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A personal genealogy of the idea of drama education as a force for change

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I recently became troubled listening to a conference presentation about the use of process drama in China. According to the presenter, the drama work was part of the citizenship curriculum and aimed to engage students with ideas of responsibility, critical thinking, collaboration, and so on. There was a suggestion that work such as this is valuable as it leads to positive social change. The facilitator was a white, Western academic (as were the majority of people at the conference presentation), and I found myself wondering whether the ‘positive social change’ that we assume is the same as that sought by the participants in China, and whether this again is the same as that sought by the school system the drama was conducted in. I then wondered about whether the lack of reflection about the idea that drama = change means that drama educators can accidentally contribute to uncomfortable agendas, while simultaneously having their work considered as unproblematically aligned with social justice. Asking these questions, I then considered instances in my own work throughout my career where these tensions have played out and could certainly pinpoint moments where reflection on what kind of change, and for whom, was sorely lacking. I, like so many others, believe the rhetoric of our field – that our work is important, that drama gives students a voice, that drama can empower, and that drama can contribute to society in meaningful and just ways. It is this tension, between reflection and rhetoric, that is the catalyst for this chapter.

When I initially wrote the abstract for this chapter, I suggested to the editors that I would engage in a genealogy of drama and social justice. I was inspired by the work of Nicholson (2010), who conducted a genealogy of the term ‘applied theatre’, and also the work of Kershaw (2016), who lamented that the field of applied theatre had no historians and therefore it was difficult to track the development of theory and practice in a way that allowed us to unpick our assumptions about what we do in ways that make us more reflective practitioners and scholars. My intention in this chapter was to explore the history of the idea that drama education is a force for positive social change, the often-assumed relationship between drama and social justice. I particularly wanted to focus on drama education rather than the larger ‘umbrella’ field of drama education and applied theatre combined. Although often conflated with applied theatre, there is a distinctive history to drama education and educational drama that I feel is worthy of exploration.

Having made this ambitious plan, I began to work back through publications to explore the idea and quickly realised that drama education practice globally is too broad to capture...
in one publication such as this, and also that publications about it appear (or not) in a variety of places; it would therefore be a much larger project to map extensively (although one I am keen to undertake). Rather, in this chapter I offer a more personal genealogy of my understanding of drama education as a force for change, revisiting several papers and books published in the field of drama education, many of which I drew on for my initial PhD thesis completed in the mid-2000s, to engage in a discussion of how my understanding of this idea became so central in our field.

Many years ago, I read The Art of Travel by philosopher Alain de Botton (2014). In the final chapter of this book, he recommends that the reader ‘travel’ around their own home. By doing so, one could reflect on and experience one’s surroundings as if they were a new place. I have drawn on this philosophical idea in this chapter. I have been an academic in the same university for 13 years now, beginning in my mid-20s. I am also the daughter of an academic who had an interest in social justice and education (although he was a literacy specialist). As I look to my bookshelves, many of the books are ones I bought to supplement my reading in my research interests: drama, applied theatre, education and social justice, social class. However, there are also a large number of books that were hand-me-downs from other academics who dropped off boxes of books pre-retirement, most of these in the area of drama. I have units of work and resources developed in the 1970s and 1980s mixed in with old journals and magazines. I have the first volume of the Drama Australia journal, published when I was in my first year of university, now–semlinal texts written by drama education ‘giants’ such as Jonothan Neelands, Gavin Bolton, and Cecily O’Neill. I also have shelves of less well-known texts that consider the emerging role of drama in education, many written between 1975 and 1995. So, in this chapter I aim to combine a personal genealogy with a de Botton–inspired travel through my bookshelves. I note with thanks Jenny Simmons, Rosalyn Arnold, and particularly John Hughes, whose names still appear written in the front cover of many of the books, for gifting a new scholar with such a rich history of the field.

A note on theory and method

In my attempt to trace an idea through my bookshelves I rely on my position as a critical scholar drawing on poststructuralist perspectives that encourage us to explore assumptions, common-sense, and taken-for-granted ideas in our field. These perspectives are hardly new to drama education. Brecht attempted to make ideas ‘strange’ for the audience to encourage reflection, O’Neill (1995) (and many others) emphasised the importance of distance and the use of conventions (such as ‘the brotherhood code’ (Wagner 1979)) to allow for this, and O’Connor (2007) refers to drama as a tool for refraction, rather than reflection, suggesting that “rather than clarity, process drama seeks ambiguity: instead of resolving issues it seeks to further problematize and complexify” (p. 8). Heathcote suggested there is at times a shared vocabulary between sociology and theatre because “theatre, like sociology, seeks to examine the nature of social life” (Heathcote 1984).

