Does Adaptive Dramaturgy Offer a Productive Model for Developing Creative and Critical Thinking Skills?

Abstract

This essay explores the first stages of an experiment that uses scholarship on dramatic adaptation to develop and link creative and critical skills in a course on dramaturgy at Victoria University of Wellington. After describing some of the challenges to developing creative and critical thinking in tertiary classrooms, we describe how and why “adaptive dramaturgy” might be a productive approach for stimulating these skills. Following this, we describe our methods of developing assessments based on adaptive dramaturgy and measuring their effectiveness, and conclude with a discussion of the results and their implications for further research.

Introduction

Creative and critical thinking are highly valued attributes. Business and industry seek workers who can “think outside the box”; job postings and degree program statements in academe stress the importance of “bridging the divide between (critical) theory and (creative) practice”; and in popular films like Independence Day (1996), the ability to combine critical analysis with creative intuition routinely saves humanity from technically superior but rigid-thinking alien hordes. As such, there have been increasing calls for tertiary education to foster these skills, and many institutions – including our own (Craft 2006; Csikszentmihalyi 2006; Jackson et al. 2006; EUA 2007, McWilliam 2008; McWilliam & Dawson 2008, Robinson 2001). Yet few individuals can perform with confidence in both critical and creative modes, or even clearly define what they are. In spite of research showing that criticality and creativity are not opposed but rather interrelated and interactive processes (Lubart 2001; Runco 2003), many people subscribe to myths depicting creativity as an innate talent which is essentially impenetrable to, or may even be damaged by, critical inquiry (Boden 2003: 12-15; Sawyer 2006: 16-26). What pedagogical strategies and models might help bring creative and critical processes together, both conceptually and in practice? This essay explores the first stages of an experiment that uses scholarship on dramatic adaptation to develop and link creative and critical skills in a course on dramaturgy at Victoria University of Wellington. After describing some of the challenges to developing creative and critical thinking in tertiary classrooms, we describe how and why “adaptive dramaturgy” might be a productive approach for stimulating these skills. Following this, we describe our methods of developing assessments based on adaptive dramaturgy and measuring their effectiveness, and conclude with a discussion of the results and their implications for further research.

Background: The Impetus and Obstacles to Developing Creative and Critical Thinking
In theory, tertiary creative arts programmes ought to provide the perfect environment for linking critical and creative skills; in practice, however, they often remain conceptually divided, because deeply ingrained cultural misconceptions about the nature of creativity influence both individual and organizational behaviours. Many people believe that creativity is an innate “gift” which cannot be taught and manifests itself in bursts of spontaneous inspiration (Sawyer 2006: 14-15). It is also widely believed that aesthetic response is both individual and subjective, so that judgments about creative products (including, for example, evaluations of work produced by students as assessed coursework) are essentially arbitrary. Some students feel that introspection or critique can only hinder creative process. These persistent myths render creativity mysterious and intimidating to individuals who feel they are not so blessed, while those who believe they have it see no need to develop critical inquiry skills, which many believe are incompatible with creative genius.

This binary model is based in ideology, not reality. As Sawyer explains, even the “left brain vs. right brain” model we often use to describe the imagined neurological differences between rational, critical-thinking types and expressive, creative types, is a myth: evidence shows that the neurological characteristic that is shared by skilled and accomplished creative talents across domains is not a dominant right hemisphere, but an exceptional rate of exchange between the hemispheres (2006: 81-83). And yet, the notion that creativity and criticality are not only separate, but perhaps mutually exclusive, remains persistent – and our curricula and classroom practices often reinforce it. Theatre should provide a rare opportunity to show how creativity and criticality work in synergy (Kuftinec 2001: 44-5), but in practice, there are numerous cultural, institutional, and material barriers to achieving this ideal. Drama and Theatre programmes frequently pursue creative and critical endeavours in different contexts (and even buildings) and toward different ends, which may inhibit productive exchanges: coursework often alternates between “theory and history” classes, which stress “critical” skills like close reading, text analysis, and written argument, and are taught in lecture theatres by PhD-trained scholars; and “practical” courses, which develop creative skills through practical and kinaesthetic methods, and are more likely taught in studios, workshops, and rehearsal halls by professional artists with MFAs.

