and joy, all the while pushing against the more alarming changing tides of both arts education policy and arts and culture more broadly. This Companion also serves as a testament to the disciplinary maturation of DE, which, thanks to tireless efforts of educators, artists, and scholars, has come to stand alongside various other contemporary performance-based practices that have advanced discussions of pedagogy and theater/performance.

Definitions and historical roots

Perhaps thanks to its relative nascence, DE is profoundly transdisciplinary with wide-ranging influences, from early twentieth-century progressive education philosophies and arts as social work in the United States and Europe with figures like Winifred Ward, Harriet Finlay Johnson, and Esther Bowman to interactive political theater-making practices of artists like Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal, and beyond. DE encompasses aesthetic methods and theories, theatrical practices, ethical engagements, and pedagogical pursuits, often all at once. When contextualized within the larger applied drama field, DE takes up the explicit goal of learning and teaching through drama, although its pedagogical dimension may take a variety of forms. Moreover, DE now appears not only in various explicitly pedagogical settings like schools, but also in community and arts institutions. Further, as creativity and creative learning modalities increasingly influence discourses and policy initiatives associated with the best practices in twenty-first-century learning and creative economies on global scale for good and ill, DE’s relevance as a worthwhile mode of learner engagement grows increasingly salient. Accordingly, new methodologies and programs continue to take shape, from explicitly social justice-focused initiatives to programs in intergenerational learning and creative aging.
As the DE discipline diversifies and matures, additional framing and nomenclature have also developed to describe this work with increasing specificity. For instance, throughout this volume, authors reference drama for learning, body-based learning, drama-rich learning, and performative teaching in addition to “drama in education.” All are useful terms that add nuance to the field’s purview and boundaries. We anticipate even more useful definitions and sub-disciplines will appear in the future as signs of a lively and healthy discipline. Readers will also notice crossover with theater for youth/young audiences, applied theater, drama for social change, educational drama and theater, and other established, emerging, and vanguard performance-based practices that take influence from and innovate theatrical forms. All these different threads of inquiry and practice demonstrate the field’s growth and help those interested in DE to negotiate what we really mean when we say “drama in education.”

Companion organization

Even as DE practices diversify and expand, the field’s disciplinary boundaries, purpose, value, effectiveness, and meaning beg ongoing critical conversations. Enter this book. We, scholar/artist/educators working in the Drama in Education, Educational Drama, and Applied Drama fields from opposite sides of the globe, offer this Companion to Drama in Education to address the key themes, scholarly lines of inquiry, methodological approaches, and exemplar program and initiatives. This volume serves as a comprehensive resource for scholars, artists, and educators alike. As DE becomes an increasingly global phenomenon, opportunities arise to sustain and build rigorous and comprehensive international scholarly and methodological conversations around this discipline, bringing together not only constituencies working in Anglophone nations where many DE programs and practices originate, but also artists and scholars working beyond these paradigms in global, inter- and transcultural spaces, and in underrepresented communities and countries.

Given our commitment to highlighting the interrelatedness of theory and practice in DE, we have crafted this Companion with a wide range of perspectives in mind. Although authors included in this volume may present fundamentally different perspectives on key issues that shape the DE field, all operate in good faith with their perspectives. This Companion captures hallmarks of artistic and scholarly exchange in DE. Given the comprehensive nature of this Companion, we have identified several key themes that we describe later in this introductory chapter. However, given the volume’s scale, highlighting each contribution falls outside the scope of our discussion here, and we invite readers to notice the wide-ranging perspectives, geographies, orientations, and methodologies presented by the roster of authors. Essays from established scholars conducting quantitative and mixed-methods research on notions of efficacy and effectiveness in DE programs appear alongside reflections of practice from new teaching artists and school educators who specialize in DE teaching. We also include more radical projects that conceptualize new poetics and new avant-gardes for learning and teaching through drama (see Gregorzewski, Shenfield and Prendergast, Cameron and Anderson, for instance). These essays and their intentional curation across the volume capture the ongoing disciplinary conversations around key issues, including better-and-best practices in DE, aesthetics in teaching and teaching artistry, DE arts integration, DE histories, ideologies and theories in drama and education, and concerns around access, inclusivity, and justice as they relate to DE and arts-based learning more broadly. In addition, by intentionally seeking out reflections, lesson plans, program designs, case studies, and provocations alongside more traditionally scholarly essays, we capture a comprehensive picture for those interested in DE’s past, present, and future in regard to both theory and practice.
Themes

