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8
THE INFLUENCE OF THE “CONVENTIONS APPROACH” ON THE PRACTICE OF DRAMA IN DIFFERENT CULTURES

Adam Cziboly, Mette Bøe Lyngstad and Sisi Zheng

The context: three different drama environments

The authors of this article were born in three different countries, Norway, Hungary, and China, and each studied drama there. They are now colleagues at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences in Bergen. Drama studies became a part of this institution in 1971, and the drama department has always had international interests and contacts; in 2001, the IDEA World Congress was organised here.

The geopolitical position, the sociopolitical climate, the educational policies, and, as a result, the drama environments of these three countries are significantly different. Thus, educational drama has developed in different directions in Norway, Hungary, and China over the past decades. However, we have also discovered surprising similarities: one of these is the strong influence of the so-called “conventions approach” in all three countries, introduced and developed over three editions of the seminal book _Structuring Drama Work_ by Jonothan Neelands and Tony Goode (1990, 2000a, 2015).

Our motivation

We became interested in learning more about the reasons behind, the means for, and the consequences of this common spread of the conventions approach in our very different countries. In order to map this, we decided to create a survey targeted at those who teach in higher education (Cziboly et al., 2021). Using our international and national networks, we reached out to approximately a thousand experts teaching educational drama in higher education. We received a total of 86 responses: 29 from China, 27 from Hungary, 16 from Norway, six from the Czech Republic, two each from Greece and Serbia, and one each from Croatia, England, Iceland, and Poland. Among many other findings, we found that 51% of the respondents had read the entire book, while 19% claimed that they had only read the part about conventions, or just some of the conventions. We also found that there seems to be a ‘core set’ of conventions – mostly those already published back in 1990 in the first edition – that are more known and used than newly-added items. In addition, a large pool of local variations exists in all countries.
We have presented the quantitative analysis of the findings of this survey elsewhere (Cziboly et al., 2021), but we have not assessed the responses we received to open-ended questions. In the second half of this article, we will focus on this, particularly where respondents were asked to describe their experiences in working with conventions. Before that, first we briefly present the different contexts of drama in the three countries, and then we focus on the different academic receptions of the conventions approach. We assume that analysing these three different drama traditions against the same criteria will to some extent represent the state of the conventions approach internationally.

**Educational drama in Norway**

For many decades, there have been numerous attempts to make drama a compulsory subject in Norway’s schools (e.g. Avenstrup et al., 1987; Lyngstad & Sæbø, 2003; Sæbø & Lyngstad, 2004; Sæbø, 2016; Songe-Møller & Bjerkestrand, 2016; Storsve et al., 2019), unfortunately without success. Drama is still not a compulsory subject in the curriculum. In 2016, several drama teachers were involved in devising a drama and theatre curriculum for lifelong learning (Drama- og teaterpedagogene, 2016).

On 1 August 2020, a new national curriculum was implemented for primary, secondary, and high schools. Words such as “drama”, “theatre”, or “imagination” do not exist in the descriptions of the compulsory subjects. The English curriculum mentions the term “role-play” once: “explore and use pronunciation patterns and words and expressions in play, song and role-play” (UDIR, 2019a). However, in the special curriculum, “Drama and rhythm for students with sign language”, the term “drama” is mentioned 48 times, “play” is mentioned seven times, and “theatre” four times. As described below, the processes of drama do have a central place in that particular curriculum:

Dramatic expressions.

Students will explore and experiment with the basic elements of drama, creating their own dramatic expressions and putting together different elements in a dramatic process. Students should be able to take an idea and develop it further through various processes such as planning, design and implementation. Creative work, interaction, and dissemination will be central to the subject.

*(UDIR, 2019b, p. 2)*

The general part of the new teaching plan contains links to exploration and interaction in practical acting processes; for instance: “The school will let the students develop creative joy, commitment and the urge to explore and let them experience seeing opportunities and turn ideas into action” (UDIR, 2019c, p. 6).

According to Berge et al. (2019), “[i]n the 2018/2019 school year, just over 13% of all Norwegian children of primary school age attended a public cultural school” (p. 10). The Norwegian cultural schools are “characterised by a rich diversity and at the same time have a number of common features” (p. 10). In Norway, one must pay to participate in cultural schools. Theatre has the fourth biggest profile in the cultural schools, after music, visual arts, and dance. According to the statistics, a total of 8,457 pupils attended theatre courses in 2019/2020 in cultural school in Norway, and an additional 2,189 were on waiting lists for such courses. By way of comparison, there were a total of 77,432 pupils enrolled in music courses, with 21,106 on waiting lists (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020). Most cultural school courses are organised on a weekly basis. There is a national curriculum for the cultural...
schools that includes some common elements and some subject-specific elements. The curriculum is heavily product-oriented: while the term “theatre” is mentioned 96 times, “drama” or “drama pedagogy” is mentioned only 16 times. “Role-play”, “fiction”, and “storytelling” are not mentioned at all (Norsk kulturskoleråd, 2020).

