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Drama teacher education – a long-view perspective

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Drama teacher education in Australia and perhaps elsewhere is at crossroads. Drama teacher education, from its establishment within formal university structures in the mid-twentieth century until now, has been a remarkable success story. But there is rapid and concerning change. For example, indicative of changes in other universities, 2019 was the last time that the Drama Teacher Education Secondary course was offered at Murdoch University. There are similar signs of contraction in other university-based drama teacher education courses across Australian universities (personal correspondence).

Much has happened since the first presentation I made on this topic in 2002 during the Perth Drama Australia Conference, “Admit Me to This Chorus – Drama, Teaching and Community”. It is timely to reflect on what has happened since Richard Sallis and I wrote “Perspectives on Drama Teacher Education in Australia” in 2012. And what has happened since the panel on drama teacher education in Perth in 2017 at Drama Australia’s New Ground Rising Conference. It is also useful to wonder if the traditional routes into drama teacher education are closing and whether there are alternatives emerging. Later in this chapter I consider some of the underlying barriers to the field of drama teacher education.

Designing drama teacher education curriculum

I have written and spoken before (Pascoe, 2002), telling the story of when I was asked by Murdoch University to design a Secondary Drama Curriculum and Teaching course. A starting point was a focus group with practising drama teachers. The group included experienced, inexperienced and beginning teachers; those who had initial teacher education for drama; and those who had somehow inherited or moved into drama teaching from other learning areas.

The focus group started with the following questions: What do you now know as a drama teacher that you wished you had learnt in your teacher education course? What were the strengths of your drama teacher education – initial and ongoing? In addition, participants were asked:

- What do you want teachers to know and be able to do on Day 1?
- What are the essential knowledge(s) and understandings about drama that beginning teachers should know?
What are the essential skills and processes of teaching drama?
What are essential values about teaching drama?

The focus group identified that developing drama teachers need:

1. Knowledge, understanding and skills about drama as an art form
2. Understanding of contemporary approaches to teaching and learning drama – curriculum and pedagogy
3. Understanding about how to manage drama learning
4. Values about drama.

Graduating drama teaching students need capacity to cope with the sometimes stressful and always demanding work of teaching drama. As well, they need to be reflective practitioners, to understand their multiple roles as curriculum developers, directors, mentors, role models and teachers. Not forgetting that as the often-lone drama teacher in a school, drama teachers can also be a resource, budget and facilities manager of a performing arts centre. Underpinning all is their understanding of the art form itself.

Interestingly, one of the most experienced teachers (the Dean of Arts in a specialised college of the arts) identified the need for young teachers to have an articulated philosophy of drama teaching. She felt they must be clear about why they want to be a drama teacher. She also argued that their ultimate success as drama teachers relied significantly on their values about drama and about teaching. They needed capacity built on respect, collaboration and working through process as well as product.

The Drama Teacher Education course I was designing emerged with two enduring metaphors:

- A portfolio of knowledge, activities and strategies to support teaching drama
- A sense of belonging to a guild or community of drama teachers on whom you can rely and with whom you can grow.

The course design emphasised that drama teaching is physical, cognitive and affective. I focused on how drama teachers see the drama classroom as a community. Students becoming teachers need to remember that the drama classroom is a living workshop. In each classroom we create and sustain a community of learners (see, for example, Wenger, 1998): a group of people who experience collaborative activities to achieve shared and individual outcomes. Just as a troupe of players on a project builds bonds over time, with the purpose of entering a social contract with an audience, so, too, do teachers and students work together in the drama classroom. The first job of the drama teacher is to create and sustain these communities of trust (Wright et al., 2006) on shared learning journeys.

We learn to teach drama in the way that we learn drama

To teach drama effectively we develop two interrelated perspectives: how we learn drama and how we teach so students learn drama. They are connected ways of thinking, doing and being a drama teacher.

We learn drama through experience, observation, modelling and being part of an ensemble. We learn to teach drama through applying our direct experiences of drama and theatre,
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observing and modelling from others teaching drama and belonging to a community of shared practice (what I sometimes call a Guild of Drama Teachers).

In learning drama we identify the distinctive nature of drama/theatre as an art form and its role in people’s lives, society and community. We learn drama by making drama, recognising that it is hands-on, practical and experiential. It is embodied learning that brings together our body, mind and spirit. We understand that drama is aesthetic experience contextualised in the histories, conventions and cultures of the art form.

