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DRAMA AS A PEDAGOGY OF CONNECTION

Using Heathcote’s rolling role system to activate the ethical imagination

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Introduction

The late great drama education pioneer, Professor Dorothy Heathcote, spent her lengthy career leading and inspiring teachers and students through meaningful experiences in imaginative inquiry, enabling participants to think, understand and feel the complex predicaments of humans and their stories. The power of her ‘living through’, ‘process drama’, ‘mantle of the expert’ and ‘rolling role’ approaches were game-changing developments in education, and she regularly generously demonstrated her teaching methods throughout her career so that teachers could learn how to use drama for powerful learning in the classroom. As a storied art form, drama evokes and constructs imagined characters and contexts, making them momentarily real for learners and audiences alike. Drama’s core elements of role, place, time and narrative allow us to conjure the ‘what if’ as players and audience, as we suspend disbelief temporarily to be ‘in the moment’ of the drama. In drama learning, students are invited to step inside imagined worlds and create the moments of the drama, taking on roles, co-constructing the action and making sense of symbolism, and embodying stories. In her innovative drama practice, Heathcote believed that ‘school is everywhere’ (Heston, 1993), and the subject matter for dramatic inquiry is all around us. Throughout her career, she modelled the breadth, depth and power of shared imaginative inquiry and the potential of creative drama pedagogy to shift students’ understandings of themselves, others and the world around them. Her early methods explored ‘a real man in a mess’ (Heathcote in Smedley, 1971), that is, what drives people and communities to behave and live the way they do. Heathcote’s praxis was driven by an interest in the cultivation of the ethical imagination through the drama learning process (Heathcote, 1993). Writing about drama and the ethical imagination, Edmiston argues that drama cultivates the experience of answerability, through which students can be faced with being answerable for those actions if they view the consequences of the actions from points of view of those affected (Edmiston, 1998, p. 69). Given the complex entanglements of contemporary life in this age of the Anthropocene, there is perhaps an urgent need to activate the ethical imagination in schools and communities. A rolling role system of teaching offers teachers a robust method for taking up this critical challenge in the classroom.
Whilst process drama and mantle of the expert have had considerable impacts on the drama education field and practice in classrooms all over the world, Heathcote’s later system of teaching, rolling role, has had less uptake and even less research into its applications in schools. Developed at the end of her career, rolling role was an organic development of her creative pedagogical praxis, devised to assist teachers in providing deep learning across the curriculum in the 1990s. She recorded, with Claire Armstrong Mills, a series of videotapes to show teachers how to plan and implement a rolling role drama (1993 & 1994). In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in Heathcote’s rolling role system of teaching and how it can be revived in schools (Davis et al., 2014; Davis & Simou, 2014; Hatton et al., 2014 & 2016; Davis, 2016; Hatton & Nicholls, 2018).

This chapter will analyse a recent transdisciplinary drama project called the Sanctuary Project, which used Dorothy Heathcote’s rolling role system of teaching to connect different curriculum subjects, learners and teachers in a shared drama learning experience in one Australian primary school. In this approach to teaching and curriculum, drama acts as a ‘pedagogy of connection’ (Dillon, 2006, 2008), through which the iterative rolling nature of the dramatic action and roles across classes and subjects provides a powerful interconnected imaginative inquiry for students. A rolling role approach to teaching can provide active and meaningful learning experiences for students, and the system offers teachers ways to address the complexities of living and learning on/about a damaged planet (Tsing et al., 2017). In the Sanctuary Project, the rolling role inquiry offered students and teachers artful opportunities to consider the complex entanglements with/in place and to deeply consider the impacts of change (Barad, 2010), all interrogated safely and critically within the fictional context of the drama. The drama positioned students as post-human subjects (Braidotti, 2013), where the role frames and action of the process encouraged students to engage with a range of collective ethical dilemmas and problematic ideas such as interspecies connections, community action, compassion and environmental and social response-ability. The drama project allowed the students to ‘make oddkin’ (Haraway, 2016) as they considered the plight and needs of migratory birds, in particular, the bar-tailed godwit and its endless journeying across this damaged planet (Tsing et al., 2017). These migratory shorebirds circumnavigate the globe on the East Asian Flyway between Australia and New Zealand, then on across the Yellow Sea, to nest in Alaska before making the arduous 11,000 km uninterrupted flight back south. By creating a community connected to these birds, this rolling role drama invited students to consider the complex challenges facing local and international wetland environments, and also to make critical links with the human parallels to the godwits story, considering those people who also seek sanctuary across international borders. In this way, students were encouraged to see the layers of meaning in the drama and also the ‘nomadic web of posthuman earth-wide connections’ (Braidotti, 2013, p. 193) between human and non-human beings.