When it comes to higher education, the first institution to offer full-time drama studies, in 1971, was Bergen Teacher Training School, the predecessor of Western Norway University of Applied Sciences. Today, one can study drama in 13 cities (Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim, Stavanger, Kristiansand, Tonsberg, Telemark, Tromso, Halden, Volda, Bodo, Alta, and Nesna), but only four of these offer an MA in the field, and only two have PhD programmes that encompass drama-related themes. For the last 20 years, drama as a method in schools has been a compulsory course for all trainee teachers in Norway, although the length of the course varies considerably from institution to institution (from 5–60 hours).

Drama within teacher training in Norway has seen better times. Most teachers working in primary and secondary schools could choose to take 60 credits of drama as part of their teacher training. Since the new teacher training curriculum was implemented in 2016, trainee teachers are only allowed to take 30 credits in drama, because the subject is not part of the traditional curriculum (Lovdata.no, 2012a). In kindergarten teacher training, drama has also been compulsory since the seventies with a 10-credit course, but this has recently been reduced from 10 credits to 7 credits, the lowest number of credits in the history of drama teaching within kindergarten teacher training in Norway (Lovdata.no, 2012b).

When asked in our survey, “Which drama practitioners influenced your work?”, two-thirds of the Norwegian respondents mentioned Dorothy Heathcote, half mentioned Jonothan Neelands, and slightly less than half mentioned Gavin Bolton. Augusto Boal was mentioned by as many respondents as Bolton, but not by the same respondents. Those who mentioned Boal usually had less than five years of teaching experience. There is reason to believe that those with the longest experience in teaching were working, while some of the pioneers they mentioned were still very active in the field. Heathcote, Neelands, Boal, and O’Neill have been guest-lecturing in Norway over the past 20 years, some of them on several occasions. The Norwegian pioneers who were mentioned the most were Kari Mjalland Heggstad, Aud Berggraf Sæbo, and Stig A. Eriksson. All of them have been active both nationally and internationally, have taught several generations, and have written books and articles that are still on the curriculum.

**Educational drama in Hungary**

In January 2020, the Hungarian government issued a new national curriculum (Magyar Közlöny, 2020), which, despite heavy criticism, was introduced in schools from September 2020. The new curriculum (just like the previous versions in 1995, 2003, 2007, and 2012) acknowledges “drama and theatre” as a compulsory subject, but only for one year during the 12 years of compulsory education: schools have to teach it for a minimum of one year any time between the fifth and the eighth grades. However, schools can choose to add more years to their local curricula, and in the 12th grade, every school has to choose between media and drama. In the years when drama is taught, the curriculum prescribes one hour of teaching per week.

The descriptions of other subjects also mention drama as a tool. Drama is most referenced in the literature curriculum, where “dramatic games”, “role-play”, and “storytelling” are mentioned several times. The same three concepts are each mentioned only once in the history curriculum; “dramatic play” is mentioned once in ethics; “dramatisation” and
Practice of drama in different cultures

“storytelling” are referred to several times in visual culture; “dramatised performance” appears several times in music; and, perhaps most surprisingly, the term “role-play” appears once in the geography curriculum (Magyar Közlöny, 2020).

Hungary’s “elementary art schools” offer specialisations in specific art forms and teach these for a greater number of hours a week. They also offer non-compulsory courses for students outside these schools. According to the official statistics (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2019), 3,006 such schools existed in 2019, teaching over 232,300 students. However, most of these students specialised in music and only 14,155 of them specialised in either theatre or puppetry.

A published national-level educational strategy or cultural strategy does not exist in Hungary at present. However, many cities have adopted their own cultural strategies. For example, Debrecen, the second-largest city of the country, builds on the drama and theatre pedagogical programme of the city’s National Theatre (Debrecen Megyei Jogú Város, 2017).