In learning to teach drama we identify drama as curriculum. We shape our practice in our drama teacher roles as teacher, curriculum leader, director, mentor, role model and resource manager.

Learning to teach drama is a practical, embodied experience. We learn to teach drama by teaching drama – by trying out strategies, concepts and approaches that help us refine our choice-making as teachers.

These connections can be seen in the following diagram (Figure 48.1).

In practice, this translated into an articulated course outline designed around these principles. (See appendix for a more detailed outline; a fuller example is available at http://www.stagepage.com.au/drama-education.) Conceptual learning was integrated into and followed practical experience. Hands-on, practical examples of strategies, skills and processes were underpinned by connections with contexts, curriculum, theory, theorists and history. The key multiple roles of teaching drama – teacher, curriculum leader, director, mentor, role model and resource manager – were modelled and taught.

The assumption (perhaps open to question) is that students start this curriculum and pedagogy unit with a secure background in drama and theatre knowledge and practice. The focus of the unit is on drama education in schools. It also recognises the links between

Figure 48.1 Relationship between learning drama and learning to teach drama
disciplinary or content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005). Starting this unit, students were asked to complete a survey of their prior learning; this was not assessed and completed as a stimulus for discussion. The survey was designed to help students identify the aspects of drama and theatre relevant to their teaching in broad categories:

- **Drama and theatre concepts and application**: Elements of drama, drama processes, skills (voice and movement), forms and genres, conventions and drama of other times and places and contemporary drama (play texts, companies, practitioners), direction, design, dramaturgy.
- **Drama education**: Drama curriculum; drama education practitioners and practice.
- **Schools and their contexts**: Planning, assessing and teacher standards.

The observed reality over the years of teaching this course was wide variability in content knowledge of drama and theatre, a gap that had to be addressed.

Looking back on what was developed I have a sense of satisfaction (without wanting to be too self-congratulatory). The course design worked. It responded to the needs of our curriculum, and at the end of the day when students left me, they had “enough to get started”. They had some tools for growth beyond the immediate course and pathways into a career in drama teaching. I had opened doors to belonging to a professional community of practice.

The course details evolved over time but stayed true to these principles. Having a drama teacher curriculum on paper and in practice is one thing, but implementation is shaped by the changing contexts of teacher education beyond my classroom door.

**Changing contexts for drama teacher education**

Drama teacher education in Australia began to be formalised in the 1960s. In Western Australia for example, in 1974 I was in the first intake of students permitted to take drama education as a major curriculum study at the Secondary Teachers College. The course outlined earlier in this chapter was established in 2002 as the third available in Western Australia. As drama education grew in Western Australian schools (particularly with recognition of drama as an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank [ATAR] scoring subject in 1999), there has been a steady need for drama educators. But there has been rapid and concerning change in the twenty-first century in the complex contemporary landscape of Australian universities.

It has been observed that “[i]n the past ten years or so there have been more than forty inquiries into different aspects of teacher education” (Mills & Goos, 2017). The Australian government’s Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) reported the following in *Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers* (December 2014): weakly applied accreditation, a need to lift public confidence; poor practice, insufficient integration with schools and tensions between theory and practice. There is a populist tabloid perception that teacher education is flawed, if not failing (see, for example, Shine, 2020). This, in turn, has led to intense politicised scrutiny and regulation including *Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education Programs in Australia* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), 2011) and the establishment of *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (AITSL, 2017). This level of regulation should ensure drama teacher education is an integral part of overall teacher education programmes. Yet, the situation is not clear-cut.

In a letter to the chair of the National Advocates for Arts Education (NAAE), Australian government’s Minister for Education Dan Tehan recognised the “significant benefit for
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students through participating in the arts in their schooling”, but added that “for teacher education courses, universities are fundamentally autonomous entities … universities maintain significant influence over teaching courses and course content” (19 December 2019). While drama is a part of the Australian Curriculum: The Arts (ACARA, 2014) and the Western Australian Arts Curriculum (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2015), there is no corresponding mandate to include drama in the teacher education curriculum beyond the generic requirement to “require all providers to account for key factors in providing 'classroom ready' graduates” (Tehan, 2019). This climate of critique and gaps in university-based teacher education has had an impact on the effective delivery of teacher education programmes across Australia.

There has been an erosion of drama teacher education at my university over time, trends of which are shown in Figure 48.2.

