Tensions in the drama classroom

Abstract

This article examines the ethos of the drama classroom, its historic marginalisation in education and the challenges of merging historic drama practice within a national system of assessment.

Introduction

There is a contraposition of drama and theatre, apparent in the philosophies of some of the forerunners of contemporary drama, which relates directly to the opposition between process and product. In their study of arts education in England, Harland et al. (2000) noted that some drama pupils they interviewed conveyed “a feel for an emphasis for process over product” (p. 109). Traditionally, however, the product of drama is a performance, usually viewed by an audience, or a finished piece of work that can be evaluated. On the other hand, in improvisational drama, it is the process which counts. For Caldwell-Cook, a pioneer of drama education, for instance, it was about freeing the imagination; for Slade there was more value in spontaneous dramatic play than the acquisition of performance skills. In their study of arts education in England, Harland et al. (2000) noted that some drama pupils they interviewed conveyed “a feel for an emphasis for process over product” (p. 109). In terms of the opposition between process and text, and process, when Dorothy Heathcote nor Cecily O’Neill, for instance, used written texts in their work; it was a jumping off point for unpacking the script through the use of an improvisational process.

It is useful, at this point to clarify the terms used in this article. As there is still some lack of consensus among drama educators regarding the terms used in drama (though work is progressing to formalise a subject-specific vocabulary for use in schools), based on my readings of the subject I have decided on the following definitions for use in this article to clarify the distinction between drama-in-education and drama education, I use the term drama-in-education to refer, specifically, to the methods practised by its early exponents, most notably Dorothy Heathcote, Gavin Bolton and Cecily O’Neill. Drama education, on the other hand, has a broader connotation and includes both improvisational work, in the classroom, and performance work for an audience, regardless of whether the script used for production is the student’s own devised piece or a published play text. The use of a published script may involve the literary study of the playwright, context and genre of the work. I use the term theatre to denote any work which has been prepared for viewing by an audience and suggests the use of a range of theatrical skills and technologies.

Marginalisation

An examination of the tensions in drama education must necessarily be examined in the context of the development of drama education. There is a history of marginalisation in
drama education which, in turn, is inextricably linked to the history of arts education as a whole.

Eisner (1998) contends that the reasons for the diminution of the arts in Western society lie in the traditional concepts of intelligence and knowledge, ideas which derive from the philosophers of ancient Greece. Plato, in particular, held the view that knowledge could only be secured through reason and reason could only be processed through words (logos). Gilbert (2005) suggests that Plato’s model of education, which was intended to train the future rulers of an ideal Greek state, has formed the basis of “the traditional, ‘liberal’ education, and its modern equivalent, the academic curriculum” (p. 49). She observes that:

It was unashamedly elitist and designed not to produce new knowledge, but to reproduce existing knowledge (and the existing order). Modern western education systems are directly descended from Plato’s model, and, like his system, they are elitist, hierarchical, conservative and closed. (p. 49)

Plato’s opinion of the arts was unequivocal. In Creativity and Beyond: Culture, Values and Change, Weiner (2000) cites an extract from Plato’s Republic in which he dismisses the arts as merely mimetic:

Moreover all the arts (painting, poetry, music, dancing and sculpture) are imitations of nature (or life) as if in a mirror (mimesis). Since nature, crafted by the demiurge, is already an imitation of the eternal ideas, the arts are merely imitation of the imitation, and therefore far removed from the truth. (p. 35)

Eisner (1998) suggests that, for Plato, philosophical reasoning towards truth was unquestionably superior to being possessed by the gods or being immersed in base natural things. Plato considered the senses to be deceptive, producing excitation of the passions and, thereby, leading to delusion:

It is understandable that the sensory, imaginative and passionate features of the arts should appear divertimento like, at best a pleasant diversion, at worst downright dangerous. (Eisner, 1998, p. 4)

This separation of mind and body influenced all areas of Western philosophy, including the development of Christian theology which has had such a formative influence on Western values. Peters (2004) affirms that “The idea that the soul is distinct from the body has its roots in classical Greek philosophy and is found in Plato” (p. 13). In Knowing Bodies, Moving Minds, Bresler (2004) cites Dewey’s article, “Nature, Life and Body-Mind” (1929) in which he traces “the dichotomy of body and soul in Pauline Christianity” (p. 8). Arts education, however, is embodied knowledge: “The arts, unlike the traditional academic areas, are an arena in which the body is central to the process of inquiry and constitutes a mode of knowing” (p. 7). Embodiment can be defined as the integration of the physical body with the experiential body or, in other words, a synthesis of mind and body (p. 7).

Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, and Gardner (1994) argue that the Greek philosophers failed to acknowledge individual creativity:
Plato and Aristotle both placed the source of change outside the individual, and in doing so they set the course of Western thought on creativity for more than 2000 years. (p. 129)

According to Doll (1993), the Greek ideal of order was a “pre-modern paradigm of an earth-centred universe” (p. 31). Doll points out that Copernicus’ discovery in the sixteenth century that the Earth was not at the centre of the known universe changed the very foundations of knowledge. Science came to be seen as a tool of illumination more powerful even than religion. With the Age of Enlightenment, science and reason became the means by which humans could experience control over nature. As scientific knowledge increased, questions raised by scholars such as Descartes and Newton fuelled criticism of the assumptions of the established order.

Descartes was a mathematician and a rationalist, and aspired to the kind of precision and certainty that mathematics provided. Descartes asserted that “knowledge must be based (via deduction) on certainty” (Doll, 1993, p. 31). His was a closed system which privileged the written over the oral word. Gilbert (2005) observes that, in education, mathematics became “the new Latin — the subject that would train the mind” (p. 54).

Descartes considered learning to be the discovery of what already existed, waiting to be uncovered. In his view, knowledge could not be created. Considering Descartes’ influence on Western thought it is evident that the creative and personal nature of the arts would lack credibility as a cognitive activity. Lyotard (1984) argues that “Science has always been in conflict with narratives. Judged by the yardstick of science, the majority of them prove to be fables” (p. xxiii). Lyotard maintains that science legitimises its discourse by “making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative” (p. xxiv), such as the freedom bestowed by rational thought or the possibilities of the creation of wealth.

It was against this philosophical background that modern education took shape in the nineteenth century. Gilbert (2005) suggests that early state secondary schools were not organised to serve the needs of a growing clientele: “Following the English grammar school system, they offered the traditional academic curriculum” which continues to “exert a strong influence on our secondary schools” (p. 52). In other words, the “academic” subjects are still considered the appropriate training for future leaders and professionals. It was the practical, or manual, subjects which were intended to provide the country’s workers (p. 52). The arts, therefore — creative, open and, by their nature, subjective — were considered unnecessary to the progress of society and unimportant in education. While music and the visual arts could take their place in schools as manual subjects, dance and drama were only ever “play”. In their study on arts education in secondary schools in England, Harland et al. (2000) explain that, in the UK National Curriculum, the arts are not deemed to be core subjects but while “art and music are established foundation subjects drama and dance have a more peripheral status, thus implying they are even less important than art and music” (p. 568).

The development of drama education

Drama education, therefore, began within the confines of a traditional education system. Bolton (1998) and Hornbrook (1998), while they have often evinced opposing views on drama education, concur that the philosophies of drama-in-education had their genesis in the progressive education movement of the nineteenth century. The teachers in progressive
schools saw themselves as facilitators, offering opportunities for growth rather than imposing knowledge from without. Here, Hornbrook (1998) suggests, “the radical spirit of drama-in-
education has its source” (p. 6).

The innovations successively introduced by the early proponents of drama education such as Finlay-Johnson and Caldwell-Cook focused on student-centred learning and the importance of play in engaging pupils in the classroom. Two world wars were to halt these developments and it was not until the 1940s that Slade began to develop his theories of drama education. Slade openly challenged the traditions of classroom acting, which was usually based on amateur and professional theatre, and proposed “a form of theatre based not on theatre but on play” (p. 85).