With regard to higher education, according to the regulations in Hungary, only qualified teachers (holding an official university-level degree or a certificate from an official, in-service teacher training course in drama) can teach drama in schools, so several universities offer courses in the field. According to the government-run felvi.hu, a portal listing all university courses, there is an abundance of offers for in-service teacher training: in December 2020, 13 universities offered 16 different courses for teachers who wish to specialise in drama. In addition, four universities offer undivided teacher training in drama, and one offers an MA in drama for teachers. There is only one arts university that offers a BA in the field: the University of Theatre and Film Arts educates so-called “drama instructors”, who are not teachers, but rather artistic workers. Drama does not have its own doctoral programme, but several universities accept PhD candidates who wish to carry out research in the field (Cziboly et al., 2021).

The flourishing abundance of Hungarian applied drama and theatre life is scarcely visible to the international community, since most experts work within Hungary and seldom publish their experiences in other languages. The web page szinhazineveles.hu, a voluntarily-run portal where theatres can share their educational programmes with teachers and others, listed 172 different kinds of educational theatre programmes in 77 theatres. There are no exact statistics, but we are aware of educational drama and theatre programmes in community centres, museums, libraries, youth clubs, prisons, drug rehabilitation centres, and NGOs as well.

When asked to list drama practitioners who influenced the work of the Hungarian respondents to our survey, we see that Hungarian names dominate. László Kaposi’s name is mentioned by 14 people, and Katalin Gabnai is mentioned 11 times. The two of them had key roles in establishing drama in Hungary, and both of them are central figures in two different, strong traditions: Gabnai has paved the way for the “Hungarian drama tradition” since the seventies, while Kaposi was the leading figure in the Hungarian adaptation of the “British way” since the nineties. Only ten (roughly one-third) of the respondents mentioned international experts. Strangely enough, Jonothan Neelands was mentioned by just five people, although many respondents had conducted studies based on Structuring Drama Work. The most well-known Theatre in Education (TiE) experts were also mentioned by many people.

Educational drama in China

In modern China, the Chinese term used for “drama” refers in most cases to two different theatre genres: Chinese traditional drama (such as the Beijing Opera and Yu Opera) and Western drama. There is a mixed use of the concepts of “drama” and “theatre” in the
Chinese language. One main reason for this is that both terms share the same Chinese translation, *xiju* (Zheng, 2021). The genre we are considering in this chapter, educational drama, was not introduced to mainland China before the nineties. Li Yingning, the Chinese dramatist, has made a major contribution to introducing this field to China (Allern et al., 2018). The late arrival of educational drama in mainland China may explain why the general understanding of “drama” in a Chinese context is still largely limited to theatre arts. However, as documented in Zeng’s article (2019), an increasing amount of attention is clearly being given to drama education in schools, especially in the private sector.

In the most recent national curriculum for compulsory education, published by the Ministry of Education of PRC (2011), music and fine arts have their own curriculum and these two subjects are time-tabled in most schools. There is no specific curriculum dedicated to drama, but there is a selective curriculum for comprehensive arts, in which drama is mentioned alongside music, fine arts, dance, as well as film and television. However, drama in this context is still related to theatre arts, as most of the teaching suggestions listed in the curriculum intends to cultivate the children’s ability to explore and appreciate art through the study of classical theatre work.

The national curriculum is the basis for textbook compilation, teaching, assessment, and examination, and is also the basis for national management and evaluation of curricula (Ministry of Education of PRC, 2001). At the provincial and municipal levels, local education departments and education commissions are guided by national policy and have the authority to issue more customised and proscribed curriculum guidelines for further developing local curriculum and school-based curriculum. These two curricula focus on maximising the overall development of children and are implemented in addition to the national curriculum. The school-based curriculum can incorporate theatre, sports, space science, orchestra, or other various themes designed and organised by the school. In short, there is as yet no official curriculum for drama, but theatre activities can be found in some schools.

However, although drama is not an official subject in schools and “educational drama” is not mentioned in the curriculum (Ministry of Education of PRC, 2011), drama concepts are suggested as teaching activities among different subject curriculum which are highly relevant to what various drama activities can cover. “Games” appears in moral education, biology, and Chinese; “learning within a site” appears in Chinese and moral education. “Imitation” appears in English, moral education, geography, science, and biology. “Storytelling” appears in English and geography. “Role-play” appears in geography and biology. “Play theatre” appears in Chinese, English, and history (Ministry of Education of PRC, 2011).

In China, in order to be employed as a full-time staff in schools, teachers must be certified, and to do so they must pass the teacher qualification examination appointed by the Ministry of Education. According to the National Education Examinations Authority, the examination covers 11 subjects taught in primary, 15 subjects in lower secondary, and 14 subjects in upper secondary school levels. Drama is not one of them, so teachers who have a drama background and want to become full-time drama teachers in schools must qualify in and be examined in at least one other subject in order to be fully employed. This may be one of the reasons why most drama teachers are employed part-time. On the other hand, as drama is not a compulsory part of the curriculum, given that very few schools have the capacity and resources to introduce drama or theatre lessons, there are few drama teacher positions in Chinese schools in general.