Contextual and site-specific factors contribute to this decline. Universities in Australia are shaped by complex political and social pressures. They are buffeted by neoliberal policy settings, market forces, deregulation, increased scrutiny, increasing student load at times of tightening government financial support and changing demographics. There are questions of purpose and focus (e.g., Calderon, 2019). Site-specific issues at the university in this discussion include turnover of leadership (public scandal and internal turmoil), flip-flop decision-making and dislocations following changes of direction. A managerial culture (Sims, 2019) contributed to choices made which were detrimental to drama teacher education. Moving from a stable four-year bachelor of education secondary to a five-year model (and, subsequently, to a three-year-plus-two model) resulted in fewer students. Further, decoupling drama/theatre courses in the School of Arts from the School of Education dried up the

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<td>Drama teacher courses required students to complete 2 units</td>
<td>Drama teacher courses required students to complete either major or minor curriculum area. Nominally 2 units but both units were taught concurrently with overlapping students</td>
<td>2 units taught separately students required to complete both units. In addition students completed a unit called Engaging Communities through Drama (33 points 30 hours)</td>
<td>No units offered.</td>
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<td>4 points of 96 point degree. 70 hours: 7 hours per week for 10 week semester focused on Drama K-10</td>
<td>3 points of 96 point degree. 60 hours 6 hours per week for 10 week semester</td>
<td>3 points of 96 point degree. Minor 30 hours 3 hours per week for 10 week semester</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 points of 96 point degree. 40 hours: 4 week intensive focused on senior secondary drama</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 points of 96 point degree. Major 30 hours 3 hours per week for 10 week semester</td>
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<td>110 hours</td>
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Figure 48.2 Example of erosion of time in drama teacher education
pipeline between the two disciplines. This was exacerbated by allocating the two disciplines to different structural colleges. Narrowing teacher curriculum decisions to limit courses to English, Mathematics and Science (echoing wider community focus on the National Assessment Plan for Literacy and Numeracy [NAPLAN] [Dulfer, 2012] and the Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA]) added to choices made. Despite successive statements of a broader vision for educational goals for Australian students (e.g. Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration [Council of Australian Governments Education Council, 2019]), the narrowing of teacher education curriculum is a retrograde step.

**Patterns** There is a similar erosion of time and diffusion of focus in other Western Australian universities. For example, in one course that is nominally teacher preparation for drama, students take Curriculum and Instruction Lower Secondary: The Arts, which runs for two hours per week for one semester. This provides generic focus on the arts as a whole. The outline for this unit states:

> This unit is designed to prepare pre-service teachers to teach The Arts curriculum in Lower Secondary school. The unit will focus on curriculum planning, teaching strategies, evaluation, resources, the demonstration of positive impact on student learning, and research relating to The Arts in Lower Secondary Teaching and learning practices to support and challenge a diverse student cohort are explored.

That unit is followed by Curriculum and Instruction Senior Secondary: The Arts, also two hours per week for a ten-week semester. Teacher education students from across the arts subjects take these units together. It is unclear if there is a specific cohort for drama education as distinct from the other arts subjects. Fears of homogenisation of arts curriculum education in this model are sharply focused in this approach (see, for example, discussion in Art Education Victoria, 2012).

There is an argument that the university model itself is broken or damaged (for example, Hellyer & Jennings, 2020). Tensions and limits in traditional models of drama teacher education have emerged in current circumstances. As we collectively face these issues, is it time to think differently and to propose radical solutions to meet what seems to be a declining approach to conventional university-based drama teacher education.

**Emerging impact of the COVID-19 pandemic**

It is too early to draw conclusions about the impact of the pandemic on drama teacher education. Research (see, for example, Thatcher et al., 2020) indicates that there will be impact on total Australian university revenue, international student enrolment in Australian universities and Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) employment at Australian universities. This will inevitably flow through to the provision of drama teacher education. There has been widespread discussion amongst drama teacher educators of the immediate consequences of lockdown on on-campus programmes and the use of remote teaching through online platforms. Genuine concerns have been expressed about the resulting loss of embodied learning. Drama is inherently a social art form reliant on physical presence in shared spaces. As this chapter argues, drama teacher education is practical, hands-on, embodied learning. Risk-averse university policymakers impose requirements to justify on-campus learning that is intrinsic to drama education. There have been rapid responses to the move to online drama teaching from our community (see https://www.ideadrama.org/Supporting-teaching-drama-and-theatre-in-these-times), but there is a need for research on the long-term consequences.
The pandemic has accelerated the trends in Australian universities rather than caused them. Under the cover of economic and health issues, decisions are being taken that are blind to long-term consequences (see, for example, Eltham, 2020). Ideologically driven policies on tertiary education and the arts, coupled with changes leading to a decline in student numbers in senior secondary schools (Zimmerman, 2018), have an impact on the need for drama teacher education graduates.