We close this introduction with a brief discussion of themes that resonated with us, as editors, as we curated this volume. As we collaborated through the pandemic, the key question, “How do we account for COVID-19?” echoed through our deliberations. At the time of writing this introduction, the globe has been navigating the pandemic for more than 18 months. By the time readers encounter these words, it will have been more than two years. While lockdowns, distancing, and moves to online engagement have deeply influenced the DE efforts around the globe, we nonetheless lack the proper distance and time to fully understand its depth and breadth of its impact. Given how the pandemic is reshaping cultural values, economics, health policy, international exchange, and our communities more broadly, this moment feels like an odd time to identify key themes and ideas in DE and consider how best to position them relative to current events. Thus, we have worked to stay humble in the face of this unprecedented moment and give space to both acknowledge the pandemic and think beyond it. Although these themes may help guide readers through the Companion, they are by no means exhaustive, and, in the spirit of drama as practice of meaning-making, questioning, and creative analysis, we encourage readers to uncover new resonances as they engage with the following essays.

Absence and loss

We first address the most challenging themes: absence and loss. The reality of the COVID-19 pandemic asks us to make and hold space for absence and loss in this Companion. Even as joy and pleasure ripple through the included chapters, we acknowledge pieces shaped by and even lost to the pandemic. Most concretely, we hold space for the now-unwritten essays about projects halted due to work stoppages and lost funding. We feel the absence of theories and creative analysis abandoned to time that could no longer be spent thinking and writing in the face of working, parenting, and caretaking from home. More abstractly, this COVID-related absence and loss further exposes the larger absences and loss in our DE field. This Companion also has missing voices and perspectives due to deep and entrenched legacies of Whiteness and colonialism in the field’s lineage. For instance, we acknowledge the glaring absence of essays documenting the robust and substantive drama in education work created in the Spanish-speaking Global South, for instance. We feel the emptiness that should be indigenous and First Nations peoples and immigrants speaking back to the Progressive-era impulses that narrowly defined the form and function of early DE practice, especially in Anglophone nations where many of our represented authors, and us as editors, study, practice, and work. To be clear, these absences are not due to the lack of legible DE practices in these communities. Instead, these omissions are products of culturally systemic and discipline-specific traditions that have decentered and marginalized practices that failed to conform to DE methods now heralded as foundational. Furthermore, while we are pleased with the range of regional, cultural, and disciplinary diversity included in this volume, we also acknowledge that our failure, as editors, to effectively curate space and time for more underrepresented voices, practices, and initiatives diminishes the volume and reminds us how much room we have to grow. This space of absence and loss, felt both acutely and chronically, frames our final commentary at the end of this chapter regarding possibilities for the future. Like the children in our short piece introducing this chapter, who and how we curate people’s lost dreams and hopes is the joy
and responsibility of those of us who work in this field. We hope readers will also approach the volume with a critical eye toward the silenced, excluded, and missing as a frame for thinking about DE’s complexity and possibility.

Process

Another key theme that recurs throughout the volume is the value of process. Marina Henriques Coutinho reminds us of this in her essay, with a quote of Paolo Freire, “The world is not finished. It is always in the process of becoming.” Similarly, this field is not finished, even as we joyfully celebrate its legibility as a discipline worthy of this scale and scope of publication. As such, readers will note process documented from a variety of perspectives. Research processes, the processes of preparing educators to confidently facilitate DE, the process-oriented nature of DE practices, and even the process by which DE evolves as an academic and aesthetic discipline all resonate through each selection. In particular, we noted themes of process around methodological generationality. Readers will note pieces that celebrate and question the way our field constructs our founding mothers like Dorothy Heathcote and Winifred Ward, in effect capturing the process by which our young field might canonize key texts and methods. Kelly Freebody’s keynote chapter sets the tone for a deep questioning of the shibboleths that have plagued our field for far too long. These discussions of disciplinary process also lay bare possibilities for opening our field and discovering new approaches to practicing and thinking about DE even as we honor the field’s deep roots and variegated shoots.