With regard to higher education, there are only three arts academies that offer full-time undergraduate study. The first full-time BA programme was initiated in Shanghai in 2005, and it has continually been recruiting new students ever since. The size of each class
Practice of drama in different cultures

varies between 12 and 25 students. This academy has established a solid, ongoing student and staff exchange programme with HVL in Norway, and one of the core teachers of its BA programme graduated from HVL. The second academy, in Yun Nan province, began recruiting students in 2011, while the third, in Beijing, started in 2014. There is no MA or PhD programme which specialises in drama education, but the academy in Shanghai recruits students who are interested in applied drama as a research focus at postgraduate level (Cziboly et al., 2021).

Although drama is not a compulsory subject in the national curriculum, drama and theatre education is growing in the private sector. There is an increasing number of organisations and private companies that offer a range of drama education opportunities for children and drama training for in-service teachers (Zeng, 2019), but where the trainers involved were educated themselves is not documented. These private organisations and companies can be found in different areas in China, mostly in big cities. Perhaps the most representative one is Drama Rainbow, located in Beijing; one of the founders is Li Yingning. Drama Rainbow has also engaged Chris Cooper as their chief culture officer, and they work closely with different international drama experts. They have been successfully offering drama courses to children, creating TiE programmes, and running summer schools in drama for teachers for the past ten years.

When asked in our survey, “Which drama practitioners influenced your work?”, 20 of the 29 respondents mentioned international figures, and 14 of them mentioned only international drama practitioners. As stated earlier, there is very limited university provision for drama education, and most of the teacher training is offered through private organisations. Chris Cooper, Cao Xi, and Li Yingning (three of the most frequently mentioned names) are associated with Drama Rainbow. Among the 32 listed names, nearly one-third of the names are not from the educational drama field but from the field of theatre, such as Chekhov, Ibsen, Stanislavski, Lupa, Brook, Schechner, Landy, Meisner, Shakespeare, and Xiong Foxi (a Chinese dramatist). The names of many widely acknowledged authors are not mentioned at all.

How the conventions approach is received

Origins

The term “convention” in connection with educational drama was first used by Dorothy Heathcote (1984/1991) in her famous essay “Signs and Portents”. According to her, “conventions (...) all slow down time and enable classes to get a grip on decisions and on their own thinking about matters” (p. 166, italics in original text). As Davis (2014) explains, Heathcote “developed her conventions as a way of engaging students with the material they were studying from a frame perspective that would lead into the drama they were making” (p. 33).

However, the term was spread widely by Neelands and Goode (1990, 2000a, 2015), and, according to them, dramatic conventions “are indicators of the way in which time, space and presence can interact and be imaginatively shaped to create different kinds of meaning in theatre” (Neelands & Goode, 2015, p. 3, italics in original text). They classified the conventions into four categories: context-building action, narrative action, poetic action, and reflective action. For each convention, they provided relevant information for its description, its cultural connections, and the learning opportunities associated with it. They also added specific examples illustrating a convention being used for particular purposes. According to their aims, facilitators can choose to use one convention on its own or to combine several conventions.
In Chris Cooper’s interview with Neelands (2019), he explained the origins of developing the conventions approach as being inspired by David Booth in many ways:

I think the whole kind of focus on story and the way that he [Booth] developed ‘story drama’ was always very important to me. (...) and also because… his second piece of advice was ‘You have to make what you do simple enough for people to be able to follow’. You know, unless drama is done by the many rather than the few experts, it’s going to die on its feet. It’s got to be made accessible. So the challenge for me always was, ‘how do we make it more accessible whilst maintaining its core integrity and its complexities?’.

(p. 1)

According to Neelands, Heathcote encouraged him to make the conventions available to all teachers. He recognised that the drama teachers he watched (Bolton, Heathcote, O’Neill, and others) used similar techniques:

You know, they weren’t reinventing the form every time they went into a classroom, there were conventional ways of working which they were using. So, it was trying to collect those together but always with the sense that the trick was not to know them but to know how to layer them and bring them together.