**Alternative models beyond conventional university-based drama teacher education**

In this section I sketch some other possibilities for drama teacher education. Turkey and Singapore provide two models of drama teacher education developed by professional drama education associations. Within the digital world, three entrepreneurial approaches provide another perspective.

**Professional associations leading teacher education**

In Turkey, Çağdaş Drama Derneği (CDA), a professional association, developed its Drama Teacher Training and Accreditation programme. They offer a three-year course with theoretical and practical components supported by extensive, well-researched resources, materials and conferences. In each module, participants plan and teach lessons and prepare portfolios that are evaluated and examined. Accreditation and certification is provided by the association. Participants personally fund their involvement. This programme runs outside but in parallel with the developing postgraduate courses in drama education provided by universities. While there is yet to be curriculum inclusion of drama in schools, this movement has supported community development in drama education.

In Singapore, the Singapore Drama Educators Association (SDEA) has leveraged government interest in training in the arts and developed a Continuing Education and Training programme of master classes, workshops and SDEA Drama Pedagogy certification. The course is 40 hours and run in evenings and on weekends. It is designed and facilitated by leading drama educators and academics in the industry. The first module, Essential Teaching and Learning Approaches, covers key principles needed to carry out drama sessions with groups. Importantly, it is run with Singapore government recognition and financial support, with fees also charged to participants.

There are issues with self-accredited programmes: quality control and openness to innovation, curriculum content and design, recognition by teacher registration boards, financial viability, reliance on volunteers, principles of adult learning, maintaining standards and the difficulty of agreement on who manages the programmes. But, as has been shown in Turkey and Singapore, there is a potential role for professional associations to provide drama teacher education.

**Entrepreneurial initiatives**

The second thread to this section focuses on the interesting developments in the burgeoning online space on a commercial basis.

The Drama Teacher Academy (https://www.theatrefolk.com/drama_teacher_academy) has been developed by Theatrefolk Canada as an online, subscription-based drama teacher education programme. It is run through a professional development website and focuses
specifically on middle school and high school drama teachers. Regular free updates and support augment the subscription.

The Art of Education University (https://theartofeducation.edu/masters) has been developed in the USA from what began as online support, professional development, conferences, an online magazine and podcasts. Recently it has developed a Master of Arts in Art Education (with a focus on the visual arts mainly) as well as graduate courses on a paid basis that are accredited through an affiliated university. It offers Flex Curriculum, an online curriculum platform for K-12 art teachers aligned to all 50 states’ arts standards. It is a subscription-based service.

In a similar space, the Institute for Arts Integration and STEAM (https://educationcloset.com) provides online courses, on-demand conferences, resources and podcasts with a focus on arts integration and STEAM education for K-12. Materials provided are aligned to national English language arts, math, social studies, science and arts standards. This approach includes drama, dance and visual arts. A one-year certification course is offered by subscription.

These models are actively and continually developing new materials to feed social media. They are not static. They have teacher-focused voices and presenters. They are well presented and attractive. They use technology effectively. They connect with different types of learners (and time-poor teachers). They are hungry and innovative and responsive to the needs of teachers as customers. They are welcomed by many teachers in schools and used by education systems.

Questions are prompted by these entrepreneurial opportunities. As with a professional association approach, there needs to be attention to quality control, accreditation and recognition. For services operating across countries, there is the additional issue of alignment to localised curriculum standards as well as intercultural difference. There are also issues about access being limited by capacity to pay a subscription.

If anything, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided increasing opportunities for these alternatives to drama teacher education to flourish. In the midst of disruption there are entrepreneurial openings (for example, Roundabout Theatre Company, 2021). What is unclear is how they present antidotes to trends towards disembodied drama education. The lure of the online world and the Zoom meeting present traps for embodied drama learning and teaching.

**Robust schema for drama teacher education**

Whatever approach is taken to drama teacher education, there needs to be an underlying robust, durable, practical schema to serve as a living and responsive guide to our work.