In this chapter I undertake the exploration influenced by Foucault’s ideas of genealogies as an attempt to understand how systems of knowledge, and the discourses surrounding them, have emerged. A genealogy aims to demonstrate that an idea such as ‘drama is a force for change’ is not self-evidently ‘true’ or morally neutral, but rather has been established by particular ways of thinking, writing, and relating in the field. The chapter is structured around a series of proposals that I make regarding an emergence of the idea that drama is a force for change to consider the notion that drama education relates to social change and social justice. These proposals represent my answers to the following question: What can
the publications on my bookshelf tell me about why I think there is an implicit relationship between drama and social change? They are not intended to be exhaustive or authoritative but rather a reflection on the ideas with the intention of beginning, rather than concluding, a discussion in the field.

**Proposal one: it begins with youth**

My first proposal relating to why change is considered such a common-sense focus in drama education relates to the very practical idea of who it is for: youth. I am arguing that youth and childhood, and the simple fact that drama education takes place for youth, are central to understanding its relationship to change. Many (including me) consider Slade’s 1954 work *Child Drama* to be a seminal text in our field. Not only did it structure its discussions around case studies of practice, which has since become a common way of publishing in drama education, it paved the way for an understanding of drama as art form in and of itself, distinct from theatre. It linked drama, unapologetically, with a quest for “happy and balanced” children (1954, 105). The idea that doing (not watching) drama made people better is a central tenet of Slade’s text. He also suggests the improvement is not only confined to the child (or, as it is sometimes referred to in the text, the “future adult”) but also teachers, who can become more “sensitive and friendly” (ibid.) through the planning and implementation of drama.

Exploring my bookshelf while wondering about drama’s discursive, philosophical, and practical relationship to youth makes me realise how nuanced and complex it can be (worthy of its own book). Yet because the relationship is assumed, this complexity remains hidden. Some publications did not really discuss children or youth at all, despite writing about drama and schools, but evident in all the arguments they presented was the notion that the purpose of the work is to teach/change students. Many argue directly for the rights of the child or spend time discussing what children need. Very few engage in a critical discussion of the relationship between youth, drama, and education.

A powerful governing idea related to youth and education is that of pre-competence (Austin, Dwyer, and Freebody 2003). Unlike adults, young people who lack knowledge or skill are not problematised as ‘ignorant’ or ‘incompetent’ but rather pre-competent. This categorisation of youth places them in a specific power relationship with the competent adult and makes the development of competence as a defining feature of the transition between youth and adulthood. At that point if a skill is still unlearned, then the ‘incompetence’ label can be applied. Like Slade’s suggestion that drama improves children, pre-competence discourses place a central focus on change, and the common-sense idea that it is the role of a child to change – to learn, to grow, and to become an adult. Placing the idea that drama helps children grow, next to the categorisation of the child as pre-competent, I read Heathcote’s words from a conference in 1980: “I believe that every child I meet understands deep, basic matters worthy of exploration but they may as yet have no language for them” (1984, 103). In terms of how it is understood pedagogically, drama education is often considered to be a way of developing the language (broadly conceptualised) that young people need to express and explore their understanding of the world. This is evident in the discourses around ‘giving voice’ (Freebody and Goodwin 2018), expression (O’Connor 2016), creativity (Harris 2014), and play (Ewing 2012; O’Toole 1992).

Beyond the pedagogical discourses, there is also a strong sociocultural discourse concerning how youth as a social category intertwine with sociocultural issues, and the place of drama education. These writings presented a complex relationship between drama and youth. Some drama is used to teach youth and guide them away from their inappropriate
paths (drug taking, sex, partying, bullying, etc.). Some drama is used by adults to gift youth the chance to express themselves artistically and personally, usually couched as in opposition to a cruel and oppressive school system that denies them this opportunity. Some drama is used by youth as a form of activism to take the chance to express discontent. Some drama is used by youth (often facilitated by adults) to represent themselves to adults to say, ‘This is who we are’, to have voice, and to celebrate their ‘youth-ness’. Some drama is done with adults with youth as audience, to engage them in an idea that the adult considers to be important. In many, if not all, of these forms there is often an orientation towards making change, either to change the youth themselves (their knowledge, their behaviour, their ideas) or to incite others to make change about issues that are of relevance to young people.

