WHOSE ENLIGHTENED PEDAGOGY?

A historical mini-tour of the educating process of drama

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In 2019, I was one of a number of drama educators from the UK, Australia and the USA who were invited ‘experts’ at a conference in China; all of us had already been working in China. The conference was under the auspice of both local organisation IDEC and IDEA (The International Drama/Theatre and Education Associations), with the optimistic title: ‘Promoting the cultural heritage and communication of children and youth with drama education’. That is a stirring theme for a conference. But it does raise questions.

This chapter investigates the double question: Whose cultural heritage, and what are the educational implications?

Human history is full of the invasions of new settlers – both of populations and of ideas. Some invasions come with armies, some infiltrate through gaps and border crossings, some come as missionaries. Very occasionally they come as invited and welcome guests. Their fans say they bring new visions and enlightenment, fresh ideas and innovation, science and better government, and roads and railways. Their detractors point out that they bring displacement, disease, slavery and alien ways and gods. The invaders also commonly suppress or kill the local languages.

Western ‘civilisation’ has been particularly energetic and effective at using all those three main strategies – armies, infiltrators and missionaries – particularly in Asia and Africa, and especially so since the Western world’s own so-called ‘Enlightenment’ in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It’s called the enlightenment because it was the time when, throughout Europe and North America, science was blossoming and sweeping away many of the traditional myths and assumptions about the external world, and a radical and creative new way of looking at that world was emerging – see, for example, A.C. Grayling’s (2017) revisiting of this classification, revealingly titled The Age of Genius: The Seventeenth Century and the Birth of the Modern Mind. That period produced the Western world’s great intellectual and political
revolutions, too, revolutions of ideas and education and classes, as even the postcolonial sceptics of its art and literature acknowledge (e.g. Bharucha, 1990; Mishra, 2017). And along with that it produced the West’s Industrial Revolution, and that demanded a massive increase in material resources. That, in turn, led to the quest for new horizons and treasure, and of course to new empires and invasions and settlements.

Modern drama education is – mostly, anyway – a product of Western civilisation and a latter-day product of that Enlightenment. Should I say a coloniser? There are quite a few successful drama education settlements, especially in Asia and Africa, and plenty of missionaries. IDEC, the organisation that organised the conference, is one of an increasing number of mainland Chinese organisations and individuals that are enthusiastically promoting drama education. This started about 30 years ago, first with a few individuals travelling to the West – like the Monkey King Sun Wutong – for enlightenment, not from the Buddha but from English and US prophets like Dorothy Heathcote, Gavin Bolton, Nellie McCaslin and David Davis. They returned home and set about establishing this new doctrine of enlightenment. This trend continues, with a constant trickle of higher degree students and scholars from China treading the now familiar paths mainly to British and Australasian academies, and, to a lesser extent, North American and Scandinavian ones. By the turn of the century, the traffic of ideas was beginning to come the other way, initially mainly in Hong Kong, with a growing stream of Anglophone luminaries teaching locally, invited to conferences, appointed to consultancies and even establishing courses and companies, more and more frequently on the mainland. This pattern mirrors the growth of both drama education and its cousin Theatre for Development (TfD) in other Asian countries, in Africa and in the Middle East (less so in South America, which has had a similar but more home-grown dramatic enlightenment).

We like to think of drama education as an enlightened practice and as a pedagogy of enlightenment. These claims need examining through a postcolonial lens. That means understanding the history of drama and where it has come from, how it acts upon its world and what our purposes are – those of us who purvey it across cultural borders as well as, importantly, how others respond to it and to us. But I am a product of that same practice, so caveat emptor, as the Enlightenment poet Robert Burns warns us in the verse that opens this chapter.

**A whistle-stop tour**

Part of the Western Enlightenment was the historical Grand Tour, in which scholars travelled to the classical monuments and temples of Western civilisation in search of enlightenment, to discover from the past what we are today. So sit back for some brief historical tourism, which, like any guided tour, will very simplistically visit just a few of the most illustrious monuments.

**Pre-history and early days**

Long before East was East and West was West, human beings have been making drama for two quite different and sometimes conflicting educational purposes:

- People have always made up and acted out moral stories and fables to help children know how to behave, to give them a sense of right and wrong and to comfort them with answers.
• Children have always used dramatic play to find out about the world as it is, to invent other possible worlds and to take risks and ask questions.