Learning to teach drama focuses on embodied learning in the arts (Bresler, 2004). Through practical, hands-on experiences in drama, we model the ways that students learn the arts and ways they are taught. This engenders embodied teaching.

This approach is based on sound research about providing:

- **Analogue experiences** – these are experiences like the ones students in drama experience, providing teachers with similar learning experiences that they need to facilitate for their students (Borko & Putnam, 1995; Morocco & Solomon, 1999).
- **Content focus** – unambiguous content description (Desimone et al., 2002; Garet et al., 2001; Shulman, 1986).
- **Active learning** – where teachers are engaged in the analysis of teaching and learning; learning from other teachers and from their own teaching; reviewing examples...
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of effective teaching practice (Desimone et al., 2002; Franke, Carpenter et al., 1998; Franke, Fennema et al., 1997; Morocco & Solomon, 1999; Garet et al., 2001).

**Dialogue amongst teachers** – belonging to a community of drama teachers participating in discussion with practising teachers (Guskey, 1986, 2003; Richardson, 1990).

**Long-term support and feedback** – support beyond the immediate experiences in the workshop through enrolling in a community of drama teachers (Borko & Putnam, 1995; Guskey, 2002).

This is an articulated theoretical framework for drama teacher education course design that steps beyond pragmatic functionalism. It is a framework informed by Dewey, Vygotsky, Bruner, Eisner, Greene and others. Learning to teach drama involves acts of purposeful meaning-making that draw together personal experiences and those of others (Dewey, 1938/2005; Eisner, 2002).


These principles underpin the example of drama teacher education outlined earlier. But, it is important to note that however strongly we assert the case for drama teacher education, we are often talking to our own community of practice without shifting the minds and hearts of curriculum and political decision makers. There is a deeper distrust playing out in practice within educational communities. It is important to understand better the underlying values and prejudices and their impact on our field.

**Contextualising dilemmas in drama teacher education**

It is too easy to sound a warning about declining standards in drama teacher education. The tree that holds up the sky is uneasily still holding for us. To move beyond this moment we need to better understand some deeper underlying issues.

As teacher educators in a contemporary world we have come to recognise “the abyssal line” (Santos, 2007), an invisible and unspoken line of presences and absences dividing worlds and worldviews into “us” and “them”. Things, people, ideas beyond that line are de-emphasised to the point that they are rendered null (hence in an Australian context, they become a *terra nullius*). This side of that line is what we collectively value, what we collectively think is important. In the eyes, minds and assumptions of many others, both educators and the wider community, arts education is rendered as “other”, as “peripheral”. Drama is neglected, obscured, overlooked and rendered invisible, unimportant or non-essential (e.g., in course offerings in schools it is “optional”). When the dominant approaches to education consign arts education to this nether world, we have institutionalised “epistemicide” (Paraskeva, 2016) that can be seen as a war on the knowledge(s) that we value, the destruction of existing knowledge and denial of the possibilities of new knowledge(s).

It is a cliché that we live in disruptive times (see, for example, HundrED.Org, 2017). The sense of distress and loss that we feel as arts educators is writ large in the wider world. A construct of abyssal thinking can help name (and perhaps explain, but not forgive) “white privilege” and “black lives matter”. Underlying deeply rooted social issues of racism, social injustice, prejudice and the associated fear and moral panic is a recognition, sensed rather than understood, that there is something lurking beyond known and accepted worlds.
In arts education the issues of *misconceptions about arts education* are useful to reconsider in the light of abyssal thinking and acting. The misconceptions that many people have about drama and arts education are revealing. For example, there are misconceptions about drama itself. Drama is just *entertainment*. Drama is *showing off*. Drama is *faking emotions or representing falsehoods*. Drama can be entertaining, but it can often serve a wider purpose through telling stories that are enacted and embodied.

There are misconceptions about drama in schools. Drama is just *putting on scripted plays/musicals/Shakespeare*. Drama is not a serious school subject/just something as a break from real learning. Drama is *wasting time*/*pretending to be trees*. Drama is touchy-feely/too emotional/too revealing. Drama is OK for the show-off kids but not for all kids/drama is only for talented kids and not average kids. Drama is messy/noisy/disruptive/kids get too excited and they are high when they go to their next class. You also hear people say there’s nothing to learn in drama/there’s no writing/there’s no content. Drama is just pretending/a form of lying or dishonesty/unleashes undesirable thoughts and feelings/encourages rebellion/challenges authority/is subversive.

