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Enlivening teachers' co-creating attitude

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This study was originally undertaken to examine the phenomenon of teachers co-creating drama in an Irish context. The goal was to better understand the phenomenon in all its multidimensionality and complexity, and to reflect on the meaning of this for the teachers. This was achieved through a series of interventions, interviews, and finally the examination of the participating teacher’s narratives. The week-long continuing professional development (CPD) summer course was part of the study and focused on the co-creation of drama. As the sampling criterion for the study required that participant teachers have a good understanding of co-creating drama and be actively using drama in their practice, the course offered a means to enlist potential research participants. Following the course, they were asked to activate what they understood to be a co-creator attitude in their classroom drama work on their return to school.

Co-creating drama is considered in this work to be the coming together of teacher and students in communal drama creation, where both parties work as “co-artists in open possibility” (O’Neill and Lambert 2006, p. 55). It distinguishes itself from teacher-directed drama, because the content evolves and the outcomes are not preconceived, and the emphasis is placed on creating something new and of value to the group. This can be anything from forming new ideas or new perspectives, to a small performance, or perhaps a move by the students beyond the typical classroom thinking, or it can be something created that encourages personal or creative satisfaction for the group. Fundamentally, it is co-constructed, contextual, and emergent work. Co-creation can best be understood, not as a specific set of pedagogical practices but as an ontological attitude. The most prominent feature of co-creating is the teacher moving beyond the role of leader and facilitator to become an “active accomplice” in the work (Booth 1994, p. 39). For this to occur, the teachers must also be prepared to shift from a position of power, perhaps stepping outside their traditional teaching role, and into a co-artist role. This requires a willingness to play, imagine, improvise, to take risks, to fail and try again, and to share all these experiences with their students. Given this, co-creation depends greatly on the active involvement of the teacher and their ability to enliven both egalitarian and creative behaviours in their teaching practice.
My approach

Creating a course that engaged teachers in developing a greater understanding of co-creating drama and appreciating the transformative role this may have upon their drama practice were important goals. This led me to consider deeply the type of activities I was to employ, because “if we want teachers to rethink the way they teach students, then we must also rethink the way we teach teachers” (Dawson et al. 2011, p. 315). My intention was to create a plan of work, but ultimately, I wanted the course to be a recursive meaning-making process. A critical aspect to my approach was the influence of ‘devising’ on my own drama practice. I was part of a theatre for young audience company for nearly a decade and engaged in devising theatre work for children. I became aware that over the years, devising had also become embedded in my drama classroom practice. Devising practices vary from artist to artist, but my personal practice centres on collaboration, an openness to emerging opportunities, an ability to draw out ideas and responses, and turning all of this into creative action. I envisioned building on the knowledge that the teachers brought to the CPD experience. I could not predict their contributions, but I could use my devising skills and my intuition developed over many years to respond to unanticipated happenings and discoveries.

According to Simmie (2007), the problem with providing CPD to experienced teachers is finding an appropriate approach to encourage teachers’ involvement, while at the same time supporting critical reflection and professional growth. My research into an ‘appropriate approach’ took an interesting turn when I encountered a study by Kelchtermans (2009) in which he defines a ‘Teacher’s Personal Interpretative Framework’, that uses ‘teachers’ career stories to understand their ways of thinking about teaching, and themselves as teachers’ (Kelchtermans 1996, p. 220). This notion of the ‘teacher self’ interested me greatly, as Palmer elegantly affirms, as a teacher:

[O]nly one resource is at my immediate command: my identity, my selfhood, my sense of this ‘I’ who teaches—without which I have no sense of the ‘Thou’ who learns. Here is a secret hidden in plain sight: good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.

