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Reimagining drama in education

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In this chapter, I will explore how we can conceptualise Drama in Education (DiE) workshops as postdramatic performance events of autopoietic feedback loops to offer a reimagination of metaxis, a concept central to DiE practice and research, and of DiE itself as a postdramatic pedagogy. I understand DiE as an umbrella term that describes embodied experiences firmly grounded in the tenets of the theatricality that characterises dramatic theatre. In other words, a DiE intervention comprises a sequence of improvisation-based, carefully structured and facilitated dramatic strategies that provoke facilitators and participants to collaboratively engage in spontaneous immersive identification with fictional roles in the realm of theatricality, that is, in imaginary as if worlds. Simultaneously, DiE includes strategies that intermittently demand detachment from the latter and invite engagement in non-dramatic activities, such as writing, drawing, and discussing out of role. Such periodic distance can evoke critical reflection not only on the dramatic experiences at hand, but also on the connections participants make to their own real-life worlds outside the workshop space. I suggest that enriching the traditional DiE tenets with a postdramatic perspective on theatre-making can fruitfully inform a complementary angle on DiE theory. Such an expanded theoretical framework can offer emerging guidelines and compelling provocations for future DiE practice. It can further our understanding of the potential of DiE to catalyse learning experiences that foster critical thinking and critical empathy in the complex and often contradictory hypertechnological world of the twenty-first century.

My reimagination of DiE as a postdramatic pedagogy stems from my practice-based PhD research. I developed a DiE workshop, Home & Away, and facilitated it twice in 2019 in the former German Democratic Republic to explore how theatre-making processes may counter xenophobic right-wing populist rhetoric. Young people aged 10–14 who identified as German participated in the workshops. I used Marsden and Ottley’s (2008) picture book Home & Away as the primary pre-text. It depicts an open-ended and fragmentary fictional story about a family who have to flee home because a war is breaking out in their own country. In and out of role, participants grappled with the fate, fears, and hopes of this fictional family. Towards the end of the workshop, I introduced a second pre-textual layer: right-wing populist quotes that I had found on social media and in the news and introduced into the story of Home & Away as fictional ‘tweets.’ I will illuminate my discussion of the postdramatic pedagogy I propose with
descriptions of distinct moments that occurred during one of the workshops, when I asked participants to come together in small groups to create a freeze frame that represented the gist of their chosen quotes. Specifically, I will describe moments from the participants’ 30-second Images of Transition performances. In these short movement sequences devised in the same small groups, participants shared their embodied explorations of how the fictional family transforms from one freeze frame (an everyday pre-war family selfie) to another (the physical representation of the kernel of each group’s chosen quotes).

To begin my reimagination of DiE as a postdramatic pedagogy, I propose that, in DiE, the active, embodied exploration of fictional worlds is only one element that provokes participants to critically reflect on complex behaviours, attitudes, and representations in imagined worlds and, by extension, their lived realities. The process of theatre-making itself affords yet another plain of embodied experience. Fischer-Lichte (2008) regards any ‘piece’ of theatre as an instance of active theatre-making. From this perspective, theatre is never an autonomous object of art, but a dynamic, living, ever-evolving performance event. The performance event includes acts of performing as well as their reception and interpretation. In the case of DiE workshops, participants explicitly verbalise and share their experiences of reception and interpretation. This process of reflective expression becomes part of the performance event as well. Fischer-Lichte (2008) coins the term ‘autopoietic feedback loop’ to describe the relationship between spectators and performers during a performance event. Polkinghorne (2004) understands poiesis as “the activity in which a person brings something into being that did not exist before” (p. 115). Thus, the autopoietic relationship between audiences and performers is a partnership of active, collaborative, and perpetual making and remaking of meaning that does not exist prior to the moment of collaboration. As active agents in the making of meaning, everyone in the theatre space continuously affects each other’s performances of acting and interpreting. It is this constant communal creation that generates unique performance events (Fletcher-Watson, 2013). The density and explicit expression of this emergent ‘interconnective agency’ can collapse the binary between audiences and performers into non-hierarchical momentary ensembles of theatre-makers akin to of Boal’s (1979) spect-actors.

In self-actualising iterations of construction (performance), deconstruction (perception and interpretation), and reconstruction (affective, energetic, kinaesthetic, and/or verbal feedback), the temporary community of audience and performers interact with the spatial configurations of the performance space, with the objects and visual and sonic elements in it, and with each other. This interaction is twofold. On the first level, they interact with the very materiality and presence of their own and each other’s bodies. On the second plain, they simultaneously interact with these bodies – including the movements and sounds they produce – as signifiers. In DiE, bodies as signifiers are incapable of being tabulae rasae. To participants, they are always already triple-inscribed: as peers, as performers, and, within the fictional frame, as characters with whom they already share an intimate history of relationality. After all, DiE participants make personal connections to characters as they devise and reflect on the fiction. They develop empathy for them as they imagine themselves in role. They experience moments of genuine emotion through a variety of dramatic and non-dramatic strategies, such as freeze frame work, improvisation, or writing-in-role. This triple inscription complicates the autopoietic feedback loops evolving during the DiE workshop. It challenges participants to grapple in practice with theoretical notions such as identity, representation, positionality, and power.