(p. 2)

**Criticism by David Davis**

Neelands claims that Warwick Dobson, Tony Goode, and he himself were interested in taking a more Brechtian or epic realist approach to drama: “To use conventions to puncture the illusion of ‘reality’ in process drama and to make the contents of drama strange rather than to make it familiar” (O’Connor, 2010, p. xviii). Davis elaborates the Brechtian characteristics of the conventions approach in his book, *Imagining the Real* (2014). He argues that Neelands misinterpreted the so-called “living through” approach represented by, for example, Bolton and early Heathcote, by mistakenly associating it with Stanislavski’s system. As Davis (2016) explained it in a conference keynote address:

The dominant influence in the conventions type drama is a sort of Brechtian distancing. It leaves aside the more complex designing of a drama that brings the participants face to face with sorting out some complex area of human interaction while still in role, both as the character and as themselves.

Davis (2005, 2014), along with several of his former PhD students (e.g. Bethlenfalvy, 2020), argues that instead of the Stanislavskian and Brechtian approaches, the contemporary British playwright Edward Bond’s theoretical and practical understanding of theatre should be blended with the “living through” approach to provide an appropriate response to the challenges we are facing in today’s globalised neoliberal societies.

Davis (2014) emphasises that Neelands is “one of the most influential writers in the field” (p. 36) and wonders why Neelands and Goode, in their second edition of *Structuring Drama Work* (2005a), did not address “the frustration they feel at the formulaic way in which the conventions approach has been used to give structure to drama lessons” (p. 37). Davis questions why Neelands and Goode “added some 24 extra conventions and edited out the two
examples of process dramas in the first edition” (p. 37), instead of keeping them as examples to show “how the conventions could be used as structures in a process drama rather than as stand-alone techniques” (p. 37).

Neelands responds to some of these criticisms in a metaphorical way in his interview with Cooper (2019):

I think the message that got lost in the conventions approach was that the conventions are the palette of colours, but they don’t make a picture. You know, it’s how you then put the brush in and make the picture which is the point. Sadly, a lot of people just stopped at the palette and put this colour on and put that colour on, and that was the end of it”.

(p. 2)

In the same interview, regarding Davis’s argument stating that the conventions approach is Brechtian, Neelands basically agrees:

My response has always been: ‘that’s absolutely fine and a very accurate description’. So it’s hope in the Brechtian sense. It’s that hope that by looking at our selves [sic] through historical or otherworldly contexts we see ourselves [sic] more clearly, we see ourselves as better. And we’ve got a better sense of what actions might be taken in order to change things. So it’s very much from Brecht”.

(p. 4)

Authors from Norway

None of the editions of Structuring Drama Work have been translated into Norwegian. However, many Norwegian practitioners use the Danish translation of the first edition (Neelands & Goode, 2000b). Several Norwegian drama and theatre educators have written about the use of conventions (e.g. Heggstad, 2012; Sæbø, 2016; Songe-Møller & Bjerkestrand, 2017; Tetlie, 2017), but the conventions approach itself has rarely been criticised directly in books or articles in Norway.

Stig Audun Eriksson (1992) introduced Jonathan Neelands and Tony Goode’s book in a review in DRAMA, the Nordic drama pedagogical journal, and, reading between the lines, Eriksson criticised the book’s textbook literature style. In a recent personal communication, Eriksson (15 April 2020) acknowledged that, in that review, his intention was to highlight the danger of the instrumentalist use of conventions. He has illuminated and discussed conventions as a means of poetic distancing and distorting. Elsewhere, Eriksson (2014) clearly argues against instrumentalisation and in favour of the Brechtian interpretation of the conventions:

Intentionally, conventions are poetic means of expression, not instrumental exercises. They have something in common with Brecht’s idea of Gestus. Gestus is stylised and natural all at once, just as Heathcote’s conventions are stylised, life-like depictions, yet removed from actual life.

(p. 11)

In a personal communication, the Norwegian pioneer Kari Mjaaland Heggstad explained the following:
When Neelands & Goode first published *Structuring drama work* in 1990, I found it quite useful when teaching drama students at our university college. The publication in its third edition is still part of our core literature at the BA level. In the hands of a skilled drama practitioner, it can make sense. However, from day one I have been critical of the simplification of complex methods like ‘teacher-in-role’, ‘mantle of the expert’ and ‘forum theatre’ which are presented as simple conventions with a short explanation, in line with activities like ‘role-on-the-wall’ and ‘collective drawing’. No distinction between complex methods and other forms can easily contribute to a superficial understanding of the art form ‘educational drama’, and I worry that this will result in teachers taking shortcuts and jumping from one activity to the next with no deeper understanding of drama. It can look like a pick and choose from 100, in a multitude of contexts, which really means no context. The simplified drama practice makes me frustrated. It makes me worried about educational drama in schools.