Brian Way, though he shared the same theoretical ideas as Slade, placed more focus on individual, practical exercises (Bolton, 1998, p. 147). Way contended that child drama should not necessarily be viewed as art but as a means to personal development through improvisational techniques. In time, Way’s theories and the practices associated with them became known as *creative drama*. Later, this expression was to become an umbrella term, covering a wide range of activities which had improvisational work at their centre. Way (1967) was “largely concerned with experience by the participants, irrespective of any function of communication to an audience” (p. 2). Bolton (1998) suggests that “A drama/theatre dichotomy” was clearly spelled out in Way’s writing (p. 148).

The progressive philosophies of drama education readily found their niche in the educational and political environment of the 1960s and 1970s (Hornbrook, 1998, p. 17). Abbs (1994), however, is critical of the approach taken by the exponents of drama education at this time because, he suggests, it makes “the individual person the single, justifying centre of educational activity” and the teacher secondary (p. 130). Dorothy Heathcote was to insist that teachers could and should be part of the process of creating drama in the classroom.

Heathcote viewed drama as a learning process which, by leading students towards an authentic experience, will allow them to discover essential truths about the human condition (Hornbrook, 1998, p. 17). Bolton (1998) suggests that she “raised the level of school learning from subject-bound parameters to ‘a study of mankind’” (p. 177). When Heathcote was appointed as Staff Tutor at the University of Durham in 1951, she was aware of the competing trends in drama education. However, Bolton (1998) suggests that she appeared to disconnect with even the best of that practice and chose to alienate herself “from the very vocabulary of her contemporaries and predecessors” (p. 175).

The New Zealand Experience

In New Zealand, early attempts to introduce drama programmes in schools met with little success. In 1949 a drama enthusiast, Margaret Walker, who was studying drama in London with Brian Way, was encouraged by the then New Zealand Labour Prime Minister Peter Fraser and educationalist Clarence Beeby, to return to New Zealand to provide drama opportunities for New Zealand children (Alcorn, 1999, p. 196). She became a teacher educator at Wellington Teacher Training College where she was to train other teachers in her methods. The college principal, A.J. Waghorn and his deputy, Walter Scott, both convinced
of the importance of the arts in education, were highly supportive. This was to change, however, and Walker found herself working in a hostile environment. Alcorn suggests:

The climate in which they were working had changed dramatically, however. At the end of April 1950 under the heading Drama Invades the Schools, New Zealand Truth was claiming that Walker’s appointment was a political one, that “members of the teaching profession” were incensed, that she had no teaching qualifications or experience and that there was already too much “playway” in schools. (p. 197)

In 1950, the Department of Education withdrew its support and Walker’s appointment was terminated. Her work remained unrecognised until Sunny Amey was appointed as National Curriculum Advisor in Drama in the 1970s (Alcorn, 1999, p. 198). The position of National Curriculum Advisor itself would end in 1988 when Amey retired and another wave of change was to transform education in New Zealand.

The 1970s were seen as a period of educational revolution in secondary schools or, what then Assistant Director of Education, W.L. Renwick, called a “restless exploratory phase” (O’Neill, 2004, p. 22). With the retreat from progressivism in education in the 1980s, however, drama began to be seen as peripheral to the real work of education (Hornbrook, 1998, p. 38). O’Connor (2010) suggests that the “territorial battles” of the 1980s “nearly derailed the progressive movement of drama education” (p. 63).

In New Zealand, when Sixth Form Certificate replaced University Entrance in New Zealand secondary schools in 1986, drama became a curriculum subject and, by 1996, more than a third of all secondary schools offered Sixth Form Certificate drama (Bushnell, 1992, p. 7). Most drama teachers at this time were also English teachers, “for although many schools offer Sixth Form Certificate Drama, few offer enough courses at other levels to allow drama teachers to specialise in their own subject” (p. 7). In some secondary schools drama was offered as an option in the junior school but this was a choice made by schools individually. Dance and drama, therefore, were considered inessential and science, mathematics and English remained the core components of a secondary school education.

The introduction of The New Zealand Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 1993) and its designation of the arts as one of the seven essential learning areas signalled a shift in attitudes towards the arts in New Zealand schools. The status of the arts in education, particularly in regards to dance and drama, was further advanced by the introduction of The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2000). Prejudices still existed, however; Landy (2006) suggests that “For non-consumers, art is a frill” (p. 84).