Proposal two: knowledge leads to change

Evident in many of the writings regarding the use, or potential, of drama education is the idea that it allows participants to gain knowledge and skills. This follows a common-sense idea that gaining knowledge or skill leads to measurable or worthwhile change. One could be pedantic here and suggest that if someone learns a new skill then they have changed because they can now do something (or know something) that they could not before, but I suggest that the common-sense idea that knowledge leads to change also implies action – that the new knowledge will encourage action that leads to personal, social, or institutional change. With this proposal, I am suggesting that a central way that drama educators claim change is through the opportunities given to participants to learn new ideas and skills. This seems obvious, and perhaps that is why this concept was rarely called out explicitly in the publications I explored. Muir was an exception, opening his paper *New Beginnings* by acknowledging his own assumptions regarding “the transformative power of education” (Muir 1996) and the idea that knowledge and change are at the philosophical and practical centre of education, that they are the why and how we do it.

Implicit attention to the relationship between new knowledge, action, and change often focused on how learning and meaning-making are achieved through drama. Some of this writing was focused on the need for children to develop, such as Heathcote’s views that a teacher’s role is primarily concerned with the “growth of the personality to whom he [sic] offers facts and information and skills” (1984, 81). Much of the writing was concerned with how students can make meaning through drama: this goes beyond acquiring knowledge and implies a deeper or more critical connection, maturity, and action. O’Toole drew on a series of scholars to map a trajectory of the way drama education defines meaning-making from pedagogical definitions (“learning through drama”) to a focus on an individual’s ability to make meaning of the world, to political ideas of subverting schooling, to more active and social constructivist ideas of proactively building dramatic meaning (1992, 216).

Heathcote and Bolton (1995) suggest that it is important that students are aware that they are learning, constantly reflect on what they are learning, and are responsible for their learning. Metaxis is an oft-cited tool for understanding how the field considers drama to engage students in meaningful learning. Considering metaxis a state of “in-between-ness” (Davis 2015), most authors cite Boal as the source of the theory that metaxis is the state of belonging to two worlds simultaneously – the real world and the fictional world (Boal 1995) – and that “the meaning of the drama lies in the interplay between these two worlds” (Bolton 1985). I would argue there are also clear connections with Vygotsky’s theory (Vygotsky 1933) of the ‘dual affect’ which is also often cited in drama literature (Davis 2015; O’Connor 2013; Piazzoli and Kennedy 2014). The combination of students being aware of their role
as learners outside of the fictional context of the drama while simultaneously engaging in action within the fiction – what Heathcote and Bolton described as “having power to direct, decide and function in the fictional world” (1995, 18) – creates a learning environment that not just allows but requires students to use and test their new knowledge. Although this required action takes place in a fictional context, it is still action, and therefore many writers suggest that the emotional experience is still real for students (Neelands 1992; O’Toole 1992) and that the relationships between real and imagined allow a safe space for students to “experiment without the burden of future repercussions” (Heathcote 1984, 104).

Although not explicitly focused on social change, the building of new knowledge and skills, particularly through considered and reflective participation in the fictional and real worlds, can draw connections to how students learn and change their perspectives on the world. How we as a field believe students learn and make meaning in drama classrooms seems to relate directly to arguments we make about the capacity for drama education to be a force for change.

**Proposal three: drama is prosocial**

My third proposal relates to drama as a “pro-social pedagogy” (O’Connor 2010). Here I mean more than just social or collaborative: I am referring to the idea that drama pedagogy builds social understanding, social cohesion, and empathy. These are pervasive ideas in writing about drama education, and for me personally, they are important ideas that inform my own understanding of why I do what I do. They are not, however, without critique, and potentially the most common is that they are underexamined or assumed, or “accidental” (Grady 2003). Here my intention is not to engage in an in-depth critique (although I have done this in other publications), but, like I have with other proposals, to use my journey through the bookshelf to unpack how and why authors have made the claim that drama is prosocial, and that this is a good thing.

Drama is often positioned as a mode of learning that works from and builds the strength of the group and involves negotiation, contact, and collaboration (O’Neill and Lambert 1982). This has been an enduring idea around which the field has understood, explored, and expressed itself. In many ways I believe it is borne out of a practicality of the work – the collaborative, ensemble-based nature of devising and performing drama – but it has grown to encompass the possibility of much more. I unpack this idea further in proposal four, but there are many publications spanning the decades that imply, if not directly state, that working as an ensemble in the current institution of schooling is in itself a radical act.