(K.M. Heggstad, personal communication, 14 December 2020, italics, bold, and punctuations are original)

**Authors from Hungary**

Historically, a specific tradition of drama pedagogy (based on role-play, improvisation, drama exercises, and children and youth acting) started to flourish in Hungary in the seventies. However, the conventions approach was, ironically, introduced by David Davis at a legendary course in 1991. This course was followed by a quick and massive breakthrough, when both the first TiE company and the first Drama in Education course were launched in 1992 by László Kaposi, probably the most influential drama pioneer in Hungary. During the first half of the nineties, several books were translated from English to Hungarian, along with dozens of publications of new methodological guidelines for teachers written by Hungarian drama experts.

An extract of the first edition of Neelands and Goode’s *Structuring Drama Work* (1990) was first published in Hungarian in 1995 (Kaposi, 1995). This extract included the abridged version of the 45 conventions of the first edition and a three-page excerpt from the original theoretical introduction to the book. The theoretical part at the end of the book has not been translated. Most of the drama teachers still learn from, use, and teach the same extract translated 25 years ago. The second and third editions have still not been translated. (Our survey showed that some of the drama teachers were not aware of the fact that second and third editions exist.) Although there have been new publications written by Hungarian experts, recent key books, such as Davis’s *Imagining the Real* (2014), have not yet been translated. However, at the same time, a new generation of English-speaking drama teachers have introduced new theories, practices, and methodologies in Hungary, so despite the lack of translations of recent seminal books, Hungary’s educational theatre and drama sphere today is vivid, colourful, and diverse.

Traditionally, the conventions approach has rarely been criticised in Hungary, although several drama teachers have experienced its limitations. Cziboly and Bethlenfalvy (2013), after observing 118 different educational theatre programmes, have concluded that:

those working with dramatic work forms mainly use nine distinct conventions that are often repeated, namely: Still-image; Thought-tracking; Role-on-the-wall; Diaries, letters, journals, messages; whole group improvisation [Meetings]; Small-group play-making; Hot-seating; Teacher-in-role and Forum-theatre. Only rarely did we encounter any alternative conventions.

(p. 293)
Bethlenfalvy (2020) recalls his experiences with the conventions approach at the beginning of his book:

> After working for a few years in the Hungarian drama in education field I realised that my drama lessons had become somewhat mechanical. My lessons usually built on the same dramaturgy and a limited number of conventions (...) I would construct a fairly happy community with context building conventions, then bring in a problem from inside or outside the group which participants would try to solve in some way or the other, and finally reflect on the story, mostly by rationalising our learning in some form.  

(p. 15)

Bethlenfalvy’s dissatisfaction led him to join the Birmingham-based Big Brum TiE Company for two years, and later enrol in the PhD course at Birmingham City University, where he explored how Edward Bond’s theory and practice can be blended with the Living Though Drama approach.

**Authors from China**

Since drama education is still a relatively new field in mainland China, only a limited amount of literature in the field has been introduced to Chinese readers or translated into Chinese. Most of the literature has been translated by drama experts from Hong Kong and Taiwan, where educational drama is better developed and more sufficiently researched. The translated literature includes works by McCaslin (1999), Haseman and O’Toole (2005), Morgan and Saxton (1999), Warren (2001), O’Toole and Dunn (2005), Neelands and Goode (2005), Bolton and Davis (2014), and Heathcote and Bolton (2006). These books were translated into the traditional Chinese used in Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, which has different wording than the simplified Chinese used in mainland China. This difference may cause misunderstandings when readers interpret concepts and terminologies. However, these are still truly important materials for Chinese readers, especially for those who are unable to access the original books. In recent years, the latest publication from David Davis (2017) has been translated into simplified Chinese, as well as the influential piece by the Norwegian drama expert Kari Mjaaland Heggstad (2019). In addition to these, the research findings from the DICE project (Drama Improves Lisbon Key Competences in Education; Cziboly & DICE Consortium, 2010) have also been translated (Cziboly & DICE Consortium, n.d.). The growth in drama literature in Chinese also indicates the growing impact of drama on Chinese education.

The second edition of the book by Neelands and Goode (2005) was translated into traditional Chinese in 2005. Neelands and Goode wrote the foreword to the Chinese readers and added a 72nd convention called The Great Wall (of China) as a gift, under the theme of reflective action. They encouraged the translators to change and adapt their original ideas and examples from practice so that the conventions fit better with the context and philosophy of Chinese culture (Neelands & Goode, 2005, p. 9), as their aim was that conventions should be adapted and changed if needed, in order to make them useful and essential at a local level. In the Chinese version, the theoretical chapters are relocated to the beginning of the book. The order of the theory part was also changed as follows: (1) Structuring drama for learning opportunities, (2) Theatre as a learning process, (3) A guide to dramatic conventions.