I suggest that Fischer-Lichte’s (2008) definition of theatre as an event rather than an art object can fruitfully provoke us to understand the DiE workshop in its entirety as a
durational performance event. This consideration suggests that the DiE workshop does not simply comprise an accumulation of scattered pieces of completed theatre works interspersed with reflective dialogue divorced from these allegedly self-contained performances. Neither is it a pedagogical intervention that instrumentalises theatre techniques to achieve quantifiable outputs and outcomes. Rather, we can conceptualise all elements of the DiE workshop as equal parts of one performance event. This conceptualisation defines the DiE workshop as an interplay of autopoietic feedback loops as “dynamic living systems which are self-perpetuating [sic] and interactive” (Shaughnessy, 2013, p. 332). This liveness and interactivity can challenge us to explore the very processes and political implications of our very own perceptions and interpretations, and how we regard, interact with, and communicate them. If we push each other to engage with them critically to the point of discomfort, they can throw light on im/possible alternatives ways of seeing, communicating, and being in the world and illuminate the conditions that influence the creations of such im/possibilities. By collapsing the binary between not only spectator and actor, but also dramatic engagement and analytic discussion, the conceptualisation of the DiE workshop as performance event also opens up new perspectives on how DiE can act as a research method.

Performance events involve observing, witnessing, and experiencing the presence and physical and sonic expressions of others. When a human being observes the movements, utterances, and gestures of another, a mental embodiment of the other’s behaviour takes place (Shaughnessy, 2012). The observer is emotionally engaged in what she witnesses. This emotional engagement is a cognitive process inevitably occurring in most humans when they encounter other people. McConachie and Hart (2010) propose that mirror neurons provoke us to recreate and experience the emotions of others even when just observing their body language or facial expression. McConachie (2008) calls this emotional engagement provoked by mirror neurons “empathy.” This conceptualisation implies that empathy does not involve consciously reading bodies as signs and critically analysing this process of perception and signification. Yet, the conscious noticing and deconstructing of autopoietic feedback loops can significantly contribute to challenging stereotypical representations. Such processes bear the potential to not only provoke us to reflect on our meaning-making processes and the relations of power that influence them. They can also evoke the conscious experiencing of a variety of perspectives. Such experiences, in turn, can challenge notions of any one singular definite reality, question sources of “truth,” and destabilise meanings taken for granted.

The temporary designation of the roles of audience and actors as if they were distinct can catalyse learning experiences that foster both critical thinking and critical empathy. As discussed above, both audience and actors inevitably transform into creators and performers in theatre- and meaning-making processes. The interruption and fragmentation of autopoietic feedback loops can provoke us to become critically conscious of the poetics and politics of signification. In this provocation lies the possibility to harness the potential of emotional engagement while transcending “doxic empathy,” a form of empathy that uncritically “re-iterate[s] deeply ideological images of the familiar that naturalize and thereby depoliticize the status quo” (Lobb, 2017, p. 594). DiE practice can create spaces in which emotional engagement in fact catalyses the conscientisation of how and under which circumstances and influences bodies, objects, and spaces operate as signifieds. Becoming critically conscious of the stage of signification is particularly vital as we strive to make sense of the overwhelming density of signs in the hyper-technological world in which we live.

One of the moments that catalysed explorations of the stage of signification through fractured autopoiesis occurred during the Images of Transition performances that were part of the Home & Away workshop. I introduced a distinct process for sharing and reflecting on
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these scenes. After each small group had shared their movement piece once on the illuminated stage, I asked them to start performing again. This time, any audience member could freeze the scene at any point in time that they found intriguing, interesting, provoking, or confusing. When an audience member shouted out, ‘Freeze!’ the performers immediately ceased to move and transformed their movement sequence into a new freeze frame. I invited the audience to denote and connote what they could perceive, while I asked the performers to listen. We carefully observed and analysed the emerging freeze frames and, in this way, both the inner workings of right-wing populism and the social climate that enable them to unfold. When the audience felt that they had expressed all their observations and reflections, we invited the performers to speak and engage in dialogue with the audience.

In such an instance, two performers, Tabea and Emma, grew increasingly upset as they began to realise that the ways in which others interpret their images and take them as read was out of their control when they could not come into dialogue with them, and when they were constrained to a very limited space (the stage) and very limited roles (objects of ascription). When Tabea tried to calm Emma down, Emma did not remain silent, but complained about the audience’s suggested meanings. She attempted to choose and establish on her own terms an interpretation of her identity as a fictional character and/or element in the scene and as a self-determined performer. Emma sounded and looked more and more agitated. As if defending herself, she voiced that the audience did not read her group’s intention at all. Rather than paint a picture of “foreigners,” she explained, they wanted to depict “just some kind of a feeling” evoked by right-wing populist rhetoric. Both Tabea and Emma frequently expressed a sense of anxiety about the very likely possibility that the audience would ascribe distinct meanings to their performance. Once any of the audience members had expressed their experience of the performance, Emma and Tabea, remarkably quickly and anxiously, tried to brush such comments aside as one of many options, in desperate attempts to highlight that no meaning could ever be set in stone.