Over the past decade drama education has moved from a position of marginalisation in New Zealand education towards becoming established as a mainstream subject. The reasons for this are varied but Hartley (2006) suggests that “schools transmit messages” and, as a rule, these messages serve production (p. 68). In New Zealand, for example, the success of the film industry has signalled renewed interest in the performing arts as a marketable product. The Cultural Policy of New Zealand (Ministry of Culture and Heritage, 2007) notes the major growth in the “film industry sector” (p. 23), and in The Arts Strategy 2006-2008 (Ministry of Education, 2006) it was recognised that learning in the arts could provide pathways to a “range of career choices in the creative industries” (p. 3). There is a danger that the
imperative to define drama in ways that will prove its validity as an academic subject could undermine those qualities inherent in drama education which lie beyond the confines of traditional academic values.

The concept of intellectual capital was foreseen by Lyotard (1984) who predicted that knowledge would become a commodity, the importance of which would derive from its performativity. Grierson and Mansfield (2003) argue that if the arts were “claimed as performative sites for knowledge exchange” and an “informational commodity” there was a danger that it would “erase or bypass what might be understood as ‘cultural knowledge’” (p. 30).

Greenwood (2003), however, observes that when the curriculum appeared, “We were grateful that it was a document that allows, even demands drama teaching that is challenging, relevant and liberating” (p. 119). In reality, though, it appears that the structure of the NCEA (National Certificate Educational Achievement) assessment model had become the definitive interpretation of the New Zealand curriculum in secondary schools. It is a pedagogy based on the assessment requirements rather than on an interpretation of the curriculum itself. Bolstad (2006) suggests that the assessment standards are, in practice, the new de facto national curricula (p. 117).

Hall (2005) observes that one of the intended purposes of the NCEA assessment model was “to involve teachers more in the assessment process” (p. 237). However, the reforms did not eventuate in diminished central control and the subsequent monitoring of schools limited their freedom to devise courses tailored to their particular students or teaching style because the requirements were too restrictive (p. 243). Taylor (2006) argues that a sole focus on results does not help teachers to “trust their own voices”, to probe with their students, to review, to try out and experiment (p. 112). Codd (2005) suggests that a culture of teaching, on the other hand, rather than performativity, tends to emphasise “process more than products” (p. xvi).

There is some pressure for the arts subjects, particularly drama and dance, to prove their academic credibility given the traditional bias towards high-status knowledge and the process “of pervasive ‘academic drift’” (Goodson & Marsh, 1996, p. 13). Assessment is an instrument of control of pedagogical processes. Teachers are generally held accountable for students’ results particularly if their school’s reputation in the community is dependent on those results. Codd (2005) argues that “The professional culture of education is now based upon externally imposed low-trust forms of accountability” and that in a culture of management “performativity replaces the critical reflection and professional judgement of the autonomous professional” (p. xvi). Codd suggests that, in a culture of performativity, “good practice is defined in terms of pre-defined skills and competencies with very little or no acknowledgement given to the moral dimension of teaching” (Codd, 2005, p. xv).

The control of personal pedagogies through the domination of national assessment models in drama, and the pursuit of academic credibility, is in contrast to the essential ethos of drama where the most satisfying learning experiences operate “when the teachers are flexible, imaginative, able to think on their feet and take a risk” (Taylor, 2006, p. 115). Taylor argues that it is difficult for teachers to realise their aesthetic vision when they are challenged daily with large classes and an “ever-increasing administration trail” (p. 108). This becomes
particularly pertinent in regard to the challenges experienced by drama educators over the past decade.

There is, however, some reason for optimism. The introduction of a revised drama matrix in 2011 (http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/) suggests a growing emphasis on performance, rather than written skills, in internal assessments. This may encourage teachers to continue to pursue creative and open teaching strategies. At the heart of the drama ethos, developed through a variety of adventurous pioneers including Henry Caldwell-Cook, Peter Slade, Brian Way, Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton, is a commitment to the creative process and a child-centred approach to learning. Neelands in O’Connor (2010) affirms that “Educational drama seeks to evolve a practice that reflects the forms, traditions, values and spiritualities of the globalised, multicultural societies that exist in most Western countries” (p. 91). Drama is a subject built on a progressive and democratic philosophy. Despite the pressures, I believe we continue to hold to that.