As far as we know, there is no specific published criticism on the conventions approach in China. In correspondence with drama practitioner Cao Xi (creative director of Drama Rainbow, who was ranked as the third most influential drama practitioner by the Chinese
respondents in our survey), Cao has claimed that a critical use of the conventions is important in drama. According to him, many practitioners use the conventions approach in a rather superficial way, forgetting what drama is really about. Cao argues as follows:

I think the use of theatre and drama convention partly frames the process of drama. They frame how participants see the drama. But often the problem is that because of its practicality, teachers tend to see them as the drama itself. They are not drama. There are usually plenty of considerations that are more important than how you frame the experience of the children, such as what are we exploring and what is the central concern of the experience etc. But often what happens in practice is that these questions are rather arbitrary or neglected because there is this need to fill the classroom with activities. Without focusing on the central concern (content) of the drama, the conventions (form) can easily be separated from what drama really enhances: children’s experience from within. And that is the major threat of the art form – the separation of form and content.

(Cao Xi, personal communication, 11 April 2020)

What do practitioners think about the conventions approach?

In this final part, we will summarise the feedback and opinions received in our survey from 86 experts working in ten countries.

**Reflections from Norway**

Norwegian respondents use conventions to structure their work either in process drama or in theatre work. According to some of them, conventions can be useful in many ways: to prepare participants for acting or as tools in learning processes such as exploring curricula. As one of them commented:

They are good guidelines for working with moral and ethical values, emotional registers, critical thinking and creative learning processes, collaborative exercises, Bildung, social codes and awareness in the classroom, mastery of physical work, focus and concentration, and ability to understand and empathise with the stories of others.

According to another respondent, they are also useful in planning: “systematics, progression, variation, improvisation, and linking theory/reflection to practice”.

While one respondent argued that conventions are useful “as long as you use them for (poetic) reflection, and not as games and starters”, another was less critical about using conventions as warm-up activities, because some conventions can be used in different contexts: some can be used to create text, while others are good for closing the process. This respondent noted: “Some are particularly good in the context of formation; others are good for developing the actor and theatre form. This is because the conventions originate in different traditions, from psychodrama to Jaques Copeau”.

According to the more critical voices, the conventions can “flatten” the process if the facilitator focuses only on the learning objectives. If conventions are integrated into the work with the aesthetic dimension, it can result in a great teaching process, but on the other hand, if the facilitator focuses only on reaching the goals in the curriculum, this will make the teaching boring. The conventions, these respondents suggested, can work in cases where one uses them deliberately and as a way to reflect.
Reflections from Hungary

The presence of different traditions in the Hungarian drama world is clearly visible from the responses we received. Many of the respondents like conventions and the conventions approach, since conventions “help to structure the task”, “they can be used brilliantly, for all ages”, and they “make the work of ‘naive’ drama teachers more aware”. Conventions are “safe points for both the teacher and the students”. From a lecturer’s point of view, “conventions are a great help in university education” and “they are easy to teach”.

However, there are critical voices too. According to one of these, “work-form” is a better and more accurate name, and the term “convention” is arbitrary and inaccurate, which probably comes from the idea that (the British tradition of) drama (in Hungary) sets itself apart from other traditions in a way that it develops its own “termini technici”.

Roughly half of the respondents acknowledged the usefulness of the conventions, “but not at all costs: flexibility is more important”, according to one expert with more than 40 years of experience. Three respondents argued that conventions narrow the thinking about drama to a formal approach, and when applying conventions becomes technical, it can easily hinder thinking about the process. One respondent referred to a misconception that the more conventions are used, the better a drama lesson is: “I think this is nonsense. Bullshit”. According to another expert, the use of techniques carries the risk of purely intellectual involvement: “Learning and practising conventions is useful as a kind of approach to drama, but if the work is based only on these, it becomes terribly predictable, didactic and boring”.

Reflections from China

According to the collected data, many of the Chinese respondents think conventions are useful and an effective way to start the process. One remarked: “I think Neelands’ conventions are quite practical and useful, and there is a system within”, which is easy and adaptable. This respondent continued: “Each element is particularly useful as a starting point for undergraduate students as the acceptance of this method by students is quite high (…) especially for undergraduates or people who have no drama education experience”.