Loud conflict over signification arose during another group’s Images of Transition performance. Contention among performers and audience members alike grew about the meaning of a frozen image, about who in the scene was looking for a sense of home in the form of safety and security, and how this might be signified in the performance. Participants came to recognise the discrepancy between what performers were wishing to show and what the audience was reading. Performer Fine tried to correct the audience’s interpretations. Agitatedly, she bluntly exclaimed that they were depicting predetermined roles. She implied that her group had not intended to create a scenario of terror on stage. In a voice that carried a sense of self-defence, Mia immediately blurted out that the audience’s interpretation of violence, theft, and deception was wrong. Performer Finn, who had managed to remain calm and silent for so long, finally burst out in despair to confirm Fine’s and Mia’s points of view. There was not only a sense that Fine, Mia, and Finn were attempting to restore the dignity of the characters who had turned from ordinary people like you and me into nothing but an overpowering imagery of brutality and criminality. I could also perceive a sense of self-defence. As if frozen inside the tiny black box that was the illuminated stage, these performers stared into the noisy darkness of the auditorium, into the invisibility that was us, the momentary arbiters of meaning, with shaking heads. They seemed desperate not to be read as responsible for such a horrific transformation.

Agitatedly, Fine was grappling with how the stage of signification had transformed her and her fellow performers-in-role into violent terrorists and deceiving beggars. As the performers talked to us, they seemed to still carry the burden of this representation on and within their bodies. Fine seemed to be deeply upset that the audience did not exhibit an
explicit awareness of how it had been right-wing populist rhetoric in the first place that had catalysed the distressing imagery that she and her peers had conjured up. In the audience, Christine and Emma shushed the performers so that their interpretation dominated the space, which was now fraught with tension. I could feel that something invisible, unspoken, but immense was at stake. Autonomy. Self-determination. Power. Even among the performers Anke, Mia, and Fine themselves, the story of the images that comprised their scene was not clear. The more they spoke about their performance, the more they realised that there was no one truth. Fine managed to stop herself from blurring out and correcting her peers' ideas. She was, in that moment, bearing other people's interpretations of the images they were creating. Yet, after a few seconds, she could not refrain from shouting at the audience that their interpretation was completely different from hers. With her hands covering her ears to block out all sound, all words, all interpretations, Laura was crouching on the stage floor, visibly distressed as she struggled in this excess of howling, harrowing purported truths to bear not being able to articulate her own meaning, not having her voice heard.

We had set out to explore the fictional (hi)story of Home & Away, but the audience could not unsee their peers as performers, as human bodies. The performers themselves could not separate their performer-selves from the fiction. Their tense bodies and harsh manner of shouting suggests that they too seemed to feel the strong urge to correct the audience and, in an emotion-laden manner, attempt to clarify what they had initially chosen to represent in the image. The performers seemed to be struggling to be silent, to bear the interpretations of others, to experience powerlessness in the making of meaning. Their actions were part of the stage action. However, they were not rehearsed. Neither were they improvised elements directly provoked by a fictional narrative. They were real actions provoked, born, and performed by our very presence and the affective reciprocal relationship of autopoiesis in the here-and-now.

Still on stage underneath the glaring spotlights, the performers now started to play fight over who got to talk about the intended meaning first. They were highly invested in 'setting the record straight' and explaining their 'truth' of the scene, however fragmentary. I could discern that this was a play fight. This was a performed fight, both a demonstration of power in attempts to reclaim it and an expression of raw despair. There was a sense that the performers did not only perform this fight for each other but also for us, the audience. It was a performed fight, and yet the actions, utterances, emotions, and urgency it evinced were real. These exhausted but tense bodies, wildly gesticulating limbs, and grimacing faces distorted by a deeply felt exigency exhibited affective responses to an engagement that pointed uncompromisingly to a powerful, relentless presence, some immeasurable gravity that was at play here. Feeling part of this performative action, I felt both disturbingly at peace in the cool dark space in front of the stage and simultaneously overwhelmed by all the impressions I had somehow been inseparable from all along. For a moment, I could feel under my very own skin those strained muscles fighting for attention in oscillations of despair, indignation, defeat, and attempts to reclaim the power to signify. Voices heated up by harsh floodlights flared up behind my eyes and echoed back onto the stage. Rendered invisible in the darkness, how did I know I was still here? Was I in power to choose where to look, how to feel, what to hear?