(Palmer 1997, p. 14)

This philosophy informed the start of our CPD journey, which began with an activity where the teachers explored their personal and professional experiences and constructed them into ‘meaningful stories’ (Goodson 1992). The inter-disciplinary activity was guided by two frameworks: Michael Schratz’s ‘Micro Level of Initiating Teacher Thinking’ (1993) and, as introduced earlier, Kelchtermans’s Personal Interpretative Framework (2009). It focused on the teachers investigating their teacher selves by identifying their learning history, beliefs, and values to facilitate meaning making. There was an added motive for placing this activity as the start of the course, which was inspired by Wilson and Berne (1999), who state that it is important for a CPD process to offer opportunities for teachers to talk to each other about learning, about their students, about their teaching, and about themselves. This, they believe, allows them to evaluate and reconsider their practice. The activity was broken down into four sections. We began with the teachers drawing a magnifying glass on an A1 sized poster sheet and drawing two large shapes in two corners. The opening element of Schratz’s approach, “The Magnifying Glass: Reflection on Teaching in Action” (1993 p. 161), embodied the ‘self-image’ and ‘self-esteem’ features of Kelchtermans’s interpretative framework. The teachers were asked to illustrate any difficulties, fears, or expectations concerning their teaching in general
by drawing/writing in the inner part of the lens of the magnifying glass. This inevitably provided common ground for the teachers as it drew attention to the challenges and realities that teachers face day to day. Following this, they delved into their “Learning History: Reflection on Becoming a Member of the Teaching Tribe” (ibid). This ties into Kelchtermans’s belief that the nature of teachers’ understanding can only be fully understood against their biographical stories. The teachers were asked to detail their learning history in timeline style around the lens of the magnifying glass, from when they first went to school to the present time, highlighting what drew them to teaching as a profession. The third step, “The Fantasy Journey: Immersion into the Inner World of Teaching” (ibid), involved the teachers expressing their needs, wants, and desires to be enhanced as a teacher, that is, more time, energy, resources. And finally, “The teaching Market: Mirror of Teachers’ Work” (ibid) involved the teachers disclosing, in the final shape, a career highlight or a particular pedagogical skill (something that worked well for them, whether subject related, classroom management, or something in their day-to-day working). This aspect was concerned with the teachers valuing their experience, recognising tacit knowledge, and noticing what skills and talents they possess. Finally, there was a discussion of all that had been revealed, questioned, or commented upon. The reflective dialogue opened a space to begin to review their own journey of learning and examine how their values and beliefs, and past experiences impact upon their classroom practice now.

Day two, the teachers engaged in an inquiry into their relationship with drama and a practical re-evaluation of their role in their drama work. We began with a simple paper activity. In pairs, they were asked to manipulate coloured paper (by tearing, scrunching, creating 3D sculpture shapes, etc.), to respond to words such as imagination, teacher, students, and drama. The teachers collaborated to co-create something tangible to show us what they thought. This became a catalyst for discussing their feelings about drama. The activity allowed for a processing of ideas, and the manipulation and sculpting of their creations helped embody their understandings and moved them to reflect on unconscious aspects at play, because “art expression is not merely the final product but is also the process by which the product has been developed, … both product and process foster significant psychological processes, revealing meaningful information about the creators’ inner world” (Sholt and Gavron 2006, p. 66). Following this, I become conscious of tackling possible barriers and biases associated with the subject. So, for our next activity, after forming a circle, I asked the teachers to swap places with someone if they agreed with the various statements that I presented (derived from the discussions in the previous activity), for example: ‘I have stopped drama because the students are playing up’; ‘I have left the kids to it in drama work’. Teacher learning is ‘activated’ by discussion and exchange (Wilson and Berne 1999), so this activity was key as it provided an opportunity for the teachers to talk to each other in an honest manner about the difficulties of their drama practice. The strongest outcome of this activity was the discovery that for most of the teachers there is a strong sense of stress and anxiety that goes with their drama practice; they shared many of the same feelings and experiences of drama, which I noted as apprehension, avoidance, feelings of being unqualified, or not having the necessary drama knowledge and skills. The most thought-provoking aspect for me was their feelings of guilt about ‘not being creative enough’. We are reminded by Wales (2009), that “teachers’ feelings are an important aspect of their work, because much of the work of teachers is about how they express their identities and personalities in the classroom” (p. 262). It was becoming clear how these negative feelings were impacting upon their relationship with drama and affecting their drama practice, therefore I needed to address and dispel the anxiety that can result from teachers’ lack of confidence in teaching drama.
This final activity of the day was an adaptation of Augusto Boal’s ‘Real/Ideal Images’ (Boal 2002). The teachers were grouped and asked to construct an image showing the ‘real’ events or happenings of their drama classes. Interestingly, many of the images were examples of discipline issues, where the students were ‘climbing the walls and jumping off chairs’, as one teacher commented. Next, the group constructed their ‘ideal’ drama class. The final part involved the groups adding a third (middle) image which showed the act which could bring them from the ‘real’ to the ‘ideal’. They had to consider what this change was, and how they could activate it. While at some points the teachers did ask me direct questions about ‘controlling’ the drama to avoid these problems, mostly the dialogue happened amongst the teachers. They swapped ‘horror stories’ (but also some positive recollections) of their drama teaching. It led to a level of deeper exploration on the part of the teachers, of the conditions and circumstances necessary for drama work to be productive, and most agreed that they wanted their students to have agency but feared unintended consequences of the work. The group moved on to build a new group image of what they saw as their ‘usual’ role in the drama work. Adding themselves as the students, they were asked to position me in their picture as teacher. I then introduced the concept of the teacher as a co-creator of drama, asking them to alter the image to present this. I had anticipated this would be a fast exercise. But, as we negotiated the physical and symbolic role of the teacher, the theoretical understanding of the co-creator role began to be debated. This resulted in a decision to show different versions of the co-creator role through images which, in fact, became an interesting way to explore the “different versions of their pedagogical selves” (Diamond 1991, p. 13). We decided at the end of this process to revisit this exercise on the last day of the course to challenge our initial interpretation of the teacher’s role as co-creator.