Drama as a pedagogy of connection

In schools, drama can sometimes battle for curriculum space and adequate provision, particularly if the formal curriculum positions it as ‘extra’ or ‘other’. Regimes of value are regularly played out in education and schools, as policy decision-makers and politicians dictate what is necessary learning and what content is valuable according to neoliberal rhetoric and policies. Politicians often use a ‘decluttering the curriculum’ agenda to limit subject areas such as drama that may not fit into narrow prescriptions of learning and data-driven approaches to teaching. In this context, teachers can struggle to convince colleagues and parents of the depth and impact of effective drama learning on young people and their lives. Drama
educators often have to advocate for drama as a subject in schools, and numerous researchers over the years have extolled the virtues of drama pedagogy in shaping meaning-making, critical reflection and learner agency in addition to the creative and aesthetic outcomes of the learning episode. Some suggest that the arts are regularly underutilised as high-quality, rich subjects and pedagogies in schools, where their potential for deep learning is undervalued (Ewing, 2010).

Conceptualised as a ‘pedagogy of connection’ (Dillon, 2006, 2008), a rolling role approach in drama can activate the ethical imagination and energise curriculum through a creative transdisciplinary inquiry. According to Dillon’s framework, a pedagogy of connection in which border transactions between disciplines can be negotiated to form something new is inherently creative. Drama approaches such as mantle of the expert and rolling role can provide creative processes and tools for making conceptual connections and new discoveries when disciplines are integrated in the classroom.

**Heathcote’s rolling role system of teaching**

Heathcote developed rolling role as an extension of her practice in process drama and mantle of the expert and, as such, utilises similar conventions and principles from her earlier work. Rolling role builds upon the multitude of techniques and strategies she had already pioneered such as active learning through role play (teacher and students), dramatic framing, keying, distancing and the use of productive tension to fuel and deepen the dramatic inquiry. Heathcote’s manipulation and use of the art form enabled participants to conjure complex predicaments and shift their understandings from the experience of being inside the problem or task. To inform her teaching, Heathcote drew upon multiple rich sources, practices, subjects and readings to enable her expert crafting of memorable drama-learning experiences, and her ability to work creatively in role alongside her participants was, and still is, astonishing. In her life’s work in drama education, Heathcote modelled the many educational ways drama can probe the ‘messy complexities’ (Taylor, 2016) of human stories and experiences from the inside, ‘as if’ they are happening to participants in the moment of learning, or in what she called the ‘now time’ of the drama. Rolling role and Heathcote’s other approaches develop the creative, cognitive and affective capacities of students; the experience of the drama can be a powerful way to make abstract concepts more real and to delve deeply into problems in all their complexity, by framing them symbolically in a storied inquiry process.

Heathcote developed rolling role for secondary teachers who were responding to the demands of the newly introduced UK national curriculum in the 1980s. She conceived rolling role as a transdisciplinary system of teaching whereby:

…any number of members of staff can form teams of collaboration, whilst teaching their own timetable and curriculum area. The programme involves the team in devising a common context from which all their curriculum teaching can spring, and this context provides purpose and relevance for the curriculum work to be undertaken. The context is carefully structured so as to provide easy access to the arts, science and humanities curriculum at all levels relevant to the age, abilities and skills of pupils involved in the programme.

*(Heathcote, 2002)*

In a rolling role system, the inquiry is centred on the establishment of, and investment in, a common fictional community context, where the rules of engagement and the basic narrative are deemed as non-negotiables. Each class works within the fictional boundaries of
that core community; however, each class has its own part to play within the overall project and contributes from different role perspectives. In their individual class time in differing subjects, students engage in tasks that make use of real-world artefacts, places and processes to fuel their engagement. Each class makes products that are then shared, published and used by other classes in some way. In this way, the materials generated from the inquiry process of each class fuel the learning process elsewhere, adding interwoven layers of meaning to the project as a whole. Heathcote proposed three layers of meaning operational in a dramatic inquiry, which are activated in rolling role:

- **Anthropological**...*Why does mankind...?*
- **Sociological**...*How do humans solve problems that matter for everyone?*
- **Psychological**...*How does it affect me and those in close bonding with me?* (Heathcote, 1993)

The inquiry process activates the ethical imagination of students as they engage in the layers of meaning generated in the role play. Heathcote’s praxis was always deeply focused on story. Any given story, for Heathcote, had hidden meanings, like a thick woven cable: ‘they are like millions of strands hidden under the surface of the storyline which can yield any teacher immense stores of examples of human interaction’ (Heathcote, 1979, p. 13). Stories are also key to the construction of a rolling role drama. Heathcote used rolling role to explore a culture of a place or time, and the endeavours that bring people together, such as those in Figure 13.1.

These endeavours provide the frames of mind for role play and supply the focus for potential tasks completed in the inquiry process. As the fictional community is established in the rolling role inquiry, students create aspects specific to that culture, so that the participants can then also interrogate more deeply ideas such as territoriality, time and memory and exploitation (Heathcote, 1993).

In a rolling role project, the learning process flows organically as a spiral of connection for each class and between classes. In this approach, the process is task-driven, as it is with mantle of the expert, but the community aspect and the dimension built into the fiction unite the classes on a dramatic journey, in which all parts and role frames contribute to the whole imaginative inquiry. Heathcote’s student and colleague, Claire Armstrong Mills, elaborates:

Rolling is the aspect of the process that distinguishes it from other methods in that it exactly describes the dynamic of constantly moving forward, without moving to a predetermined end. As with a wheel, the focus of the drama is fixed. Nevertheless, the purpose of the wheel is to move, and no matter how far or fast it moves, it has a constant relationship to the axis.

*(Armstrong Mills, 1993, p. 6)*

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*Figure 13.1  Aspects of culture to explore in a rolling role inquiry*
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Like mantle of the expert, rolling role is propelled by student tasks and activities. Rather than focus on an enterprise or commission, the focus of rolling role is to build in tasks that establish a fictional community and address the challenges within that community. The cycles of activity move like a spiral for each class, as they contribute ideas and information about the community over time. Heathcote (1993, Tape 7) explain that learning grows in each episode within the inquiry cycle for participating classes (Figure 13.2).

Whilst each class feeds the wheel of learning, they also contribute a piece of the puzzle and narrative about the fixed axis, the community. Publishing is key to this shared meaning-making. Each class publishes its work so the other classes can use and benefit from it, the rolling story can develop further and meanings can be shared and deepened. Mapping out how each class contributes to the whole imaginative inquiry involves careful initial planning. The rolling role system enables teachers and students to make conceptual connections across the curriculum and utilises the power of role-based inquiry to activate and stir the meaning-making process as student-made materials roll on from class to class.

Heathcote was keen for teachers to build dimension into the learning process, to engage students and to immerse them into the world of the fictional community. Rolling role activates the ethical imaginations of students, as the immersion in the episodes of the drama enables students to creatively make affective links between the content explored and their own feelings and insights (Figure 13.3).

Heathcote saw this as a key feature of rolling role: that students engage with the work on multiple levels and through various creative processes and phases. In her terms, the ethical imagination needs to be central to rolling role as system of teaching for active learning.

**One rolling role example: The Sanctuary Project**

The Sanctuary Project was a rolling role dramatic inquiry that activated curriculum content and concepts from the curriculum subjects of science, history, geography and English. In this teaching project, a cohort of eighty Year 5 students created a fictional town called Castlemaine and engaged in an extended dramatic process over six weeks. Three classes were involved in the project and each was given a different role frame as experts, targeting different curriculum subjects. One class worked in role as scientists (the science and technology subject...
area), another were historians and geographers (the human society in the environment subject area) and the third class took on the role of journalists (the English subject area). The non-negotiable narrative at the core of this fictional Castlemaine community involved an important government-funded project to rehabilitate local Ramsar-rated estuarine wetlands as a sanctuary for migratory birds, in particular, for the endangered bar-tailed godwit. The drama, roles and community were all fictional; however the science, history and the birds were all deeply based in the real world. The crisis in the drama paralleled real-world problems and the need to maintain wetland habitat for the godwits on their yearly migratory journey as they navigate the East Asian Flyway and visit coastal Australia and New Zealand (Figure 13.4).