A fleeting moment followed; a moment in which all sound died down. None of the performers had left the stage. In role, Finn began to speak into the evanescent silence, “So, we were, from the beginning till the end, the family. So—” The audience, confused, bewildered, perplexed, started to mutter again. Webs of words, syllables, voices surged up once more. Wedged into the image, performer Mia demanded attention as she suddenly shouted...
into the mumbling darkness: “You have to listen!” As Finn now continued to speak, the experience of being a performer who occupied a minority position perspective of powerlessness in the making of meaning took on a new dimension. Finn connected this first plain of experience with a second level. The latter linked these embodied discoveries directly to the Othering processes at play in right-wing populist rhetoric and the distinct mode of representation of others as allegedly alien Others on which it lives. Finn did so by returning to the fiction. As he employed the first-person plural and talked about a “pose,” he seemed to identify as both fictional family member and performer: “Yes, er, at the end was, so the pose at the end, it was, you know, someone other than us.” The despair of Finn, the performer stuck on stage, seemed to arise from an interplay between his performer self’s conscious experiencing and his ‘real’ self’s deconstructing of autopoietic feedback loops and the synthesis of fiction (Home & Away) and reality disguised as fiction (right-wing populist rhetoric).

“We had tweets, that we are terrorists and stuff, what isn’t true, of course,” Finn tried to explain, with a voice imbued with a haunting, very real presence of anguish and distress. Finn tried to explain that the things that people write, say, and circulate proposed that he and fellow performer Laura were terrorists. He attempted to clarify that they were not. Rather, it was a misrepresentation of both a vicariously and indirectly experienced fictional reality and of their direct experience of an immediate performed reality, which was, of course, informed by their very real existences as young people, workshop participants, and peers. Full of anguish, Laura interrupted Finn. Her expression added to the sense that the Images of Transition performance reached into the present moment. Framed on stage, the real, the performed, and the fictional seemed not to collide, but to superimpose each other into a single, loud, dense image of urgency that seemed to irreversibly burn itself into the back of my mind. The more words escaped Laura’s mouth, the less I could discern whether the participant Laura, the performer Laura, or a fictional family member was speaking: “We are, so to speak, these people, these terrorists, who no one knows! So, like … People have no idea WHO WE ARE!” Finn chimed in, exclaiming despairingly and exhaustedly, “It is these tweets! It is these tweets!” His stretched-out tense arm was trying to reach us in the darkness of the auditorium, but we were an invisible, anonymous void of noise. We were an ocean of words, assumptions, alleged truths. We were the waves relentlessly crashing into each other. We held on to our words because an inexorable excess of signs filled our perceptions. Confusion filled our lungs as we drew air from this undefinable elusive space fraught with exclamations, images, noise. In this moment, could I still see Finn, the young man who had walked into the drama room this afternoon as a workshop participant? Could I remember whose story he was trying to tell?

The space calmed down once again. This time, the stillness of the emerging silence almost disturbed me. Eventually, Finn spoke again. The tweets he and his group had chosen catalysed the family’s transformation, he mumbled. Laura nodded. The posts have power, she contemplated aloud. As audience member Anke put it, “I reckon they have the power, so to speak, who these two are in the heads of other people.” With a voice imbued with sadness, Anke added, “But not who we really are.” Laura nodded: “That’s how one imagines that, but that isn’t our real face.” Anke was part of the audience. Yet, she used the first-person plural. She identified with the misrepresented, with the Othered, despite her comfortable position in the anonymous darkness. Her memory of being on stage during her own group’s Images of Transition performance seemed to be very much alive. In this moment, she was both subject and object of ascription. Empathically, she expressed solidarity with those wedged into a minority position perspective on the stage of signification. Momentarily, she shared their position. She became part of them. Out of the space of friction that seemed to hold the
potential for Finn, the participant, the performer, and the fictional character, to speak as one, Finn reflected defeatedly. He contemplated how the distinct discourses that the very real technology of social media enables allow for a very limited representation of himself and the family of characters and performers of which he was currently part. Into the calmness and exhaustion after the storm, he quietly concluded: “So, through these tweets, we, also, you know … changed. It … makes us so.”

I propose that enriching the conceptualisation of the DiE workshop as a performance event of autopoietic feedback loops with Lehmann’s (2006) notion of postdramatic theatre (PDT) can fruitfully inform a complementary angle on DiE theory that offers preliminary guidelines for future DiE practice in the twenty-first century. Traditionally, DiE practice and research are firmly grounded in the tenets of the theatricality that characterises dramatic theatre (DT). This theatricality can catalyse moments of metaxis between a fictional character and the DiE participant. In other words, the DiE participant may find herself in an in-between space that allows her to simultaneously experience herself in and out of role, concurrently as both self and Other. In this way, theatricality provides potential opportunities for reflection on complex attitudes and behaviours. For example, O’Neill (1995) emphasises that her approach, process drama, rooted in Heathcotian principles, lives on spontaneous but structured dramatic improvisations coupled with an awareness, appreciation, and application of theatre form according to the aesthetics of classical Aristotelian drama. Additional reflection on the dramatic activity and devised theatre works offers vital complementary learning opportunities, especially when participants make personal real-world connections to these aesthetic experiences. Neelands (1994) criticises purely realist and naturalist theatre, acknowledges non-mimetic performance forms, and suggests that his Conventions Approach moves beyond dramatic theatricality, since the drama strategies he proposes are Brechtian in nature. Interpolated Epic Theatre strategies of Verfremdung are to enrich the unfolding fictional plot and illuminate the motivations, social contexts, and internal psychologies of the characters. Reflection interspersed into dramatic engagement provokes participants to think about their experiences of and as part of the fiction, and to transfer these emerging questions and insights onto their own lives and real-world behaviours.