The most clichéd dramatic symbol of the Western world, the Greek masks of comedy and tragedy, gives us a hint of those two dramatic purposes:

• The mask of comedy represents the first of drama’s educational purposes: to show us how we should and shouldn’t behave, and to give us comfort in the world and the gods – the comfort of right answers and happy endings.
• The mask of tragedy does not: it asks questions and discomforts us.

The ancient Greeks understood very well both of those two highly educational reasons for staging drama. Greek theatre was a place for neither just entertainment nor just storytelling, but was, as Tor-Helge Allern reminds us (2017), a major forum for discussion and education, where the playwrights and their audiences debated and questioned the big political and moral issues of the day: power and dissent, the new hot topic of democracy, the necessity of war, the place of women.

And at just this juncture another recurrent and central theme of drama education raised its head: official disapproval, where those two faces of drama clashed over the art form’s propensity to raise awkward questions which undermine the absolute truths and moral behaviour that those in power need to have unquestioned. The philosopher and schoolmaster Plato admired theatre, but he wanted it banned for showing young people enticing examples of bad behaviour.

We will not have them trying to persuade our youth that the gods are the authors of evil, and that heroes are no better than men...because they [actors and plays] are likely to have a bad effect on those who hear them, for everybody will begin to excuse his own vices ... and therefore let us put an end to such tales, for they encourage laxity in the young.

(Plato, ca.360 BCE)

Like a lot of other later educationists who distrusted drama, Plato mistook fiction for untruth, and he also feared both ambiguity and the unanswered question – the ‘what-if’ question that is so central to drama education.

**Anno Domini**

Now our whistle-stop tour salutes some of the later monuments of the olden days. Most readers will not have heard of Ceolfrith. He was an eighth-century English monk, and also the tutor of the more famous and quite enlightened Venerable Bede. Ceolfrith’s job was to teach the Bible to his students, in the very early days of Christianity, so he invented the drama strategies of teacher-in-role and hot-seating, which readers may imagine were modern. He taught by taking role – as a character from the Bible, sitting down just as we do nowadays in the ‘hot-seat’ – and getting his students to ask questions. And he encouraged his students to do the same thing (Bragg, 2003).

Later on, in the tenth century, the churchmen livened up their public services by dramatising stories from the Bible, such as the early Quem Quaeritis (‘Whom seek ye?’) trope at the Easter festival. Then, as the ‘Dark’ morphed into the ‘Middle’ Ages, these spilled out of the churches as the miracle plays. This was festival theatre, where – as in renaissance
paintings – those holy moments and stories were reinvented as local and contemporary events. Produced by the local guilds of craftsmen, these plays involved a lot of improvisation and audience participation. These immensely popular festivals are of great significance to this discussion, because they were also explicit drama pedagogy. Since the Bible was in Latin and most people couldn’t read it, the plays told its stories and delivered its moral messages, and so drama gave the people the power to discover the Bible for themselves. And that took away the Church’s total control of the story. Inevitably, in the intense politicking of the Reformation, the ‘new churchmen’ realised with alarm, rather than excitement, the power of the drama. The influential puritan Archbishop Grindal was just one of many across Europe who responded exactly like Plato, announcing that: ‘This play… is a gin of the devil contrary to our gospel and our statutes…’ (1576).

More worried about his statutes than his gospel, like Plato he banned the plays.

Not all the Church agreed with him, and it wasn’t until after the Elizabethan and Jacobean flowering of theatre, and after Shakespeare was dead, that Grindal’s successors actually got the theatres closed, during the next period of British political repression. Drama as pedagogy was quite a significant factor in that Tudor flowering, countering the forces of would-be repression, and was surprisingly led by the Catholic Church. St Thomas Aquinas had given drama a cautious thumbs-up, Henry VIII’s Cardinal Wolsey enthusiastically promoted it and Sir Thomas More, Henry’s favourite courtier until he got his head chopped off, called himself ‘Head of Drama’ at his Liberal Sciences Academy. Schools were already doing drama. Shakespeare didn’t just come out of thin air; he got his first taste of drama, probably in Latin, at Stratford Grammar School. And the boys of St Paul’s and Westminster Schools took to the streets as professional troupes, much to Shakespeare’s irritation. That’s drama as a teaching method.

**On to enlightenment**

In the early years of the Enlightenment itself – the seventeenth century – theatre was non grata in Britain and much of Europe, and it was a censorship battleground for writers even as revered and royally favoured as Molière (Spingler, 1985). However, invisible as usual, drama education still found places to germinate and flourish. The Czech philosopher Johan Comenius, introduced in my teacher education course as the ‘father of modern education’, not only encouraged play, but wanted to make his school curriculum and his whole school a theatre, enthusiastically adopting the popular metaphor of ‘theatrum mundi – theatre of the world’ (Østern, 2007).