We began day three with Playful Triggers (Loi 2005), introduced with the intention of unpacking the idea of collaboration. Playful Triggers are everyday things/objects used to access, interpret, and communicate ideas. Loi describes how Playful Triggers, generate receptive modes through their tactile, visual, mysterious, playful, tri-dimensional, poetic, ambiguous and metaphorical qualities. These triggers ask people to challenge taken for granted or conventional ways of doing, seeing and articulating things to co-generate shared understandings and collaborative practices. (Loi 2005, p. 18)

The teachers’ task was to assemble a collection of objects into ‘a meaningful story’ of collaboration. Crucially, the activity invited imagination, playfulness, and unpredictability into the room, which are undoubtedly strong features of co-creating. There was much giddiness when this exercise began, but as the group moved through the deliberating and experimenting stages, they began to work seriously and created concrete examples of their understanding. By the end of the morning session, the teachers had a strong sense of the power of the collective, and the difficulties of collaborative work. They probed the different parts that people played, noting some people took a peripheral role, while others were ‘knee deep in it’. They then discussed the best way to cultivate a democratic classroom. This led to one teacher suggesting that co-creating with the students would be “collaborating, just not all the time”, echoing Aitken et al. who propose that, in drama, “power need not be solely wielded by the teacher nor the total preserve of the child but that there are spaces to be negotiated, created, and extended by both parties” (2007, p. 15). Another interesting outcome of this work were the rich metaphors of collaboration that the teachers physically created through their sculptural representations, and the way the triggers became tools for participation, reflection, and

Fiona McDonagh
Enlivening teachers’ co-creating attitude

meaning-making. There was also a revealing insight in the way the teachers approached the task. They struggled with the fact that there was not one ‘right answer’. They repeatedly asked me, ‘what are you looking for?’ ‘What do you want at the end?’ My reply was, “it’s your representation, so the only opinions and thoughts that matter are yours”. By facilitating this process of learning through art-making, I had hoped they would recognise that there can be multiple perspectives, multiple ways to solve a problem, and that there can be more than one solution (Eisner 2002). Eventually, the teachers co-produced a representation that worked for all the individuals of the group, and decided that rather than the product being most important, the process was as valuable.