In DT, both audiences and actors subscribe to a fiction contract. While we can consider them as located in autopoietic feedback loops of perception, interpretation, and feedback, they are to believe completely in fictional characters existent in a fictional, closed cosmos. Not all DT strictly subscribes to the realist or naturalist paradigm. In fact, a fourth wall may not be present throughout the theatre event or parts thereof. If the fourth wall is broken, however, it is always a fictional character who directly addresses the audience. In this way, DT exhibits a closed logic. Changes in time and location follow a clear reason based on a coherent, already-provided plot. Characters are in themselves ‘well-made’ pieces of make-belief with logical psychological motivations.

PDT does not rigidly reject the DT paradigm in its entirety but exploratively extends and constructively challenges it (Kotte, 2005; Primavesi, 2004). PDT is an umbrella term that describes a wide range of theatre practice that shifts DT’s focus on mimesis, text, logic, and causality to an emphasis on poiesis, presence, perception, and the im/possibilities of representation. Since the second half of the twentieth century, theatre makers have challenged the notion of DT’s mimetic theatre. Increasingly, practitioners like those of the historical avant-garde, Brecht’s Epic Theatre, with its intermittent alienation and stylisation, as well as artists engaging in performance art and happenings playfully began to explore the im/possibilities of the totalising representative acts that DT offers. Lehmann (2006) describes PDT as an amalgam of contemporary theatre practice that emerged out of these decades of
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theatrical exploration. PDT challenges the notion that theatre can mimic real life by presenting audiences with closed fictional worlds. From this perspective, in its quest to represent the world mimetically in a logical and causal way, DT fails to represent the complexities of human experience (Stegemann, 2009), which are compounded in the hyper-technological world of the twenty-first century. PDT suggests that theatre can, however, present possible subjective fragments of our world in collaborative performance events. In PDT, actors do not present spectators with readily rehearsed and polished dramaturgies of closed characters and neatly sewn narratives. Instead, ensembles of active performers and audiences explore open dramaturgies of the unavoidable incongruities and inconsistencies of multiple perspectives, feelings, images, and ideas. In the process, they devise new performance events.

PDT extends the DT paradigm by refusing to regard dramatic literature as the unquestionable basis and most important element of theatre. While Brecht’s Epic Theatre rejects realism and naturalism, along with the immersive emotional identification and catharsis they promote, it does have coherent narratives at its base. A playwright determines a plot, and a director determines how actors execute embodiments of this plot. Actors’ bodies illustrate logical, causal fables that are interspersed with alienation effects in order to shock audiences out of empathy with fictional characters into openness for critiquing their fictional material circumstances and taking on board distinct political ideas in the real world. In this way, Brecht’s Epic Theatre, and by extension the DiE practice it inspires, may run the risk of developing dogmatic tendencies (Lehmann, 2006). PDT departs from Brecht’s theatre concept in so far as it no longer regards predetermined narratives with internal logics as the instruction and aim of theatre-making. In PDT, a ‘dehierarchisation’ of theatrical means takes place. In consequence, text is only one theatrical element of many, such as light, space, body, objects, movement, sound, voice, language, and mise-en-scène. Each element is equally important and valid in its own right. Rather than being a servant to text or even a subordinate communicator of political ideologies, the theatrical element in PDT is free to refuse any rehearsed representation. It is free to ‘stand for itself.’ In other words, not every element is necessarily thought up and composed into one distinct sign before the performance event but may point to its very own materiality and presence during it. Stillness and silence too become part of the network of theatrical elements and thus of the PDT performance event, in which DT’s obsession with chronology of action and events gives way to the simultaneous open interplays of signs (Weiler, 2005). The latter generate open continua of time and space, and fractured attempts of narratives and roles. Through collage, montage, surreal jumps in time and space, and sudden, startling juxtapositions of conventional dialogues and their deconstruction, PDT challenges audiences to incessantly dismantle and reconstruct dramatic constituents (Finter, 1985; Kotte, 2005).

PDT does not offer audiences uninterrupted representations of characters with fully formed internal psychologies. Instead, there tends to be a focus on the human body itself. Often, the body is not exclusively a signifier for something else or an embodiment of a distinct fictional character. Rather, the locus of attention shifts towards “the execution of acts that are real in the here and now and find their fulfilment in the very moment they happen” (Lehmann, 2006, p. 104). The affect-laden direct visceral experience of presence, performativity, and liveness moves to the centre of the performance event. Performers and even audiences may be provoked to experience the very presence and physicality of their bodies in the form of pronounced bodily sensations, such as exhaustion or heat. In this way, PDT interrupts DT’s psychological character-building by holding space for self-representation. In other words, the PDT actor does often not engage in DT style ‘as if’-acting in the pursuit of impersonation, pretence, and mimesis, but becomes a performer who offers a performance
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of herself. Kirby (2002) usefully notes that there is, in fact, a range of performance modes other than mimetic acting. For this discussion, it is crucial to note that, although a performer does not represent a fictional character, she is someone other than herself. Carlson (2004) suggests that “[e]ven if an action on stage is identical to one in real life, on stage it is considered ‘performed’ and off stage merely ‘done’” (p. 3). What characterises a performative action is that it occurs on stage. The stage here is a metaphor for a “play frame” (p. 54), which is marked by consciousness. If we are conscious that we have an audience of any kind, we engage in performative action. Although a PDT performer is not engaging in classical DT “as-if”-acting, she is, just like the audience, “operating in a world of double consciousness” (p. 54). In other words, a metaxis is at play between everyday reality and a permeable dimension that is possible within and as part of it. This is the realm of what Lehmann (2006) calls “theatReality.”