Another vital thread of analysis regarding the theme of process relates to the rigorous documentation of method. All essays included in this Companion document or analyze final dramatic or theatrical products alongside their processes. Authors note how projects operated over time, how facilitators learned from risk and experimentation, and how the daily goings-on of DE engagements impacted participants both in the short term and over time. This focus on practices often over outcomes is noteworthy in the discourses of theater and performance and education since it brings attention to the murky, chaotic, imperfect, and ever-changing spaces found in rehearsal rooms, classrooms, and community centers where so much DE practice occurs. Moreover, a focus on process emphasizes the distinctly human nature of DE work that, in its best form, makes space for ambiguity, hard questions, multiple truths, consensus, and revision.

Evolving purpose

Drama’s evolving purpose in education also reverberates through this Companion. Authors have offered beautiful examples of drama ethically and soundly utilized as a modality, method, or technique for other learning aims, be it climate change (Lehtonen) or reading literacy (Ewing and Saunders). Other authors skillfully remind us that DE is a valuable and worthy pursuit simply because the arts help us find beauty and enjoy more livable lives. The case studies and analysis demonstrate that DE can be rigorously evaluated and assessed as learning and that DE is still inherently pedagogical even when learning outcomes, pedagogy standardization, and the general neoliberal turn in education are destabilized in their prominence. All of these perspectives work in concert and highlight how both theatrical practice and education shift through time in regard to goals, method, and policy.
Futures

Last, this Companion stands as testament to the future of DE. Readers will note essays that acknowledge and engage with populations that have been underserved by DE historically, carving out space for new conversation about ethics and inclusive practice (see Mattaini; Brendel Horn; and Tsang, Lam and Chan, for example). The book’s curation also points to new and emerging subgenres and micro-disciplines in DE as well. For instance, Erika Piazzoli and others’ essays on performative language teaching draw attention to the rich scholarly and pedagogical communities that look at DE practices and language learning. Additionally, several other pieces highlight the future role of technology in DE. While we avoid toxically positive tropes about potential takeaways from the pandemic, we also acknowledge the innovation brought on by the abrupt immersion into technology as a primary modality for learning and art-making in many parts of the world in the last two years. This new technological turn also points to new possibilities for access and connectedness and helps us find new strategies to engage with the theoretical and practical tensions between the role of liveness in DE and the increasingly technological ways in which we connect and communicate with one another. Like the radio and television before it, the Wi-Fi-enabled mobile phone, which is used less for actual phone calls these days and more for media creation and engagement (social and otherwise), once again troubles our societies. This concern is further perpetuated by the development of proto-cyborg identities where one’s technology functions as an extension of one’s self, not to mention the nefariousness of algorithms that provide incessant dopamine hits for minds across the age spectrum. Technology use and the era of being very online are both domains ripe for healthy hand-wringing about the speed of change, the right to autonomy and privacy, and the shifting value of live engagement so inherent in the practices of DE. However, as several authors here remind us, alliance with young people and their preferred modes of engagement via an embrace of technological innovation is not only possible but also desirable (for instance, see Petersen Jensen and Peterson and Regar). Despite these exciting possibilities, this volume also surfaces profound concerns about DE futures as well. As austerity measures and neoliberal economic policy take hold of public institutions around the globe (see Pascoe, among others), what do DE programs stand to lose? How can we protect our resources, time, expertise, preparation programs, and research agendas in light of current policy discussions about economic utility and provide counternarratives to highlight DE’s value beyond its potential to prepare a new creative class of workers? Above all, this Companion points to a DE future ripe with potential, but not without challenges.

Ending with love

We conclude this introduction in the same manner as our final essay: with love. As Kristin Hunt reminds us in the volume’s final essay, love is a radical act. Love requires vulnerability, honesty, care, commitment. We offer this volume to our field in that spirit, and we believe the authors represented here likewise approached their contributions with the same intent. Love as a radical act means unapologetically celebrating joy, pleasure, and accomplishment in our field while also holding ourselves to account. Love requires us to ask challenging questions, look at established practices and ideas with new lenses of analysis, and hold our field accountable for changes toward a more just and inclusive discipline. By doing so, this radical love affords us the opportunity to remember the particularly powerful moments where DE practice distills seemingly timeless and universal human ideas from relevant experiences in our current lives. To embody new potentials, to envision new futures, and to honor our many and varied pasts. We go right to the edge, we go right to the end, we go right to where all things lost are made good again!