The next 200 years saw the rise of science lead to the Industrial Revolution and the expansion of Western, especially British, ideas across the globe, mostly fuelled by the pursuit of material resources for that revolution and new markets for its products. By the mid-nineteenth century, the revolution had led to some upheavals relevant to our tour, including the birth of modernism, the acceptance of material progress as inevitable and desirable and universal education in most Western countries. Not that this initially favoured the creative arts; the fathers of the revolution were too intent on providing a literate, numerate and compliant workforce to carry out the project of progress. The single-sentence curriculum statement in Australia’s first Education Act (Parliament of Victoria, 1872: Appendix) stipulated ‘Reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, geography, drill and where practicable gymnastics; and sewing and needlework in addition for girls’. However, the privileged classes were permitted a ‘cultural curriculum’, and Australian private schools advertised ‘music, singing, drawing, painting and dancing, poetry, callisthenics … and dramatic performance’ (Barcan, 1980, p. 166).
But by the beginning of the twentieth century, drama was getting more than a toehold in a few of the state schools in the Anglosphere, because this era was also the dawn of progressive education. At the very beginning of the century, from 1901, Harriet Finlay Johnson was headmistress of a country village school in England, where the children left at 12 years of age to become farm labourers. She was a visionary who, like Ceolfrith and Comenius, wanted the whole curriculum to be full of play and drama, so she brought drama into everything. Those elementary schoolchildren in that country village school performed complete Shakespeare plays, exploring political themes as they did so; Richard the Second was a favourite, with its theme of the Peasant’s Revolt. They play-built their own plays on history, and they did a lot of improvisation and role-play; she taught them mathematics by setting up a shop full of shopkeepers and customers (Finlay-Johnson, 1907). This was not only happening in the UK: a head teacher in Sweden, Esther Boman, ‘used drama to focus on aspects of the curriculum and on personal problems connected with the girls’ lives’ (Bolton, 2007, p. 47); just a few years later, in the USA, Winifred Ward (1930) founded the classroom drama movement she labelled Creative Dramatics, which has been going strong ever since, and is still alive and kicking.

Diversification and consolidation

And something else was happening too, which Ward called attention to – the use of drama in classrooms was becoming more experimental, and at the same time less indiscriminate and scattershot. Gradually, many quite distinct educational purposes for drama emerged, sometimes married together and sometimes treated as oppositional:

- Drama is a valuable art form in its own right – the training of theatre and performing skills has value per se;
- Drama is a pedagogy that creates engagement and motivation and can help to teach other subjects;
- As a spoken and dialogic art form, drama has a special place in language teaching;
- Dramatic play is the basis of creative self-expression and can also stimulate ‘creativity’;
- Drama teaches social skills;
- Drama teaches empathy;
- Drama plays a role in cultural and intercultural understanding, through its trick of getting the actors to step into other people’s shoes;
- Drama has a multiple place in personal development, in what across Europe became known as ‘bildung’: developing self-esteem and self-confidence, the emotions, kinesthetic and sensory skills, cognitive and intellectual capacities;
- Drama even has a role in well-being and, more than that, in healing. In schools, this was generally just a hunch, and one that many teachers steered well clear of anyway, not seeing that as the purpose of education. However, in adult circles, this became explicitly embodied in the psychodrama and drama therapy movements, and in contemporary times, is enthusiastically incorporated into applied theatre, especially in conflict zones.
- Towards the end of the century also came the dawning recognition that drama can be an agent of social action, even of social change.
- Drama can certainly be used to help young people understand their own agency and the choices before them.6
Uncivil war

All this diversity of course bred tensions, rivalry and territorialism. Winifred Ward herself expressed some concern about the art form becoming subordinated to instrumental purposes when used to teach curricular subjects. Soon after World War II, responding spiritedly to this critique by adherents of ‘more traditional forms of theatre activity’ (Allen, 1979, p. 128), pioneer drama educator Peter Slade defended his improvised and play-based ‘Child Drama’ by attacking the ‘wrong shape and experience [for children] of the proscenium theatre’ (1956, p. 44). These salvos, and a 1951 pitched battle at a notorious ‘Bonnington Hotel Conference’, generated an acrimonious debate throughout the century, centred on a vicious dichotomy between art and pedagogy, and a long-running civil war within the drama education community, mainly in the UK. That was more or less ended by the end of the century with the grudging acceptance of the principle that, whatever its purposes, all the activities that we call drama and theatre share exactly the same elements — something that the average person in the street could have told us all along. Some vestiges of the ‘theatre = art versus drama = process’ dichotomy became exported to Asia and Africa as part of the twenty-first-century colonisation of drama education.