Fictional frames demand that DT operates on the level of theatricality (das Theatrale). PDT, however, shifts the primary focus from theatricality to theatrical reality, or theatReal-ity (das TheatReale) (Lehmann, 2006). TheatReality emerges from the ensemble’s heightened state of awareness and perception of the “intensified presence” of living human bodies in the theatre space (Lehmann, 2006, p. 163). TheatReality does not exist outside of this space. Such a space, however, does not have to be a traditional theatre building. It does not have to involve a purpose-built stage. Neither does it prescribe any distinct audience configurations or parameters for participation. Rather, it is a space emerging from the intention to perform, experience, and partake in a performance event in any way. During a PDT performance event, dramatic theatricality may be fragmentarily present or entirely absent. TheatReality, however, is always at play in the form of an existent consciousness of taking part in theatre and the visceral experience of the raw ‘realness’ of human presence and interconnection.

PDT’s focus on theatReality effects that DT’s traditional fiction contract, on which DiE lives, becomes fragile (Fogt & Fogh, 2015; Gronau, 2005). This fragility does not mean that PDT has no place in DiE. Quite the opposite is the case, since the PDT participant in the performance event becomes an active “co-author of his experiences and thus a co-artist of the artwork” (Stegemann, 2009, p. 288, my translation). PDT emphasises the affective relationship among ensembles, highlighting participation, interaction, and process rather than the importance of a completed product. From a PDT perspective, theatre is “an active force (energeia)” (Lehmann, 2006, p. 104). This ensemble-based energeia emerges from the complex interactions in which theatrical elements, free from hierarchisation and rigidly prescribed signifieds, create rhythms of imagery and association. They invite audiences to engage in a common struggle with the inevitable ambiguity of meaning as they attempt to synthesise their perceptions on their own terms during a performance event (Kotte, 2005; Weiler, 2005). By creating playgrounds for unfamiliar perceptions through an aesthetic of the performative (Fischer-Lichte, 2004), PDT provokes spectators out of “normative audience behaviour” (Fletcher-Watson, 2013, p. 23) that problematically perpetuates anaestheticising inertia, uncritical consumerism, and the absence of alert wide-awakeness (cf. Greene, 1995; Primavesi, 2004). Herein lies the potential for educational practice that fosters critical empathy and new perspectives on how we might utilise DiE as a research method.

The reconceptualisation of DiE practice as PDT performance events provides us with a contemporary lens through which to explore the notion of metaxis, a DiE participant’s sense of simultaneous belonging to fiction (a fictional narrative) and reality (her existence in her own lifeworld). Boal (1995) defines metaxis as “the state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image. The participant shares and belongs to these two autonomous worlds” (p. 43). I propose that the two ‘worlds’ at play in metaxis are not as ‘autonomous’ as Boal makes them
out to be. A PDT perspective on metaxis complicates and challenges the notion of the dichotomy between a clear-cut, closed world of fiction and reality as another sphere distinctly detached from it. A notion that argues that independent fictional and real worlds can overlap or collide with one another posits that those realms must be rigidly separated to begin with. PDT challenges this very presupposition. Pertinent educational endeavours must respond to this challenge accordingly. A PDT perspective on metaxis introduces theatReality as a permeable third dimension at play in performance events and thus in moments of metaxis. Reimagining the notion of metaxis from a PDT angle appears to be crucial if we are to develop, implement, and analyse potent DiE practice in the twenty-first century.

The PDT-enriched conceptualisation of metaxis I propose includes four central elements: reality, theatricality, theatReality, and f(r)iction. This reimagination does not regard the fictional mode, to which I assign the label theatricality, as an autonomous sphere rigidly separated from reality. Rather, theatricality takes place within the realm of reality (see Figure 7.1).

I define reality from a critical poststructuralist standpoint. In other words, I regard reality as discursively constructed within distinct historical, political, social, cultural, and economic contexts that manifest lived experiences of existent, unequal relations of power. Theatricality cannot be divorced from reality. Reality directly informs our experience, perception, interpretation, and communication of fiction, and vice versa. Reality and fiction are themselves located in constant autopoietic feedback loops. In post-truth times of distorted representations and fake news in ubiquitous on- and offline echo chambers and filter bubbles, this reciprocal relationship blurs the boundary between what is real and what is fictional. The border between these allegedly independent spheres becomes permeable as the latter question the very autonomy of their own perimeters.