Framed as adult experts, each class had a different role frame as scientists, historians, geographers and news reporters, and they participated in a shared drama experience and produced different materials and ideas which rolled from class to class. They delved into the past of the Castlemaine community, its present needs and considered its future as a sanctuary for birds...
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and humans. The project was designed to revive Heathcote’s rolling role system, but also to incorporate additional elements to adapt to the contemporary classroom context. The use of technology was blended into the inquiry, so that students were able to publish their work online via the schools learning management system and share information at critical moments in the drama. In addition to the rolling role inquiry in regular class time, the same cohort of students also explored the notion of sanctuary in their performing arts hour time slots, creating work that explored the birds’ journeys but also the movements and stories of displaced people around the world. Complementing the rolling role work, these sessions allowed their drama teachers to use puppetry, drama and movement activities to work artistically with the concepts and ideas generated within the project more broadly. Puppetry gave students the opportunity for rich embodied learning and gave them a physical way to use the abstraction of the puppet to relate aesthetically to the birds and their journey across the world. Puppetry provided an embodied access point into the non-human world of the godwits, as the children animated and symbolised the flocks travelling through the sky. This rich para-disciplinary approach added additional depth and support to the transdisciplinary inquiry of the rolling role project.

The project began with a discussion of the word ‘sanctuary’:

TEACHER: Do you know what the word ‘sanctuary’ means? What does it mean, for humans and animals?
STUDENTS: To have a home…To be safe…To have somewhere to live…To have food and shelter.
TEACHER: Does it mean the same thing for humans and animals? Or are humans more important?
STUDENTS: No, it’s the same…Animals are just as important as humans.
TEACHER: Now a harder question…Is ‘sanctuary’ a right, or does it need to be earned, somehow?
STUDENTS: It’s a right…everyone deserves it…if they need it, they should have it.
ONE STUDENT: All living things have the right to be safe and have what they need to thrive.
TEACHER: Ahhh…so every one and every thing has the right to thrive?
STUDENTS: Yes!
TEACHER: But do they? I don’t know…
STUDENTS: Well, they should!

This out of role exchange between a class of curious 10-year-old students and myself as the drama teacher occurred early in our rolling role dramatic inquiry project. In a brightly lit Australian coastal classroom, we interrogated the concept of ‘sanctuary’ and considered the equity of needs between humans and animals to enable them to thrive. This short exchange at the start of the workshop exemplifies Dorothy Heathcote’s idea of a ‘laboratory classroom’ in action in a rolling role inquiry (Heathcote, 1993, Tape 11). This laboratory approach characterised her mantle of the expert approach, as students were given tasks to complete on behalf of an imagined client. Similarly, in rolling role, work is done via tasks, and ideas are activated, critiqued and tested as the drama unfolds. In Heathcote’s terms, this was an important part of the cognitive apprenticeship that was embedded in her praxis:

[t]he dramatic framework is a laboratory…where we explain things to each other…Laboratories are those [places] where tangible tools can be seen…You hope that by applying critical imagination to tasks, their insight and their personal elaboration on ideas will actually begin to happen. ‘Cause in the long run, you know, we don’t teach classes, we teach people.

(Heathcote, 1993, Tape 7)
Heathcote characterised a laboratory classroom as one where teacher and students are explaining the world to one another as the dramatic inquiry unfolds (1989/2012, p. 12). In her innovative practice in drama education, Heathcote applied what she referred to as a crucible paradigm of education (1989/2012), positioning learners and teachers as co-creators, engaged in learning processes that involve stirring our knowledge together (Heathcote, 1989/2012). Heathcote saw teachers and students as active meaning makers in this type of learning, constructing the learning experience together. In terms of rolling role, she said:

“All the time in this type of work we are trying to avoid the one-way transmission, that says, ‘pin your ears back, listen to this, and now you will know it’...but instead, it says ‘pick up the clues, start to actively engage with the material, and between us, we’ll sort it’.

(Heathcote, 1993, Tape 4)

Working in improvised modes via collective creation of the drama, students make sense with each collaboration and development in the episodes of the drama. As the belief and investment in the fictional community grow, students perceptively make connections and see the ramifications of events and tensions unfolding in the dramatic action.