A need to address the creative capabilities of the teachers became apparent on the previous day when the teachers discussed a ‘lack of confidence’ in their creativity. I wanted to tackle this head on. As Craft (2002) suggests, “[t]he choosing of a creative path in any given situation is less a matter of ability to do so and more about a mind-set or attitude” (p. 107). So, in this session I was to set about a process of ‘rediscovering’ their creative mindset. In attempting to build, as Craft suggests, a ‘receptivity’ and ‘openness’ to creative work, I facilitated Heid’s (2008) art exercise, in which she employs Torrance’s and Safter’s ‘Four Stages of Creative Thinking skills’ (1999) in conjunction with the book If... by Sarah Perry (1995). Torrance and Safter advise that there are four stages of creative thinking, namely, fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration, and when exercised, we are more likely to become creative problem solvers. The book presents recognisable, but divergent, ideas fused together in different images along with matching statements, such as ‘If mice was hair’, ‘If caterpillars were toothpaste’, and ‘If butterflies were clothes’. The book ends with the words, “If...this is the end, then dream up some more”; this set up the teachers’ work. In pairs, they were to create their own pages to add to the storybook. As outlined by Heid, the teachers began Torrance and Safter’s four stages by brainstorming and generating ideas for objects and animals to amalgamate, illustrating fluency. Then they demonstrated flexibility by moving between ideas and experimenting with new combinations. The third level of creative thinking – originality – saw them searching for originality or a unique idea. During the fourth level, elaboration, they developed ideas and details, becoming artist-like. This led them to create new pages for the book that were abstract, absurd, and wonderful. To begin with, the teachers were hugely concerned with the quality of their artwork and their drawing skills. But, as the ideas began to flow, their focus turned to the quality of the ideas they were creating. When the teachers were given the tools to find alternative ways to arrive at their images, they did so with inventive and imaginative results. I noted many of them were surprised at their ability to be imaginative. If imagination is the generation of ideas and the flexibility of thinking or visualising of possibilities (Egan 2005), then creativity is ‘doing’ something meaningful with your imagination. Consequently, it follows that there is a need to be imaginative in order to be creative. The work seemed to give them a fresh perspective on their creativity. At the end of the session, when we discussed the planned activities for the final two days, many of the teachers commented on how little drama they had done so far. When I asked them why they thought that was the case, one teacher made a very interesting observation:

I think it’s because the co-creating stuff is about a way of thinking isn’t it? We’re doing all this to help us learn that way of thinking.

(Anne-CPD course)

This was a significant moment for me, because essentially it clarified the philosophy of co-creating. Initially, my intention was to facilitate both myself and the teachers to co-construct
our understanding of co-creating drama. But on reflection, I had a particular idea of co-creating, and in fact I was aiding the teachers in coming to share my understanding. From the outset, when designing the course, my focus was not on exploring drama approaches or conventions to build drama work. In theory, the teachers had all undertaken drama pedagogy of some kind as student teachers. Therefore, in theory, they had knowledge of drama strategies and conventions. I was concerned with activating a co-creating mindset in the teachers, so they might look for 'potent opportunities' and work spontaneously with the group in a collaborative manner. In reality, my notion of co-creating was imposed in a facilitative manner, rather than co-constructed with the teachers. However, throughout I struggled to articulate what co-creating was ‘exactly’. When Anne expressed it as a ‘way of thinking’, it shed light on the co-creating ‘attitude’ we had been exploring. I had hoped by encouraging the teachers to see their own imaginative and creative capability, and by encouraging them to be open to creative action, they would become aware of the co-creating possibilities in their practice. By adopting co-creating as a way of thinking, therefore as an active attitude, Anne had begun building her own understanding of co-creating, which, in turn, informed mine. We were modelling learning as a shared, social endeavour (Fraser and Price 2011), something that is mirrored in the co-creation experience. From Anne’s comment and further discussion, we came to understand that co-creating was a way of thinking and an attitude, and thus our next step on the course was to put that into action.