One respondent commented particularly on the adaptation of the examples offered in the book, which they felt were a weakness, and claimed that “the examples in the book are mostly not very useful, I have hardly used them”. Although conventions are often used by the Chinese respondents, it seems they are mostly rational and critical when thinking of applying the method, as they claim that the use of conventions must “relate to the story and the frame, keep flexibility in use of conventions, but one should not pile up the conventions”. As one explained:

Convention is just a tool. Drama is about a situation. Therefore, only through detailing the situation within a frame, can the tension of drama be possibly created. The use of conventions must be based on a concrete (drama) situation, not on the purpose of simply filling the activities (in the classroom).

Reflections from other countries

Our survey was also completed by other international experts: six from the Czech Republic, two each from Greece and Serbia, and one each from Croatia, England, Iceland, and Poland. Most respondents from these countries were “pleased to work with” conventions, since they
are “great tools” which are “easy to combine”, “help to structure drama learning”, and “give the order to the process”. Conventions are used for multiple purposes, such as “exploring the content of the drama”, “creative problem solving”, “the analysis and interpretation of different texts”, “exploring different fields of the intelligence of the children”, “agitate people [sic] and involve the whole personality of the participants in the process”, and “to stir up the creative process of the participants”; they are also “very useful also when teaching other subjects (e.g. literature, history, etc.)”.

Regarding the limitations of the approach, one teacher warns that “the conventions alone do not necessarily create meaningful learning in drama”, or, as another expert formulates it from a rather instrumentalist aspect, they are “not a guarantee of achieving all learning outcomes”. One of them notes that “far too often I see drama teachers teaching about the conventions rather than using them for their original purpose”. One practitioner mentions that “using conventions in kindergarten is limited due to the age of the children”. Another practitioner believes that there are “other ways of drama education” besides the conventions. These are “Spolinian exercises, games or role playing” and “making theatre (devising theatre)”.

Final thoughts

The conventions approach is probably among the most successful methodologies, if not the most successful, in terms of international expansion and influence. Besides the canonised list of conventions, hundreds of local variations exist from country to country. Many practitioners, and even Neelands himself (Cooper, 2019), agree that its success lies in its accessibility: the conventions approach is relatively easy to understand, apply, learn, and teach.

However, many agree that accessibility also leads to a kind of simplification and might carry the danger of instrumentalisation. For those facilitators who have learnt about planning and leading more complex processes and can combine the conventions in a meaningful way, access to a wide variety of work forms (a total of 100 conventions in the third edition) can be enriching. However, for those who try to use the handbook as kind of a “recipe book”, and simply read the descriptions of the conventions without understanding how these conventions can be organised, the mere application of stand-alone conventions in order to achieve a curriculum learning objective might result in a stockpile of empty forms. Sadly, the book offers little help on how conventions could and should be organised.

Even in the first edition, complex methods (such as Mantle of the Expert or Forum Theatre) and overarching elements of drama work (such as teacher-in-role or narration) have been combined with work forms. Recently, simpler exercises (such as The Iceberg or Harmony) and theatre genres (such as commedia dell’arte, documentary theatre, or verbatim theatre) have been added to this mix, all discussed at similar lengths, and with similar exploration of details and importance. This practice did not make it easier for the less-trained reader to differentiate between conventions and to understand how they can be organised into a complex process.

Nevertheless, the conventions approach has had and will continue to have a strong influence on drama education internationally and has contributed to the training of generations of drama teachers. However, will it be able to respond to the challenges imposed by COVID-19 (e.g. Cziboly & Bethlenfalvy, 2020)? Will it be able to acknowledge local traditions and variations in addition to the canonised list of conventions? Will it be able to provide more guidelines for planning and leading? Is there a possibility for a productive dialogue between the conventions approach and the living through approach? We believe that addressing these and other questions will shape the form and the content of the fourth edition.
Notes

1 All quotations originally in Norwegian language were translated into English by the second author, those in Hungarian by the first author, and those in Chinese by the third author.
2 In earlier versions: “dance and drama”, “drama and dance”, then “theatre and drama”.
3 Due to the limited space of this article, this is a superficial description of the regulations; the actual regulations are much more detailed.
4 As of 3 December 2020.
5 Compulsory education in China encompasses a free nine-year education, including six years of primary education and three years of secondary education, starting usually at the age of six. The curriculum consists of the following subjects: science, geography, Russian, chemistry, history, fine art, moral education, Japanese, biology, mathematics, physical education, physics, arts, music, English, and Chinese.
6 In fact, while the first edition (Neelands & Goode, 1990) contained 45 conventions, the second (Neelands & Goode, 2000a) had 71, so they actually added 26 new conventions. Even the first edition did not include any examples of process dramas – Davis is probably referring to other books of Neelands.

References


108
Practice of drama in different cultures


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