There is also so much writing in the field of drama education that implicitly, if not explicitly, recruits the development of empathy as a powerful reason for using drama pedagogy. Much of this is focused on the way role and role play is understood. Neelands suggests that by getting students to take on roles and adopt different perspectives, drama pedagogy can help students “to see the underlying human significance and themes in their learning; to explore prejudices and stereotypes; to develop empathy and respect for others who are culturally, historically or socially different from themselves” (Neelands 1992). Recently (in non-drama reading, but still on my bookshelf) Hughes (2016) suggested empathy and the search for common humanity as a key component in a framework for reducing prejudice through education. He stated:

> Prejudice is a type of objectification whereby a person’s individuality is not recognised and he or she is seen as part of a whole, a type of stock character defined by pre-ordained
traits that are, in effect, a set of clichés, stereotypes and overgeneralisations. To get beyond this, the first step is to recognise another person’s individuality … [and] that he or she can be related to in terms of the universal themes that unite humanity (desires, feelings, family, belief, culture, the body and so on).

(2016, 110)

Unlike scripted characters, roles in a process drama or role play are fluid. They are embodied by participants who bring different perspectives to the context; they can be reimagined and rearranged, and they can be responsive to emerging events (O’Toole 1992). Many consider the reflective and deliberate decision-making around roles as providing participants in drama with opportunities to practice empathy.

Proposal four: schooling is inherently political

This last proposal led to a debate amongst my drama education friends. No one disagreed – yes, it was decided that schooling was most certainly inherently political. But isn’t drama as well? Our conversation led back to Peter Brook’s idea that all we need for drama to take place is for someone to walk into an empty space (Brook 1968). Is walking into an empty space political? Some of my friends argued yes: Who can walk? Who has the power over the space? Who belongs in the space? All stories told have agenda and perspective, and therefore power and politics. Others argued that art can be political and is politicised, but it is not inherently political. It was the kind of semantic debate that I can only seem to have with other academics and makes me simultaneously celebrate and question my choice of career. I ponder this here because my final proposal is that schooling is inherently political – it is structured to be so. There are the overt politics – school funding, debates in public media, the political agenda of the minister for education – and there are the more hidden politics: curriculum, representation, physical spaces, valued funds of knowledge, and so on. Drama itself can be political, but I am unsure that politics are inherent to what drama is, why it is created, or how it is considered effective. Despite that, I propose that drama education is political because it takes place within the institution of schooling.

It would seem that the field agrees with me. To address its position within a political institution, early writers in drama education often explicitly aligned drama education with progressive and anti-oppressive ideas. Drama education, for many, is and should be a disruptive force in an education system too focused on hegemonic and neoliberal ideas of success. Rereading O’Neill and Lambert’s 1982 offering Drama Structures I feel I can see the way rhetoric about what drama is aligns with anti-neoliberal sentiments, projecting a distrust in a school system where students are increasingly “trained to work as individuals and to be both competitive and possessive about their achievements” (1982, 13). Neelands too considered drama work to be a way of overcoming “the detached climate of the classroom” (1992, 6), and then in later work he and Nelson more explicitly aligned drama education with the acquisition of power in an unfair schooling system:

Acts of theatre, socially made and shared as lived experience, offer a paradigm for engaging urban youth in explorations of power, agency and the distribution of economic and cultural capital.

(Neelands and Nelson 2013, XX)
Here, more than any direct quote so far, is a clear and deliberate link between drama education and social change. It attends to the idea that working collaboratively on experiential work in schools allows students to understand issues of social justice more deeply. Implied is the suggestion that this deeper understanding will assist action that may lead to change. It aligns with notions of critical pedagogy and critical hope, both powerful discourses in drama education that promote the development of critical consciousness in students. Students with critical hope see the world as ‘unfinished’, a challenge rather than a hopeless limitation (Freire, 2007), and their understanding of power and skills in agency allows them to act powerfully in and on the world. Some writers, including me (Freebody and Finneran 2013), have suggested that drama education’s often-assumed relationship with critical pedagogy can be traced to Freire via Boal, with Pedagogy of the Oppressed followed by Theatre of the Oppressed. Others have been more circumspect about the relationship and wondered to what extent, through an unreflective alignment with critical pedagogy, have we “accidentally positioned ourselves as Marxists . . . or done so intentionally?” (Grady 2003). O’Connor (2013) noted that with a few exceptions, there has been surprisingly little research into the relationship. I had initially wondered whether it was a connection that I had made in my head, as an individual practitioner inspired by the practices of both critical pedagogy and drama in education. Exploring my bookshelf, however, it is evident that critical pedagogy has been a powerful theory that informs the politics, if not the practice, in our field.