A new common paradigm and purpose

This war was, however, really a self-destructive sideshow, perhaps itself just a mild symptom (though quite malignant in the UK) of the paradigm shift that was taking place around the world. By the latter part of the century, a new dominant paradigm for drama education was emerging that enveloped or superseded all those competing and complementary objectives noted above. This was that drama can be a liberatory practice: for personal, social and/or political agency and empowerment — to varying degrees in different contexts, of course. This paradigm crystallised in two influential movements from opposite ends of the Western world. Both were largely inspired and driven by the same key theorists, notably, educationalists Paulo Freire and Lev Vygotsky, and, from theatre, Bertolt Brecht. However, these movements had opposite dramatic starting points.

• In England, children’s dramatic play and informal forms of role play and improvisation were the foundation stones for Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton, and their followers, to develop a new processual drama pedagogy known at the time as drama-in-education (DiE), that would both ask questions and create a dialogue within the drama as a ‘process for change, hopefully for the better’ (Heathcote, 1976, p. 115), and to develop in young people a sense of agency and choice of action.
• In Brazil, theatrical performance and actors’ exercises were Augusto Boal’s building blocks for the establishment of his Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), which would also ask questions and create a dialogue within the drama, in order to counter social (1979), personal (1995) and political (1996) oppression in real life.

Both movements sought to use theatricality in proactive and experimental ways; both used and valued improvisation; both, importantly, sought to break down the barrier between performers and audience — as ‘spect-actors’ in Boal’s forum theatre, and all together as participants with no external audience in the role-play-based drama of Heathcote and Bolton.

More or less independently, outside the Western, so-called ‘developed’ world, a liberatory community theatre movement was emerging that cohered under the label of TfD,
initially in places like Kenya, the Middle East and the Philippines. This movement established a measure of philosophical congruence and cross-fertilisation. This was contemporaneous with Heathcote and Bolton and with Boal, and there were a growing number of benign mutual influences through the sharing of practice by pioneers in all three movements of TfD, DiE and TO.

Back in the cultural West in the early 1990s, coined simultaneously in the UK and Australia and then quickly adopted across the globe, the term ‘Applied Theatre’ became an inclusive label for theatre and drama practices conducted beyond theatre buildings with communities, usually for liberatory, therapeutic or social benefit purposes. Applied Theatre has to some extent supplanted the phrase TfD. It has quickly developed a literature, usually referring to work in communities of special needs and with adults. However, it shares the field, and many of its strategies and dramatic techniques, with educational drama/drama education, which are the most common umbrella terms nowadays for formal work with young people incorporating DiE, TO and the other practices from that long list of school-based purposes above.

This (more or less) unanimity of paradigm and purpose – a drama for questioning and dialogue, leading to agency, change and empowerment – found eloquent expression at the time, during the 1995 IDEA 2nd World Congress in Brisbane. This was attended by many of the founders of DiE and TO, including Bolton and Boal in person, as well as pioneers from TfD, such as the Philippines Educational Theatre Association (PETA). Two spoken statements from this Congress are worth quoting in detail here as they crystallise that unified vision of drama’s questioning, dialogical and empowering role in educating young people. The first comes from the Western world, from Australian John Carroll, discussing the need for drama in schools:

The thing that drama does is it starts with the emotions and then connects to the head and of course that’s what we need. Because we are producing in our schools people who are what I call emotionally illiterate.

Schools are basically one long conversation that starts in kindergarten and goes on to high schools. And that is basically a conversation between the teachers and the students, that is unbalanced in relation to the power, and in that situation the students need some form of teaching that will give them a voice – that will change that very unequal allocation of authority.

It seems to me that drama is a universal learning technique, because whether it’s children in a classroom who need to hear their own voice, and often for the first time find the power in their own voice to say things that are their concern … Or whether it’s people in the third world who may be in a situation where they need to express thoughts that are maybe unable to be expressed in any other way.