TheatReality and reality are in a similar relationship. TheatReality too occurs within reality. Since both theatricality and theatReality take place within reality, there is a state of permanent permeation per se at play between reality and each of these realms. There is no

Figure 7.1 A reimagining of metaxis informed by a postdramatic theatre paradigm
impervious line segregating reality and theatReality. In fact, we could consider that a certain degree of theatReality frequently invades the performative space of the everyday. For example, for Goffman (1959), any everyday social interaction can be regarded as a stage, a play frame, constituted by an intention to perform. His performative sociology proposes that theatre is an adequate metaphor for the presentation of the self in everyday social life. Butler (1990) takes this idea a step further by arguing that identities are not inherent, but performative. Those perspectives suggest that some degree of theatReality is intricately interwoven into what we perceive as reality.

TheatReality is a dimension distinct from theatricality. TheatReality can exist without theatricality. A heightened sense of awareness of the reciprocal relationship between theatReality and reality can occur with no fictional framework present at all. It is important to note, then, that not only is it the conscientisation of the metaxic relationship between reality and theatricality that can catalyse fruitful moments in which participants are able to explore themes surrounding representation and signification and the discursive frameworks and power relations at play in such processes. Becoming aware of the autopoietic relationship between reality and theatReality also bears the potential for the development of critical thinking. It is thus important for practitioners and researchers to be aware of and pay careful attention to the dimension of theatReality when facilitating, observing, reporting, and evaluating or analysing practice. This includes paying heed to our own experiences of theatReality, which, in turn, demands from us a sense of wide-awareness and openness to unexpected experiences (Greene, 1995). This sense requires us to consciously regard the DiE workshop in its entirety as a PDT performance event. I suggest that future researcher-practitioners should make the notion of theatReality a crucial element even in the conceptualisation and planning phase of DiE practice. We must not hierarchise our own actions, utterances, and observations and those of participants according to whether they occur within or outside the classic fiction contract. We must not classify data constructed outside any allegedly ‘actual’ dramatic engagement as data of ‘secondary importance.’ Instead, we should regard theatReality as an integral element of the performance event.

An interesting question emerges from these considerations. Is theatricality without theatReality possible in DiE? As my illustration suggests, I posit that it is. Practice that often passes as DiE is capable of robbing both practitioners and participants of the invaluable experience of heightened states of awareness of presence, perception, and participation in poiesis, and thus of critical reflection on our own patterns of responding to signifiers and interacting with other human beings. Such practices include rigidly structured and didactically facilitated role plays, activities that ask people to mimic and illustrate predetermined story lines, dogmatic demands for re-enactments of given scenarios, and hours of isolated sensory, trust, and acting games or lengthy ‘living through’ improvisations in uninterrupted sensory spheres. Such practices are analogous to, for example, multicultural initiatives that ask participants to simulate and exhibit expected forms of unconditional empathy as demanded by an implicitly prescribed political correctness, or programmes that encourage the imitation of someone else’s cultural tradition in order to purportedly develop deeper understandings of (and tolerance for) Others, who are unwittingly conceptualised as fundamentally different. Such endeavours impede poiesis as the making of communal reflection and creation of reciprocal relationships of genuine interest, solidarity, passion, and critical empathy.

Moema Gregorzewski

Moments of f(r)iction are quite the opposite of such death of theatReality. I am borrowing the term “f(r)iction” from Fogt and Fogh (2015), who themselves adopt it from literary theorist Behrendt (2010). I define f(r)iction as a space in which reality, theatReality, and theatricality imbue each other into an emergence of metaxis. In this space, we experience
ourselves as what we regard as our ‘real’ selves in any given context, such as DiE facilitator or participant. Of course, all the other roles we occupy in everyday life outside of the performance space always reverberate within these ‘real’ selves. Similarly, the specific contexts that influence and manifest the nature of these internalised constructions are present and implicitly become part of performance events. In the fleeting space of f(r)iction, we simultaneously experience ourselves and each other as such ‘real’ selves, as performers in the dimension of theatReality, and as fictional characters or elements in the realm of theatricality. An unpredictable dynamic interplay between presence and representation defines the emergence of f(r)iction. As Fischer-Lichte (2008) suggests,

The more frequent the perceptual shift between the arbitrary order of presence and the purposeful order of representation the more unpredictable the entire process and the more focused the subject becomes on perception itself. In the process, the spectators become increasingly aware that meaning is not transmitted but brought forth by them. (p. 150)