Beyond the overtly political positioning of drama education as subversive to schooling, there are many other ways that the writers on my bookshelf aligned drama with progressive, anti-oppressive ideas. There is a large body of literature that exposes children’s rights to play, create, fail, risk, and be children. Much of this discourse problematises the role of adults in children’s lives as barriers to these important experiences. One of my favourite quotes regarding drama and youth came from Slade’s seminal text. He suggested that “The Child, through Child Drama, avoids the imposition of well-intentioned, ill-informed adult plans” (1976, 108). There is a small but influential consideration of the role of beauty in education, and the place of drama as an aesthetic practice within this (Winston 2010). Drama is also recruited by some as a tool for direct action. This work varies in form, from political plays devised and performed by children to process drama work that encourages children to empathise with terrorists (O’Connor 2013). This work positions drama pedagogy in ways that draw students to work together, to learn, to consider different perspectives, and to take action.

There are, no doubt, more ways the alignment between drama and social change has been considered throughout the decades since Slade’s Child Drama. The point with this proposal is not necessarily to unpack all the ways that drama educators have positioned themselves as political or socially just but rather to suggest that the positioning happened, and more, that the positioning needed to happen so that the field could understand its place and purpose within an overtly political and publicly politicised system. Ignoring politics was not an option for a field that needed to argue its value and conceptualise its worth as a body of knowledge and skills in an increasingly narrow and conservative schooling system.

One could argue that this chapter has essentially made one proposal: that the focus on youth emerges as an education (or learning) discourse (because drama is done with youth and youth live in schools and the purpose of schooling is to learn) which merges with social justice discourses (because schools are inherently political and have therefore historically positioned the type of learning they provide as ‘good’). Taken together, these key discourses
build connections that create a common-sense understanding of drama as a force for social change. I appreciate that this chapter, as a review of an idea, is the ‘tip of the iceberg’, and, as I indicated in my introduction, it is intended to begin conversations rather than finish them.

**A final personal reflection**

One thing I have not addressed in this chapter is serious critique of drama education and debates about its place and purpose. Anyone who knows the history of the field knows that some of the ideas I have been discussing here are not uncontested. Probably the most aggressive critiques centred around the mythologising of Dorothy Heathcote (Muir 1996) and other key scholars – what Hornbrook (1989) referred to as a “cult of personality.” My reason for omitting these critiques was practical: I did not feel they contributed clearly to the idea of the chapter. However, as this is a personal genealogy of an idea, I will indulge myself with a reflection on these critiques. I approached a rereading of Heathcote’s work with some trepidation. It is the third time I have spent significant time with Heathcote’s ideas – the first being in my undergraduate degree in the late 1990s, and the second as I was writing my PhD in the mid-2000s, and the third now. Each time they have informed me in different ways. In my undergraduate degree I was in awe and excited by the potential of this incredible pedagogy. I imagined it as an activity that could achieve anything – free the world from its ills. As a PhD student studying social class and schooling systems, I was more reticent. A worthwhile tool, yes. Certainly, it allowed students more ‘freedom’ to talk and a different learning experience in what were usually narrow spaces. However, I did not feel that it attended well enough to a broader sociological question about why the work mattered and how it brought about change. Now, I read the work with a new perspective again. I am on the cusp of a generation of drama educators who never knew Heathcote: although she was alive and practising for the first part of my career, I never had the opportunity to work with her, and neither did most of the colleagues I work with. As a result, the personality and mythology seem less prominent in my reading now. Her work, together with the various accounts of it by colleagues such as Gavin Bolton, is, in its essence, a scholar discussing how and why they do their practice. A detailed account of drama education that gives the field insights into not only an important historical moment for our field but also how so much of our current theory and practice has emerged. As I reflect on the experience of exploring my bookshelf, I am struck by what a gift it is to have this history for us to traverse. In a recent editorial, Peter O’Connor and I reflected on the importance of academic publications such as journals as a “record of praxis, the aide de memoir for us to trace the genealogy of ideas” (O’Connor and Freebody 2020). I believe that practitioners within a field should understand why and how the field emerged and what different purposes it has served, currently serves, and can serve. This knowledge allows us as scholars and practitioners to critically reflect on our work, have informed ideas about how and why our work could serve a social justice agenda, make more deliberate contributions to society, and better serve the participants we work for and we work with.

**References**


Drama education as a force for change