The second comes from the East, from PETA’s Beng Santos-Cabangon, promoting drama’s significance for young people who do not even have access to schools, like the child scavengers on Manila’s ‘Smoky Mountain’ of garbage, whose performance with PETA she starts by describing:

We did it right there at Smoky Mountain, and during the performance it seemed like they were different people – you know: ‘this is the one performance in my life – I am much better than that – I am a kid who deserves much more – I live here in a dump – children are not supposed to live in garbage.’ You could see that determination among the kids.
In a lot of our drama experiences we have ensured that there is always that critical, analytical component in every drama process that we do, such that children and young people do not only receive what is given to them and then give – just like a bank: you deposit then later on you withdraw – but rather there is that process of thinking and rethinking, validating what was given to them, looking into it, analysing what works for them and what doesn’t work for them, what is effective, what is important to them, what they have to say about it, and expressing it, as I said in a very creative manner.

One of my colleagues would tell me that theatre is one of the cheapest forms of empowerment.

(IDEA, 1996)

A look at current drama education literature will show that these hallmarks of the liberatory pedagogy espoused by Carroll and Santos-Cabangon are still our dominant paradigm.

**Structural changes**

Other significant and complementary structural developments were happening through the latter part of the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first. It was a time of consolidation, even of all those diverse practices, a time of the maturation of drama education into a discipline and a coherent practice, and, worldwide, the patchy beginnings of increased establishment in classrooms and curricula at every level emerged.

- All those other diverse purposes that had emerged in the twentieth century – drama for creative self-expression, teaching language, drama therapy and so on – had become much better articulated and were establishing contexts of practice for themselves.
- Drama was becoming quite normalised in classrooms – from the 1950s in the UK and North America and spreading out from there – usually strongest at either the pre-school or the upper secondary level. By 2015, drama was officially at least a compulsory national core curriculum subject in Australia, Hungary, Iceland, New Zealand, Peru and Taiwan (though ironically no longer in England, and only patchily in North American states and provinces).
- Teacher education specialist courses in drama had been burgeoning, too, throughout the whole period, especially in the Anglophone world, usually focused on the secondary school level.
- Drama teachers – in early days, like most theatre workers staunchly wedded to our practice and often contemptuous of theory and scholarship – started to analyse and research our practices, and a body of research literature had emerged: textbooks, research reports and peer-reviewed journals, sometimes with tentative titles like *Towards a Theory of Drama in Education* (Bolton, 1979).
- Most practically, by the 1990s, many countries and schooling dispensations now had their own drama education organisations and were ready to look outwards.

This brings us to now. So, mini-Grand Tour over, it’s time to move on to our own post-modern era, to what this has all been leading to … to the time of IDEA itself and what today’s big questions and their implications are, not just for that conference in China, but for the rest of the World, too. That 1995 IDEA Congress foreshadowed them in its
twin themes – mirroring IDEA’s own mission statement and the vision that Carroll and Santos-Cabangon were articulating:

- What is the role of drama/theatre in establishing personal and cultural identity and providing a space for dialogue?
- How does drama/theatre address the cultural, artistic and educational needs of young people in a rapidly changing contemporary world containing many forms of disenfranchisement and threat?

The coming of IDEA

The coming of IDEA was – put simply with a bad pun – an idea whose time had come. By 1990, all those significant factors in drama education outlined above were converging worldwide (in spite of that uncivil war still going on in the UK; in fact, the seeds of IDEA were sown in England). In 1992, IDEA created itself in Portugal in three European languages. Showing its broadening global reach, IDEA has added a fourth language, Chinese, since IDEA 2007 in Hong Kong, IDEA’s 6th World Congress and its first Asian venture.

In the next 25 years, drama’s missionaries – or its diaspora, if you prefer the metaphor – have spread more widely across the globe, with some developments in practice, too. This development has not always been onward and upward. Sometimes it is two steps forward and one step back…. The history of IDEA is almost a microcosm of the history of drama education itself. The Association had a somewhat divided start, problematised by ideological, cultural, economic and aesthetic differences (often entangled with or even masquerading as each other). Designed as a world federation of national drama education associations, from more than one country it had to accept membership of two competing and mutually hostile organisations. Somehow, much goodwill and some unity of purpose emerged in the inaugural 1992 Congress, and with strong leadership, a few casualties and some brave, culturally diverse and inspiring triennial congresses over the next decade, IDEA achieved the milestone of UNESCO recognition in 2007 as the peak body of drama education, a distinction previously limited to music, visual arts and dance education.