Based on the revelations of the previous day, we spent time considering co-creating in terms of its influence on our drama practice. As a collective we generated a shared description of important characteristics, recorded as curiosity, investigating, collaboration, play, trust, risk-taking, imagination, creativity, and spontaneity – elements that all resemble features that Craft associates with creativity (2002), and that Eisner associates with teacher artistry (Thibeault and Eisner 2009). The teachers also suggested that both parties need an openness to the journey, and to be ready to work in a ‘live’ and playful way. Finally, they discussed working intuitively at times and being attentive to the emergence of opportunities. Fullan (1995) states that what attracts teachers to professional development are often concrete and practical ideas that relate to the day-to-day work of their classrooms. Bearing this in mind, the next step was a practical illustration of co-creating. I felt by depicting a concrete example of co-creating drama in action, it would help bring the attitude alive and support understanding of the practicalities of this way of working. We began with a brief introduction to the elements of drama (Haseman and O’Toole 1988) and used an image as a starting point. I positioned myself alongside the teachers as a co-participant, and we brainstormed ideas. I reminded them that we were to operate as much as we could in a shared manner. From here, we experimented, improvised, discussed, and co-created new ideas which developed into a small narrative. I attempted to remain open to all suggestions and continually looked for support and ideas from the teachers. The teachers and I then revisited the application of drama strategies and techniques with a new co-creating attitude.7

Afterwards, we shared our observations. Some teachers were concerned with having a myriad of possibilities to develop the work. Others added that because the group are involved in decision-making, the students would be helpful in choosing the best direction for the work. One teacher suggested that the teachers would need a broad knowledge of drama strategies and a good understanding of linking the activities to develop the work. They also recognised the importance of creating the right conditions to enable students to feel comfortable about sharing and building ideas (reflecting my intentions for the CPD course). Overall, this discussion allowed us to consider and debate the practical implications of the leap from experimentation on the course to actual classroom practice.
Enlivening teachers’ co-creating attitude

On the final day, in order to draw upon the teachers’ rich teaching experience and to bridge the gap between theory and practice, the closing part of the course involved the teachers in a practical illustration of using the co-creating attitude authentically within their drama practice. The teachers worked in groups to select pre-texts/starting points. The next stage involved one teacher from each group facilitating a small session using a co-creating attitude. By doing this we were recognising the nature of drama as an unfinished story, where the uniqueness of the individual teacher and the group determines the journey and the finish line. They were finding ‘their’ interpretation of co-creating rather than trying to replicate mine. Although I was the ‘specialist’, I felt as Booth did, “I appear for a few hours or a few days, armed with plans and stories I have prepared well in advance and without all the responsibility classroom teachers have” (Booth 1994, p. 12), hence the teachers’ everyday classroom experience would be key in developing a feasible approach to co-creating, because they had ‘real’ lived experience of the context and understand it best (Guskey 2000). Afterwards, we reflected on the experience and dissected the process in terms of artistic process, the elements of drama used, the aesthetic of the work that was co-created, the level of equality achieved, and their understanding of their pedagogical responsibility. We concluded that co-creating drama was not about continuously trying to co-create drama, but about making drama together in the company of imagination and creativity. Finally, we returned to the image exercise from day two that we had agreed to revisit. The teachers proceeded to show me three images of the teacher as a co-creator of drama. The final image was symbolic; it reflected a unified group holding hands in an interwoven web, with some students looking in, representing moments of involved co-creating, and some looking out, representing students looking for opportunities. They placed me as the teacher figure, holding hands with the students, in an active pose, an equal, a co-participant in the action and the creation and the action of the drama. This image of a creative community was a fitting way to finish our five days together.

Conclusion

Co-creation democratises the drama experience. It is a playful, creative enterprise that centres on the teacher sharing power, participating in creative action, and actively creating space for discovery. Initially, I set out to develop a CPD course to enrich teachers’ understanding of co-creation in drama. But as I began to design the course, I quickly realised that as the drama experience becomes more open and the power dynamics of the classroom change, the teacher needs to re-evaluate their usual classroom status, their relationship with their students, and, perhaps, their teaching style. This prompted me to employ arts-based inquiry approaches to inspire the teachers to go beyond their habitual ways of thinking and working. To aid this, I integrated a process of ‘self-understanding’, because ‘it matters who the teacher is’ (Kelchtermans 2009), and as Sachs (2005) believes, examining teacher identity provides a framework for teachers to construct ideas of “how to be”, “how to act”, and “how to understand” their work (p. 15).