In this project, the weekly workshops with students established the fictional community of Castlemaine, its environment, colonial past and present wetland challenges. The design of the fictional episodes was deeply informed by real-world information and local history, which was woven into the fictional context of the drama. Ideas for enactment came from real-world historical and scientific information local to the area or other areas like it along the eastern seaboard of Australia. In setting up the non-negotiable core context of Castlemaine, it was clear all students needed basic information to orient them in the world of the drama. All student groups learned what an estuarine wetland was and considered it as a dynamic interdependent ecosystem through movement and embodied exploration. The picture book Circle by Jeannie Baker was used to introduce students to the bird at the centre if the drama: the bar-tailed godwit. To assist students to grasp an idea of the past and its colonial context, students met a naturalist artist from the past, Harriet Smith. This section of the drama also utilised information about the Scott sisters, who were accomplished nature artists of the natural wetland environment located in the Hunter region of NSW in the 1800s. The sisters in the 1800s were brought to life via the ‘frozen effigy convention’, where students were able to ask questions of a character (played by one of the teachers). Like scientists and scholars today, the students were able to reference the intricate paintings of the Scott sisters to get a sense of the fauna and flora captured when the wetlands were thriving in their natural state.

Each class had unique tasks that fuelled the wheel of learning before the larger group came together at the end of the drama when a crisis was introduced. In the first sessions, they established their characters and created short professional biographies that they shared online. They were given more detailed information about the types of professionals that were needed in the drama, via role cards. This gave students particularity in their scope of expertise. For example, in the class of scientists, there were botanists, ecologists, environmental scientists, hydrologists, invertebrate experts and marine and avian scientists. As the drama unfolded, each class was charged with different activities that contributed to the world of the community. The scientists got to work planning and learning about wetland rehabilitation; the journalists focussed on identifying local stories and local identities; the geographers mapped the landmass that became the focus for the scientists; and the historians used that map to then locate sites of indigenous significance such as middens, ceremonial places, story
trees and, more problematically, sites of colonial massacre. The map became the source of information for all classes and provided additional challenges when the scientists realised they had already begun work on the site without understanding the cultural significance of the place. What ensued was a highly charged in-role debate about the ethics of science, cultural memory and hierarchies of knowledge! This group resolved to apply for more funding to rectify the earthworks that had already been done and to rethink their design to align more respectfully with cultural protocols. The teacher collated their ideas on a fictional map on the classroom whiteboard, repurposing a map of their real-world town and its local estuarine river system, which were given new fictional names. This fictional Castlemaine digital map of the rehabilitation plan was then shared with the other classes online.

After this material had been generated and shared in the rolling role process between the classes, fictional time had passed, and the Castlemaine wetland area had been re-established so that water flow was revived and non-human life was once again returning to the area as the ecosystem began to flourish again. Then the drama turned, and an imagined crisis was injected into the learning process. This was timetabled to occur on one day, so the dramatic tension was able to be established and unfold. The journalists received a recorded voice message that was a tip-off that the new government wanted to revoke the wetland statutes and embark on a high-density housing project, allocating houses and apartments for new home buyers and relocated refugees. This was loosely based on a case in Australia in which the existence of a wetland was threatened with development for housing. Each journalist had to let the other experts know about this turn of events via a confidential email. The students were busy working on their tasks when the emails started coming through. This was a critical dramatic moment, as the experts felt that all their work was now under threat. What about the birds and all the animals? Messenger journalists visited the other classes to explain what information had been received and what needed to be done, as an important community tribunal meeting was called for later that day with government representatives in attendance. Each expert had to then prepare to speak at that meeting and present an articulate case as to why the development should not go ahead. The students busied themselves with the task of formulating their cases. Later that day, the whole cohort of 80 students came together with their teachers, and two executive teachers took on the roles of the supercilious government representatives. A lengthy and volatile improvised exchange took place as the officials heard the views of the experts in the room. Students in role voiced their concerns about the wetland, the needs of the birds and the betrayal of this new government who wanted to destroy this important sanctuary. Here is one example of students arguing their case, from the school’s video documentation of the meeting:

STUDENT 1: I am Professor Octavius Karl, and I would like to present my case. I say that you are betraying the past government that gave us the funding to build a place where these birds can have sanctuary. And you are taking it…ripping up the dirt and building houses. And where are the birds going to live?

TEACHER IN ROLE AS GOVERNMENT REPRESENTATIVE: Professor Karl, people also need houses.

STUDENT 1: I am aware.

STUDENT 2: There is more than the birds to think about, there is a whole system of animals and wildlife. I am a sediment scientist. I am an expert on ragworms. The birds eat them, and they are important for the birds to live.