Being a ‘proper’ subject of study for young people, drama has made just the slightest dent in a few global education systems and also given drama educators the confidence that comes from at least working in an officially sanctioned learning area, rather than just a marginal play-space. However, the Association continues to be marginalised, struggling for profile and economically fragile; member organisations have come and gone; and neither geopolitics nor nature has been kind to IDEA. The 2016 Congress to be held in Turkey was cancelled because of a terrorist attack on the host University just prior to the meeting; after being postponed for a year, the identical situation happened in 2017; and, while I have been writing this chapter, the 2020 Beijing Congress has gone the same way, because of the Covid-19 coronavirus. But the fact that the 2020 Congress was scheduled to be in China, along with the ‘warm-up’ conference and the special invitation of several Western ‘experts’ that began this chapter, indicates that we are still spreading ‘the Word’.

Drama and cultural identity – autonomy, assimilation or blending?

This brings us back to the postcolonial question of what we were doing in China. We were, fortunately, invited guests: merchants with offerings, not invaders, settlers or missionaries as such. That neatly frames an exploration of the traditional East/West ‘divide’, which is where I will start, but I also briefly visit a few other problematic cultural borders, geographical and otherwise.
Therefore, in order to problematise drama education a bit, as it pertains to culture, let us go back to the merchandise we are peddling: this Western product of ‘enlightenment’.

What opportunities does drama provide elsewhere in the world to enrich the schools, using that long list of the learning purposes of drama that crystallised back in the twentieth century?

- To teach the art form? As a motivating pedagogy? For child-centred learning? For creative self-expression? For teaching language? For personal development? For social skills? For intercultural skills? For health and well-being?

Also, what opportunities are associated with the contemporary paradigm of drama’s capacity to provide young people and schools with:

- A space for dialogue and questions?
- Agency for social action and social change – in Beng’s words, a ‘cheap form of empowerment’?

And here – if you, or your school or your country is new to drama education – you have to choose. Even if the subject does get in through the school gate, drama can’t do all of those things all of the time. No school principal anywhere in the world is going to believe you when you say that it can, nor will a principal give you enough time in the school’s curriculum to prove it. And anyway, these learning opportunities can’t all be your educational priority.

**Challenges and barriers**

Moreover, you may have barriers that make some purposes of drama education impossible, or at least difficult. Some of these barriers in fact exist in many, most or possibly all cultures, including those in the West, but many of them are certainly present in the current curriculum in mainland China, as I and those other invited drama merchants have encountered personally:

- Not every school, nor every community of parents, will be ready to make space in their crowded year for something that seems to have so little to do with the business of training children to have successful careers.
- Are the teachers ready or willing to engage in a genuine dialogue of learning with the students and give up some of their power and authority as ‘the ones who know’?
- Not every curriculum can easily accommodate a subject that has so little to do with reliable facts and truths and precepts.
- Although the term ‘creativity’ is a rhetorical key to open curricular doors, the teachers and their principals and policy-makers will discover quickly that creativity cannot be taught by numbers, but is connected with play, experiment and risk, and above all unpredictable. Creativity is as unsettling as it is inspiring, and there are no right answers.
- What is the students’ cultural heritage, or, if you like, their own cultural baggage, based on what they have been brought up to know, and their expectation of what goes on in schools:
  - such as the need to avoid exposure and preserve face;
  - or a reluctance to become involved in any embodied or active learning;
  - or even to engage in two-way dialogue or make real decisions?
Mini-tour of the educating process

- Come to that, are the teachers ready for all of those – will they even be willing to move the furniture and leave the front of the classroom?
- The students, and even the teachers, may just not be used to asking questions instead of answering them, and particularly when faced with questions like ‘What if…?’ which do not yet have an answer, questions that point to new dilemmas and choices to face, instead of simple certainties.
- Can they somehow make this Western import their own:
  - what is in their own cultural heritage that can help to make it theirs, too?
  - What is in their curriculum that can?
- Finally, and significantly for Mainland China in its current dispensation, not every education system – or government, come to that – wants its students either:
  - to become too personally empowered;
  - to go about creating social change.

These last challenges were driven home to me, forcibly but in a nuanced way, at that IDEC conference and since. The organisers, or whoever is behind them, requested that we send our keynotes in advance, so that the simultaneous translators would be familiar with them. Mine came back with the demand to delete a couple of paragraphs, one referring to historical religious dissent (in Europe) and the other discussing the capacity of drama to question social norms and encourage social change. This was the trigger phrase for censorship. However, ready to withdraw from the conference over this, but first wanting to test the water, I rewrote my speech in code. Instead of ‘drama for social change’, I wrote, ‘drama to help people make their lives better’. This was accepted, along with my other similar change. It was a clear message, however, that was reinforced at the macro level a couple of months later when the Chinese government very publicly announced that they were dropping the aim of ‘Independent thinking’ from their school curriculum.