**Historical approaches to teaching drama**

While Heathcote’s student, Cecily O’Neill, offered guidelines to teachers and attempts to provide a theoretical basis for her argument, Heathcote resisted articulating her practice. She preferred to show rather than explain. Bolton (1998) suggests that the essential nature of Heathcote’s work lies in her assumption that dramatic action is subordinated to meaning (p. 177). Heathcote’s practice came to be defined by others as living through drama (Bolton, 1998, p. 178), a precept which suggests that the action is taking place in the present moment. Heathcote allowed the plot to emerge through the action, which has occasionally been a source of discomfit to the more traditional teachers who are familiar with plot as the centrepiece of any drama. In this respect her methodology contrasts with that of Slade and Way who stressed the importance of one action following another in story form (p. 178). Heathcote approached drama as a method of teaching rather than as a subject in its own right — hence the distinction between drama-in-education and drama education. Nor was Heathcote convinced that assessment in drama is necessary.

Hornbrook (1998) argues that the emphasis that Heathcote (and Bolton) place on the interior processes of the student constitutes “the distinctive discourse” of drama-in-education (p. 17). Fleming (2003) suggests that these particular developments in drama education have resulted in many teachers seeing drama as “a kind of instrument either to bring about ideological change or, more frequently, some form of adaptive behaviour in relation to social needs” (p. 19).

Heathcote was a teacher educator; her work with school pupils was, initially, a series of practical demonstrations for her adult students, usually qualified teachers. As she became well known for her work, initially through a BBC documentary, *Three Looms Waiting*, which gave a presentation of one of her classes, she was invited to give master classes in her method around the world. As two of these tours, in 1978 and 1984, included New Zealand, hundreds of local teachers have experienced Heathcote’s methods first hand, rather than relying on the few books available about her work.

Heathcote’s tours of New Zealand were organised by Sunny Amey, the Curriculum Officer for Drama, who was to have a substantial influence on drama education in New Zealand.
schools through her encouragement of the methods espoused by the proponents of drama-in-education. However, whilst Heathcote’s visits had a profound effect on drama education in New Zealand, there was a second movement of equal importance in schools.

The influence of theatre on drama education

The outbreak of The First World War put an end to innovations in classroom drama education for over 30 years and involvement in theatre expanded in the period between the world wars. Small amateur drama societies (often known as Little Theatres) began to appear in the large, industrial cities (Bolton, 1998, p. 71). Gradually, companies were established in towns and villages across England and the former Empire which, of course, included New Zealand at that time.

The amateur drama movement was to have some influence on drama in schools. To improve the standard of theatre performances, enthusiasts considered that training should begin at school. Among these enthusiasts, there were those who simply wanted better school plays and there were those who wanted to see drama in secondary schools as a timetabled subject taught “by an English teacher (or, possibly, the speech specialist or the trained actor)” (Bolton, 1998, p. 74). There were others, however, who were more interested in advancing a “developmental theory of Drama relating the natural expression of play to the craft of theatre” (Bolton, 1998, p. 75). The stage was set for conflicting views of the purpose of drama education.

Managing the tensions

Critics of drama-in-education claim that it relied on too few “gurus” and four decades of practice had been “determined by four individuals”, namely Slade, Way, Heathcote and Bolton (Abbs, 1994, p. 120). Fleming (2003), however, maintains that the work of Bolton and Heathcote has continued to evolve and that many of the criticisms of their approach have failed to acknowledge the development in their thinking (p. 19). Fleming (2003) asserts that the conflicting views of drama, particularly in regard to the theatre/drama divide, are moving closer together. He argues that, over time, the proponents of process drama have discovered a new appreciation of form and structure, whilst theatre practitioners are realising the benefits of fluid concepts of acting and rehearsal, using improvisation to explore role and situation (p. 19).