STUDENT 3: My name is Doctor Joshua Smith and I’m here to present my case. First of all, the species that we are trying to save here is a very endangered species and it has got one of the longest flights in the world, non-stop. And right now, what you are trying to do, you are trying to build houses
where they rest, eat food and get fat before they take off and go on their trip. And right now, you are trying to build houses in that area, and the consequences are as follows...you will destroy all the mudflats in the wetlands so the bar-tailed godwit that flies to that area to eat before it flies away, it doesn’t have anywhere to do that. And your houses that you want to build, there is a lot of space on the other side of town where you could build these houses...and that’s my case.

The expert role frames allowed students to argue from their areas of expertise. The historians spoke about the cultural significance of the site and the need for preservation, whilst the journalists focussed on the way this new housing development proposal betrayed not only the work already done but also the interests of the community. This lengthy improvisation ended with the officials assuring the group that their comments would be taken back to the minister for her consideration. Students were pleased that their arguments and concerns would be heard in the imagined future of this fictional community.

Whilst the drama enactment concluded at this point in the narrative, the learning process needed to come to an end and the learning needed to be shared. Two weeks later, we held a sharing day for participating students, their families and other staff members, at which students shared excerpts of the project and the materials they had created, and some shared their work in role, as experts. The class of scientists had created video pieces to share – their teacher had sent out the school drone to film the real local river system and the students had worked in groups to provide an expert voice-over as if the footage was Castlemaine. In these videos, the students spoke eloquently about the need for wetland rehabilitation for migratory shorebirds. Students also shared their puppetry and drama work on this sharing day. They were very proud of their work, and numerous parents reported that they had been excited to take part in this rolling role learning process. One parent reported that their child couldn’t stop talking about the godwits, while another said her daughter had asked if this was the way that all their schoolwork could be taught in the future. Some wanted their families to explore the river system in their own town as a result of this project. After the end of the project, some classroom teachers spoke to students about community action and discussed practical and real ways they could respond to the issues raised in the drama in their real-world town.

**Shifting from ‘a real man in a mess’ to post-human entanglement**

This project has highlighted the potential of rolling role as a system of teaching that offers teachers a way to shift thinking and practice in drama. Much of our pedagogy in drama education has rested for decades on a human-centric focus – human stories, human agency and human potentialities underpin many drama lessons and processes in schools. Solutions are often miraculously found in these dramas to complex human problems, or storylines simplified or glossed over, to ensure the didactic messages of the drama are delivered as stable, so that the learning can be measured and therefore made ‘valid’ in the current neoliberal educational context. Such classroom dramas tend to place humans as the heroes, as the agents of change, with human exceptionality at the centre of the action. Perhaps this needs to shift within the contemporary contexts of education and the current state of the planet. Scholars with interests in posthumanism and new materialism offer theoretical and practical spaces for thinking differently about the way worlding is conceptualised in classrooms, and this has resonance for drama education and its curriculum futures.

Whilst Heathcote railed against transmission models of teaching and gave precedence to active learning through dialogic processes and laboratory classrooms, the notion of ‘man in a mess’ still has man at the centre, and often it is a white man. To what extent do we situate our
classroom dramas in tired humanistic tropes, and neatly tie up narratives as though the problems opened up in the drama can be controlled or fixed by human will alone? Or worse still, we open up complex problems without supporting students to feel able to respond at all. In these difficult times, perhaps, we need to reconsider more explicitly how the fictional enactment of the lessons might lead to real and ethical action outside of the drama experience. It may be time for a more expansive philosophy of interspecies collectivity to enter our drama lessons, so we might consider more fully the ways in which we are all entangled with all kinds of species and matter. The ‘messes’ man has made are historic, situated and devastating for the planet and human existence, so how do we pedagogically work with that knowledge in our laboratory classrooms? The design of this rolling role project was influenced by the work of feminist theorist Donna Haraway. She calls upon us all to make and ‘stay with the trouble’, rather than run away and hide from it (Haraway, 2016). She says:

The task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present. Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places. In urgent times, many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe, of stopping something from happening that looms in the future, of clearing away the present and the past in order to make futures for coming generations. Staying with the trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future. In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.

(p. 1)

Maybe our task in these times is to use drama as a pedagogy of connection, so we can ‘stay with the trouble’, in service to our students and their complex futures. This type of drama work requires less narrative closure and certainty, and opens the context in order to juggle multiple lines of inquiry simultaneously. In this way, rolling role can be used to bring ‘other’ worlds, times, places and beings into the inquiry space and into our imaginations.