That curriculum is highly successful, however, not just in its own terms but in international academic rankings. In 2018, the three Chinese regions that were tested occupied Places 1, 3 and 4 in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) rankings. Furthermore, the Chinese curriculum is a product of at least three major influences: 2,500 years of the Confucian traditions of respect for elders and master/apprentice instruction; the not dissimilar utilitarian Western influence of education as transmission from the teacher who knows, to the student who does not (in the spirit of Mr. Gradgrind: ‘Teach the children facts – nothing but facts!’); and 70 years of Communism and adherence to revered texts like the Little Red Book. Why should Chinese educators, parents and students risk this and their ratings by introducing a new learning area and/or pedagogy that takes time from attaining those achievements, and furthermore does so by means that seem to run exactly counter to all of those traditions – asking questions, encouraging dialogue and independent thinking, sowing and fertilising uncertainties and advocating democratic relationships between teachers and students?

Opportunities

...And yet... it’s not all as bleak for the dramatic-enlightenment peddlers as the oppressive realpolitik identified above suggests. My own limited experience in China, and that of my fellow-merchants, shows that in spite of all of those hindrances and discouragements, some
teachers and even a few principals and education departments in China are turning to drama with interest. The officials are, of course, mainly attracted by the comedy mask function of drama: providing affirmation, safe and controllable creativity and reassurance of orthodox values – and a colourful profile for their schools…

... just like their counterparts in Western schools!

There is also, however, a small but growing community of skilled and articulate practitioners of dialogical and challenging drama education and pedagogy, often well supported by their now much more experienced colleagues in Hong Kong and Taiwan…

... And is the shadow of political repression and censorship any more oppressive or challenging for drama advocates and practitioners than the still-common blank un-interest and sometimes contempt for such un-serious and ‘soft’ pursuits as the arts that is shown by many senior Western education officials?

Chinese teachers themselves, when they actually get to sample drama through our merchants’ tasting sessions and workshops, are enormously enthusiastic. Working with some of these over weeks and months in schools and in workshops, we have found that they do initially find unusual and difficult the challenge of asking questions and encouraging dialogue and knowledge sharing, and even the question of exploring ‘what if…?’ Doing those things are all so alien to their own education and their training. However, we also find that when they actually get to experience drama, most teachers and even principals are captivated and excited, exactly as we all know in the West; and the Chinese teachers are quick learners, hard-working, energetic and proactive. Don’t just take my word for all this. Recent research corroborates it (e.g. Au, 2016; Wang, 2017; Duan, 2018), and even the pro-government China Daily was gushingly impressed by one of several UK-inspired companies that operate in cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Cheng Du. 7

I have also observed, here and elsewhere, that for those educators already enthusiastic and engaged by the comedy-mask enchantments of drama, it is often only a short step to the more surprising and exciting charms of the tragic and questioning mask. That’s partly why the Chinese teachers in our workshops are so enthusiastic. To playfully provoke the orthodox is fun, and the cultural difference can actually add to the allure, too. I found that out years ago, in a world’s apart but equally non-Western setting, when teaching and play-building with community theatre groups in South African townships shortly before their independence in 1992. Theatre was very popular as a form of protest and affirmation, using a mix of Western theatre and indigenous forms like traditional dance and praise poetry. But it was all comedy-mask drama (even though the plays usually dealt with subjects like police brutality, injustice and political murder) – the endlessly reiterated assertion and affirmation of ‘Amandla!’ (Freedom!), presented with the associated stereotypes of their own tough lives. I found the one thing I could offer these highly sophisticated theatre-makers was the unexpected question: ‘That police officer who just bashed and killed the old lady at the demonstration… I wonder what he went home that night and told his wife and children? Would that be an interesting next scene, do you think?’ Time after time, the theatre-makers were startled by such questions – a divergent kind of questioning that was not part of their repertoire – and then they were fascinated and engrossed, often coming up with dazzlingly unsettling and provocative drama in response.

In sum, our experiences above suggest that our shape-shifting art of drama can indeed provide eminently serviceable learning across cultures. Well-crafted, it may help people anywhere to illuminate and illustrate their lives and behaviour; to restore the bruised keyword of this chapter, as a pedagogy of enlightenment. Our protean core business is to create flexible models of human behaviour. Protected inside these models, we can ask challenging
questions, playing with human figures to give us insights into how they work and how they might be different. Identification and empathy are part of that core business, and we are a group art, so dialogue is central.