Finn, for example, experienced a simultaneity of himself (reality) and of himself as performer in a minority position perspective of powerlessness in the making of meaning (theatReality). He made crucial insights into the modus operandi of the stage of signification, especially as it relates to the inner workings of right-wing populism and the advancements in new media that expedite it, when he consciously stepped back into the world of Home & Away (theatricality). As he entered the realm of f(r)iction, he connected his experience of theatReality with theatricality. This provoked him to link his embodied discoveries as performer/participant directly to the Othering processes at play in right-wing populist rhetoric and the discourses and technologies promoting it. The momentary audience could be considered to enter spaces of f(r)iction as well. For example, it was a visceral experience when the audience became an invisible, anonymous void of noise in front of the stage. The experience of becoming an ocean of words, assumptions, and alleged truths provoked me as an audience member to be consciously present as myself, the facilitator, as a performer located within an autopoietic feedback loop, and as a theatrical element catalysing theatricality. After all, I played a significant part in creating this ocean, this undefinable force of pushback the fictional family faces in the story of Home & Away, through noise, through silence, through my mere presence. It provoked me to interrogate my own enjoyment of temporary feelings of ease and power and my own action and inaction in that very moment of the performance event. The memories it evoked in my ‘real’ self aroused me to reflect on my very own, very real past and present habitual thinking patterns, behaviours, and automatised modes of perception in the social world. When Finn spoke using the first-person plural and words such as “family,” he pulled me back into the realm of theatricality, but my sense of belonging to both theatReality and reality remained. In other words, an autopoietic feedback loop catalysed a sustained moment of f(r)iction. Even though the autopoietic loop of theatricality was fractured, since we had temporarily frozen the Images of Transition performance, an autopoietic feedback loop of theatReality sustained the performance event and eventually actuated the emergence of f(r)iction.

Superimposed fragments of reality, theatricality, and theatReality rub against and agitate each other into an ephemeral state in which the triple inscription of facilitator/participant, performer, and fictional character/element effects a complication of who and how we are in the social world. No matter whether we identify as an audience member or an actor, our performer selves experience moments of ascription even though we are not located in a classic
fiction contract. The echoes of our fictional characters connect us to embodied experiences our 'real' selves never had, preserving the felt knowledge arising from affective states of, for instance, pain, sorrow, fear, and hope experienced in the realm of theatricality. We take these emotions into the space of f(r)iction, where they meet face-to-face real personal memories that we associate with them. It is no wonder, then, that f(r)iction encompasses agitation, irritation, and resistance. Yet, such affective states take place in a space other than everyday reality. In fact, f(r)iction can allow for such raw affective conditions and confrontations to unfold safely.

The fragility of the classic fiction contract does not necessarily entail lack of safety. F(r)iction can enable a pedagogy of discomfort that holds space for disconcertment and contention because it is able to provide a double framing. As O’Connor et al. (2006) note, a double frame is possible when “one dramatic perspective into the event has been placed within another” (p. 239). I posit that a theatReal perspective can be placed within the theatrical. If workshop design and facilitation explicitly frame participants as performers in the realm of theatReality, they (as both temporary audience members and actors) become performers who intermittently engage in as-if acting to transport themselves into the realm of theatricality.

In the space of f(r)iction, a safety paradox is at play. Protecting participants “into emotion” (Bolton, 1984, p. 128), a double frame “provides a double protection but, paradoxically, a double opening for young people to feel the issues” at hand (O’Connor et al., 2006, p. 239). Within the realm of f(r)iction, this double opening allows participants to explore the stage of signification through “postdramatic aesthetic reflection” (Fogt & Fogh, 2015, p. 1923). This is a “level of meta-reflection” that is “achieved in states of acting that go beyond simple ‘as-if’ acting” (p. 1923), a practice that runs the risk of promoting doxic rather than critical empathy. In metaxes between reality and theatReality, participants experience firsthand the power relations at play in the very process of signification. Concurrently, they connect these experiences to the realm of theatricality, always subliminally aware that the fictional narrative at hand is not some unlikely, otherworldly fable, but a story analogous to the real world.

I make the case for a DiE practice that consciously embraces both DT and PDT elements as a postdramatic pedagogy. Such a pedagogy has the potential to catalyse instances of f(r)iction that confuse the very making of meaning to problematise the politics of representation itself rather than show participants what kind of representations are purportedly ‘wrong.’ Instead of seeking to communicate a reality or truth, the postdramatic pedagogy I propose shatters these very notions. F(r)iction acknowledges the pervasive persistence of chaos, contradiction, and complexity of life in the twenty-first century and the insecurity and confusion it conjures up. On the basis of good will and solidarity, participants find themselves in the equally exhausting and astonishing communal experience of attempting to make sense of their perceptions and interpretations, their feelings and thoughts, amongst a density of signs and a multiplicity of layers of representation. Another level of safety comes in the guise of shared affective experiences and felt moments of connection amidst an elusive but forever imminent excess of ambiguity, which is no longer suppressed but acknowledged as an integral and inevitable part of life. A startling interplay between the DT principles of representation, mimesis, and theatricality and the PDT elements of presence, poiesis, and theatReality can create metaxic moments of f(r)iction that provoke participants and facilitators to affectively and critically explore how stages of signification and politics of representation operate. As a postdramatic pedagogy, a PDT-inspired DiE practice has the potential to create aesthetic experiences that take young people beyond mere empathetic identification through immersion in dramatic worlds. Instead, it evokes critical empathy that propels the deconstruction of attitudes and behaviours. By acknowledging the significant roles of both catharsis and critical thinking, these moments are not devoid of emotion but engage affective
as a fleeting fissure of possibility for ethical encounters with a variety of purportedly set-in-stone representations of alleged Others, in both fictional spheres and lived realities in which overwhelming image bombardments in off- and online worlds dominate and often distort the everyday.

References