We may counter-argue these points of view, but the misconceptions persist.

I doubt that anyone wilfully sets out to hold and pass on misconceptions. They often reflect gaps in an individual person’s experience or education or are the residue of a bad experience of school drama that becomes amplified. Sometimes these misconceptions reflect a lack of understanding of the purposes and scope of drama in schools. Sometimes, they reflect unspoken prejudices or cultural norms. Sometimes they are the fear of the unknown. Whatever the reason, misconceptions are learnt, and as teachers our role is to respond to that mis-learning and address it.

Eggen and Kauchak (2013) observe that “misconceptions are constructed; they’re constructed because they make sense to the people who construct them; and they are often consistent with people’s prior knowledge or experiences” (p. 195). It takes powerful and embodied personal experience to change entrenched points of view. In that light it is important to understand the factors that have an impact on how we learn to teach the arts and drama.

Pointing out a misconception, simply labelling it as “wrong” or “flawed thinking” is of limited use. People who change their thinking and practice need:

• viable, alternative experiences that disrupt their misconceptualised understandings
• to see how that changed understanding is useful in the real world
• to see how applying their revised thinking to new situations actually produces desired results
• to have their revised worldview valued and endorsed by peers and the school community
• to see that students are learning differently, with higher levels of approval and satisfaction and with better outcomes or results
• to see that parents and the community support what is different.

The antidote to misconceptions is being clear in the messages we communicate about our field. The ways that we state purpose and scope need to be well articulated, though not overstated. We need to check for understanding. Or to put it another way, as Stephen Covey (2004) reminds us: *seek first to understand then to be understood.*

To return to the notion of the *abyssal line*, drama teacher education in this time and into the future needs to walk both sides of that line. The need for the robust schema outlined earlier is urgent and essential. Drama teacher education curriculum is not just content knowledge. It embodies other ways of knowing and being in the world. But to understand and practise drama education is to recognise that it is embedded in conflicts about what has been...
called geopoliticised knowledge (Mignolo, 2002) and that we function within distinctive axes of sociopolitical, economic and historical contexts of practice and teacher education.

In this chapter I have set out to take a long view on drama teacher education, to put in perspective models of current and future practice and to explore alternatives to traditional approaches. It is too easy to play the misunderstood victim role as contexts change. It is necessary for us to strategically acknowledge and disarm critics and move past obstacles. It is insufficient to simply assert our place in the educational sun; we need to make the case with robust research based on experience that is not merely confirming the past but also engaging future possibilities.

In writing this chapter, I acknowledge my learning from my drama education students, colleagues and friends, particularly in DramaWest, Drama Australia and the International Drama/Theatre and Education Association (IDEA); and, thanks to long-time collaboration with Peter Wright, Murdoch University. See http://www.stagepage.com.au/drama-education for extended elaboration of drama teacher education ideas.

This chapter focuses on secondary drama teacher education. There is a parallel story to be told about the development of courses for early childhood and primary teacher education. In primary teacher education the situation is similarly contracting. Within the Master of Teaching (Primary), the Arts as a whole curriculum area is included as part of a first-year unit on integrated curriculum (health and physical education, HPE; humanities and social sciences, HASS; and the arts). Drama is one of five arts subjects in the Arts.

Notes

1 This university is not identified here.
2 Abyssal thinking “consists of a system of visible and invisible distinctions, the invisible ones being the foundation of the visible ones. The invisible distinctions are established through radical lines that divide social reality into two realms, the realm of ‘this side of the line’ and the realm of ‘the other side of the line’. The division is such that ‘the other side of the line’ vanishes as reality, becomes nonexistent, and is indeed produced as nonexistent. Nonexistent means not existing in any relevant or comprehensible way of being. Whatever is produced as nonexistent is radically excluded because it lies beyond the realm of what the accepted conception of inclusion considers to be its other. What most fundamentally characterises abyssal thinking is thus the impossibility of the co-presence of the two sides of the line. To the extent that it prevails, this side of the line only prevails by exhausting the field of relevant reality. Beyond it, there is only nonexistence, invisibility, non-dialectical absence” (Santos, 2007, p. 45).
3 Terra nullius is a Latin term meaning “land belonging to no one”; this was the legal construct used in Australia to establish land rights at the time of colonisation.

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