**New cultural challenges**

Culture – the word and the idea – is undergoing its own transformations during this same period of the maturing and expansion of our little world of drama education, with geopolitical changes on an unprecedented scale that challenge the very notion of culture… along with equally thermodynamic reactions to those changes. The most obvious of these are the accelerating transport and communications revolution, and the rise of the algorithm, which have together produced:

- Economic and cultural globalism, and the simultaneous retreat into political nationalism and tribalism;
- Increased overall human prosperity and education, and the simultaneous growth of neoliberalism and the gap between the haves and have-nots in every dimension;
- The rise of the individual and the decline in communalism in society at all levels, along with the replacement of agreed values with a multiplication of contested values systems;
- Instant access to virtually everything that is known, but no keys to making meaning of that knowledge based on agreed premises that we can trust;
- Instant communication with everybody in the world, en masse or individually, and the reactive manifestation of this in intimate social bubbles within a largely uncontrollable social media;
- The gigantic geophysical shifts of climate change, population displacement and nature’s games like modern pandemics.

How on earth (literally) is the tiny drama education community to navigate its way through the seismic cultural shifts taking place as a result of these changes, beside which the question of whether Chinese schools are fond of us or not is hardly a grand issue. One way is to grasp at straws in the wind. There are plenty of those, no doubt chronicled elsewhere in the pages of this book. One of those straws that drama educators beyond the Western world, such as Taiwan’s Wang Wan Jung and the Hong Kong drama education community, are already clutching at is the corporately fashionable portmanteau term ‘glocalisation’: ‘revealing the struggles and dialogue of the local contexts and cultures with this globalising teaching trend’ (Tam, 2013). Drama has in fact always been about glocalisation. Shakespeare nailed it when he wrote, in *A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream*:

> As imagination bodies forth  
> The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen  
> Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing  
> A local habitation and a name

...to allow us to scrutinise those uncomprehended big ideas and play with alternatives.

Another way is to go back to our roots and rigorously re-examine what we do. How much use in any of the above human tectonic shifts will the comedy mask be – iterating the comfortable stories and transmitting the traditional cultural mores, the agreed facts and truths and certainties, to which the traditional curricula cling? Well, since in all the above geo-shifts all of those cultural norms are constantly evanescing and re-crystallising as something completely different, maybe this kind of drama will provide the overwhelmed
children, parents and education systems at least with some safe, familiar playgrounds. That’s part of what drama already does in schools, usually as an educational sideshow.

But clinging to shibboleths – or, to put it less rudely, reinforcing received cultural norms – in order not to feel totally powerless in the teeth of these mighty forces is a poor preparation for the young people who are already facing them. We might, however, speculate that the tragedy mask of challenge and experiment, question, intellectual risk and the troubling of certainties could have a much more central cultural and educational role to play. We just need to find the right stage – or, to use a more contemporary metaphor, an appropriate public platform to sell our merchandise – to let people know that drama is, or could be, in PETA’s words, ‘the cheapest form of empowerment’.

Notes

1 For example, and most influentially, Li Ying Ning from Shanghai, Lin Meichun and Chung Xiao from Taiwan and Phoebe Chan and Estella Wong from Hong Kong, all of whom established tertiary training courses on their return.

2 In spite of what Augusto Boal suggests in Theatre of The Oppressed (1979): that Greek tragedy was the theatre of oppression. Read on.

3 ‘…lords of misrule or disguised persons … come unreverently into the church or churchyard and there to dance, play any unseemly parts, with scoffs, jests, wanton gesture or ribald talk’.

4 I am grateful here for the comprehensive scholarship of Li, Chyi-Chiang (Alan), whose PhD thesis (2007) is unlikely to be familiar but is essential reading.

5 ‘There is, sir, an eyrie of children, little eyasses, that cry out on the top of question, and are most tyrannically clapped for it… these are now the fashion, and so berattle the common stages’ (Hamlet, 2.ii).

6 This chapter unfortunately does not give space to call the roll of honour of all the pioneers of all these movements and practices down through the twentieth century, nor of the philosophers and the writers whose ideas gave birth to the practices and those who crystallised them into theory. Further detail and references for the scholars cited throughout the chapter can be found in O’Toole, 2009.

7 China Daily: https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/life/2013-08/12/content_16887429.htm

8 e.g. Wang Wan Jung (2017), Tam Po Chi (2013).

References


Mini-tour of the educating process