Sharing power in the classroom is often aspirational but sometimes difficult to realise. Consequently, I modelled a ‘collaborative and dialogic’ learning context by deliberately avoiding instructive methods and ensuring that many of the activities were underpinned by collaborating features such as mutual commitment, shared leadership, and decision-making (Roschelle and Teasley 1995). This also mirrors the thinking of Dawson et al. (2011) who believe that, “[t]o make sustainable changes in instruction, teachers need to experience what happens when they are allowed to learn in a collaborative, dialogic professional development environment” (p. 315). The importance of the teachers’ confidence in their creative abilities, and its impact on their drama practice, was the subject of much discussion throughout the
course. Some of the teachers discussed feelings of ‘not being creative enough’ and a ‘lack of confidence’ in their artistry or feeling ill-equipped to use drama within their classrooms. Co-creating invites teachers to function artistically and to inspire “unanticipated moments of creativity” (Gallagher 2007, p. 1233); therefore, I needed to engage them in imaginative activity and provide them with experiences that would re-establish and nourish their creativity. Children make stories and drama all the time; they make-believe effortlessly, but for adults, this often ends with childhood. By embedding the arts as a central mode of inquiry (rather than focusing exclusively on drama), it provided us with an opportunity to be more bold in our work. We returned to childlike behaviours, embracing play, curiosity, and imagination. Furthermore, it was a deliberate act of culture building on my part, because the arts, help us improve the way we interact with others by learning how to let go of negative attitudes and excessive needs for control, learning how to foster more open and original ways of perceiving situations and problems, gaining new insights and sensitivities toward others, learning how the slipstream of group expression can carry us to places where we cannot go alone.

(McNiff 2008, p. 32)

Furthermore, initially I had understood my stance within the course as open and receptive. I intended to stimulate and co-construct an understanding of co-creation by being responsive to the teachers. But, on reflection, my work was more rigid and facilitated than I had envisioned. It was only after Anne’s comment that a real negotiation and co-construction of meaning occurred. Consequently, a process of authentic co-creation came into being. Anne brought us to an understanding of co-creation that, as McNiff infers, we could not have come to alone. Throughout this CPD experience, as the teachers began to probe understandings of their teacher selves, they began to recognise their self-imposed boundaries, and the possibilities of their teaching. As did I. By asking questions about and of ourselves, and most importantly by sharing this, we began seeking change of some kind. If we consider that CPD work is designed to encourage teachers to consider a modification in practice, then this also means they are considering new ways of ‘being’ in the classroom. Therefore, finding ways to awaken consciousness of who we/they are and who we/they can be is essential. Greater investigation of teacher identity and the significance of ‘feeling’ creative and capable within drama CPD could lead to more investment in and the enhancement of drama teaching practice. My hope is that for the teachers of this CPD course, as their teacher and student roles become less structured in the co-creating experience and there is a sharing of power, they will become co-artists, and there will be a realisation of the creativity they possess. This may ‘release’ them, allowing them to become, as Greene (2001) suggests, ‘more’, moving them to reach beyond who they think they are, to who they know they can be.

Notes

1 The course was 25 hours in total and approved by the Teacher Education Division of the Department of Education and Skills (DES), which is predominantly responsible for CPD provision in Ireland.
2 Sixteen primary school teachers self-selected to join the course, from which seven participants were enlisted for the study.
3 I have only chosen to discuss the significant activities rather than including warm-up and scaffolding exercises that took place. The breakdown will also include observations I gathered from the course, which yield insights into how teachers experienced the programme.
Some elements stayed true to the Schratz model, while I adapted other elements to our particular CPD situation.

It is important to note here that there was an intentional absence of drama techniques at this initial stage because I wanted the teachers to focus on the exploration of their teacher selves rather than jumping straight into the matter of drama.

The strategies and techniques we used were a synthesis of prosocial and co-construction ideas and methods of established practitioners such as O’Neill, Neelands, and Booth.

References


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