For drama educators currently practising in New Zealand, however, it is important to develop a synthesis of these sometimes competing discourses. NCEA assessment in drama requires teachers to deliver programmes which utilise improvisational techniques but they are also expected to develop their students’ performance skills through the production of plays for an audience. At the same time, many of the teachers themselves, as reported in this study, are committed to the development and nurturing of creativity in their classrooms. New Zealand drama teachers, therefore, must integrate some diverse and dichotomous viewpoints. O’Connor (2008) has his doubts about the possible outcome of this endeavour: “Somehow making drama a subject takes the very artistry of teaching away and replaces it with the deadness, the technicality and dullness that pervades so much else of what we do in life” (p. 12).
By its nature, drama education is a student-centred, collaborative and creative subject. For drama practitioners in New Zealand the challenge is to define and maintain their own principles of education while working within an educational structure that requires adherence to The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum (2000) and the achievement objectives and assessable outcomes demanded by the NCEA assessment model.

O’Connor (2008) observes that drama has existed in “marginal spaces” for most of his working life, “For drama education has been seen as not theatrical enough to be real theatre, too playful to be real learning, and too ephemeral to be of real value” (p. 2). O’Connor was appointed National Facilitator for Drama with the New Zealand Ministry of Education in 2000 but resigned in 2005 after expressing dissatisfaction with the structure of the arts curriculum document: “What I did was to move drama from the margins to the centre, and in doing so I made a terrible mistake” (p. 5). For O’Connor, the demands and strictures required by the curriculum were anathema to the ideals and values of the early pioneers of drama education.

It is evident that drama education contains within itself contradictory discourses which have not been entirely resolved. Fleming (2003) maintains that this “central dichotomy” has a long legacy in art and drama education and is encapsulated in such contrasting notions as subjectivity and objectivity; private and public domains (p. 141). He explores the “major differences in emphasis which have been part of drama’s history”: drama/theatre; process/text; process/product; drama-in-education/drama education (p. 10).

Fleming (2003) suggests that, while Heathcote attracts scores of admirers and her own work is peerless, many of her theories do not translate easily into the regular school environment (p. 19):

The best examples of drama in education practice which were often observed in demonstration lessons were difficult to sustain in the day-to-day reality of the classroom. Many teachers will recognise the force of that view. They were facing a tall order if they expected to sustain, week after week, improvised work of the high quality which they may have observed on video or on courses. (p. 19)

In his biography of Heathcote, Bolton (2003) admits that she was rarely cramped by the timetable:

One of her past students writes, however, “Her main weakness was the fact that she had never taught in a school … she was always the honoured visiting teacher and time and facilities were put at her disposal in an unrealistic way.” That she was mostly a stranger to the pupils must have also coloured her initial approach to them. Together, these circumstances add up to an unusual, some would say artificial, setting for her teaching. I have often heard despairing observers comment, ‘It’s all right for her”. (p. 35)

Hornbrook (1998) agrees that the tensions existent in drama teaching today spring from the historical development of drama-in-education, the aims and intentions of which were antithetical not only to the idea of theatrical performance, but any notion of assessment or prescribed objectives: “For them, issues about the relative quality of students’ work in drama were only of marginal interest” (p. 22). Bolton (2003), however, argues that “It is strange that
educationists, who would not expect to find objective evidence of what people have learnt from a theatre experience, nevertheless pretend to themselves that such objectivity is somehow accessible in the classroom” (p. 99). Fleming (2003), on the other hand, suggests that the improvisational process can be evaluated:

The mistake made in the past was to assume that knowledge in the case of drama consists of theatre history, stagecraft or literary criticism and that the ability to devise and structure drama is somehow innate because dramatic playing seems to come naturally. (p. 33)

It would not be surprising if contemporary drama teachers were sometimes perplexed regarding the wider purpose of their subject. Harland et al. (2000) observed that, amongst teachers in the schools they studied, there was “a noticeable reticence about using the term ‘theatrical skills’ when talking about their practice (p. 71). This conflict of ideas about the nature and purpose of drama is, perhaps, best epitomised in the work of Gavin Bolton (1998) and David Hornbrook (1998). Hornbrook considers that the exponents of improvisational classroom drama often lack credibility and takes issue with the methods espoused by Heathcote and Bolton in their work with drama-in-education. He argues that:

One of the principal questions I asked myself in the 1980s was what effect the drama methodologies so extensively advertised in journals, conferences and in-service training sessions had actually had on classroom teaching. My conclusion was that the gap between rhetoric and reality was a disturbingly large one. My visits to schools revealed custom and practice looking not so very different from that which I experienced when I began teaching in the 1960s. (p. ix)

In response to Hornbrook’s criticisms, David Davis wrote in his foreword to Bolton’s publication of *Acting in Classroom Drama: A Critical Analysis* (1998):

Far from seeking to lock horns with Hornbrook, Bolton is at pains to find an approach that is inclusive. He is quite content for Hornbrook’s claim to be true for the type of drama that Hornbrook himself is advocating (theatre/performance focussed work) but is challenging the notion that it could cover what has come to be known as “living through” drama. Bolton’s massive scholarly research does enable him to arrive at a definition that is inclusive and wider than Hornbrook’s approach. (Davis in Bolton 1998, p. IX)

Fleming (2003) asserts that these conflicting views of drama are moving closer together. He argues that, over time, the proponents of process drama have discovered a new appreciation of form and structure, while theatre practitioners are realising the benefits of fluid concepts of acting and rehearsal by using improvisation to explore role and situation (p. 19). Peter Brook (1968), a renowned British director and innovator, explains his view of the creative possibilities of “living theatre”:

In a living theatre, we would each day approach the rehearsal putting yesterday’s discoveries to the test, ready to believe that the true play has once again escaped us. But the Deadly Theatre approaches the classics from the viewpoint that somewhere, someone has found out and defined how the play should be done … There is a deadly element everywhere; in the cultural set-up, in our inherited artistic values, in the economic framework, in the actor’s life, in the critic’s function. As we examine these we will see that deceptively the opposite seems
also true, for within the Deadly Theatre there are often tantalizing, abortive or even momentarily satisfying flickers of a real life. (pp. 14-17)

Fleming (2003) points out that the history of theatre has often included many highly creative and adventurous artists who have transformed theatre practice (p. 19). For example, Bertolt Brecht’s theory of alienation and his rejection of naturalism in the theatre transformed ideas about performance whereas, as Bolton (1998) observes, Brian Way took the risk out of classroom acting by circumscribing acting behaviour into prosaic exercise (p. 164):

At a time when some professional theatre was taking risks, when professional actors were engaged in their own exploratory workshops led by people like Keith Johnstone and Joan Littlewood, Way was consolidating the idea of a dictated sequence of actions. When rehearsal rooms became hothouses for ensemble playing, Way kept his young actors working “in a space on their own”. (p. 165)

In New Zealand, both the curriculum and several NCEA achievement standards pay attention to the conventions of making drama. In Drama and Curriculum, O’Toole et al. (2009) note that in a few places, such as New Zealand, Australia, Denmark and Taiwan, “drama has achieved at least a notional place among the standard subjects offered through all the years of schooling” (p. 24). For those still “Standing outside the door of the curriculum” (O’Toole et al, 2009), this is an enviable situation. For drama educators in New Zealand, it is an ongoing process of adaptation.

NCEA achievement standards in drama cover not only improvisational work but also performance skills. In addition, the standards include an academic theatre history component. The writers of these standards have attempted to synthesise the competing strands in drama education. In their work, drama teachers continue to endeavour to balance these strands while managing the daily demands of their practice.

References


New Zealand Qualifications Authority. www.nzqa.govt.nz


**Biography**

Zoe Brooks

**Dr Zoe Brooks**

Zoe Brooks has been involved in drama education for over 30 years. From 2000 – 2011 she held the position of Head of Drama at Freyberg High School, Palmerston North during which time she completed post graduate study, including a doctoral thesis which examines the effect of the introduction of NCEA assessment on drama practice. In 2012, Zoe resigned from the drama department in order to work in the Teen Parent Unit, assisting students to make a fresh start in education. Email: Brooksz@freyberg.ac.nz