In shifting to focus on entanglement in drama, we can use the pedagogy and art form to powerfully negotiate roles, problems and creatures, accessing ways of knowing and feeling that are intangible if we focus only on the human story. How can we imagine and access ‘mortal critters’ and be with them in the interconnected turmoil we face on a ‘damaged planet’ (Tsing et al, 2017)? How can imaginative inquiry frame humans, worlds and creatures in a worlding process, where imagination gives shape and access to things we cannot see or touch in the classroom? Can we generate new knowing only through imagining together? I believe that drama can offer students ways of knowing, seeing and being in the world anew. We can use the form, processes and symbolism of drama to frame inquiry but also to facilitate sense-making as enfolded beings. Haraway uses the term sympoiesis as a word for worlding, a radical form of ‘making-with’ when we connect and consider ‘complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems’ (Haraway, 2016, p. 58). Taylor and others engaged in the Common Worlds Research Collective are highly critical of the way educational processes can rely on hero narratives, particularly in relation to learning about nature and the environment. Taylor states that such approaches:

…unwittingly position nature as existing to serve human interests, and repeat the kind of dichotomous ‘heroes and villains’ tropes that call us to identify with those heroic versions
of human history that trade on notions of moral superiority and human exceptionalism. It might make us feel good and righteous to be on the ‘right’ side of human history, on the side of the good guys who will rescue and protect nature, but is it ultimately helpful, indeed relevant to be thinking in this way? What are the costs of hanging on to separated and purist notions of nature (and childhood for that matter) as we face up to the considerable ecological challenges and intergenerational justice issues of our time?

(Taylor, 2017, p. 65)

In the Sanctuary Project, students created and served the imagined human community of Castlemaine, but also the critters and ecosystems that were entangled with it. Students exercised care and empathy, but through their work as experts and puppet artists they were also exposed to multiple layers of the fictional world. At times in the drama, humans would intentionally or unintentionally ruin or restore the sensitive ecosystem of the estuarine environment, all the while knowing that year in, year out, in the real world, the godwits continue to fly back and forth in search of food and sanctuary, as humans continue to meddle in their affairs. Whilst the participating students had never seen a real godwit, their empathy for them and connection to them were quite profound. The rolling role project enabled a new sense of interspecies relations to develop.

Conclusion

The Sanctuary Project rolling role drama was designed to problematise students’ understandings of the ethics, action and politics inherent in the precarious concepts of sanctuary and the ‘right to thrive’. The design of the project took up Sterling’s post-sustainability challenge to provide ‘un-learning, re-learning, and new learning as a necessary response to a deeply challenging reality’ (Sterling, 2017, p. 37). Theorists such as Haraway, Barad and Braidotti suggest this kind of framing allows for hope and response-ability to emerge. Approaching drama learning through the lens of entanglement opens up the inquiry, but also invites educators to consider the ‘agential cuts’ evident within the learning process and how the drama works at ontological and epistemological levels. What new insights are uncovered when drama intentionally works with ethics and intra-action, foregrounding connections but also differences, and how these affect all beings? For Barad (2010):

Entanglements are not intertwinings of separate entities, but rather, irreducible relations of responsibility. There is no fixed dividing line between ‘self’ and ‘other’, ‘past’ and ‘present’ and ‘future’, ‘here’ and ‘now’, ‘cause’ and ‘effect’…. Entanglements are relations of obligation – being bound to the other – enfolded traces of othering.

(p. 265)

Drama offers a pedagogy of connection, providing affective and cognitive processes through embodied role play to examine the responsibilities that lie within interspecies entanglements. Such an approach requires teachers to reconsider how their pedagogical approach might use the drama art form to open up complex problems and relations, working across subject disciplines and boundaries. Using rolling role for transdisciplinary inquiry in schools may be one system that is flexible enough to address both philosophical and onto/epistemological ‘work’ as well as the more pragmatic demands of curriculum integration. The need to activate the ethical imagination in schools and communities is more pressing and urgent in these times. Drama pedagogies such as rolling role can offer profound systems, forms and
strategies for teachers to make learning matter and help students rehearse the kinds of agency they might need to manage their own futures. This kind of aesthetic ‘work’ may just be crucial to the future of education as well.

References