Development of creative and critical skills in university coursework is likely hindered not only by an abundance of misconceptions, but also by an accompanying absence of clear, concrete definitions: students (and faculty) need to have a clear sense of what these skills are in order to feel that they are learning them. Another recent research project at VUW found that first-year chemistry students did not perceive themselves to be learning critical thinking skills because those skills were never clearly defined in the context of the course (Boniface & Gilbert 2011). It seems highly likely that the same problems apply in theatre, because creativity is generally even less clearly (or less correctly) defined than critical thinking. Many people can only define creativity in terms of originality (another myth, as Sawyer points out [23-24]), or in terms of the final products left behind by a creative process: it is one thing to agree that a book or play is a creative product, quite another to understand (and learn) the skills by which such products are made.

In addition to these general problems, each tertiary theatre programme faces challenges specific to its material and ideological contexts, depending on, for example, whether it is configured as a vocational or liberal arts programme, or as an independent unit or part of a larger, multi-disciplinary unit, as in the case of Theatre at VUW, which is part of the School of English, Film, Theatre, and Media Studies (SEFTMS). Theatre at VUW combines
conventional, lecture-based courses with a commitment to intensive, practice-led, production-based courses, and many courses are offered in both English and Theatre streams (including the one at the centre of this study, “Dramaturgy of the Real”). But many students express a strong preference for either “creative” or “critical” modes of learning: Theatre majors, particularly those who aspire to creative careers, are often uninterested in history and theory courses (or perceive them as a barrier to be hurdled on the way to the “real” theatre courses they want to take); whereas English majors often express discomfort or resistance to assessments that demand creative expression. These preferences and resistances are often informed by the aforementioned myths: theatre students may believe that creative talent needs no critical inquiry, while English students often feel they lack creative gifts.

Moreover, although research shows that creativity has a strong social, collaborative dimension (Corcoran 2001: 30; Sawyer 2003; Sawyer, 2006: 119-121, Simonton 2003: 6), individual assessment and study habits prevail at VUW. The combination of large class sizes, students who are compelled to work off-campus (20 hours a week is common), and Victoria University’s “choose-your-own-adventure”-style BA, which encourages students to major in two or more subjects, means that Theatre students have few opportunities to form collaborative relationships with peers, and their demanding schedules are detrimental to scheduling group work (Corcoran 2001, 42). In addition, in-class discussions during the course revealed widespread scepticism about the effectiveness and value of “group work.”

Finally, students are typically habituated to what Paulo Friere called the “banking” model of education (2000:72). They are dependent on the approval of teachers, and many are less concerned about whether they are learning than whether they are passing, and once assured of a passing grade they often coast, as we discovered during this project. This observation is not meant to reflect poorly on the students. As Maryellen Weimer says in Learner Centred Teaching, much hinges on “the extent to which faculty control learning processes and how these authoritarian, directive actions diminish student motivation and ultimately result in dependent learners, unwilling and unable to assume responsibility for their own learning” (2002: xvii). The mirror image of students’ tendency to equate “learning” with term-papers and exams is a widespread, if rarely voiced assumption that social and collaborative work is not “serious” or “real” learning. These material and social realities constitute significant barriers for any teacher aiming to stimulate creative and critical thinking.

Hypothesis: Adaptation, Dramaturgy, and Pedagogy

The principal investigator’s PhD research focused on how contemporary playwrights use and abuse well-known plays (particularly Shakespeare) in order to simultaneously contest and exploit their cultural capital (McKinnon 2010). As Sonia Massai observes, plays such as Aimé Césaire’s Á Tempête (A Tempest) or Jean Betts’s Ophelia Thinks Harder constitute creative performances of critical theory: the exemplary intersection of theory and practice! By appropriating and rewriting material from old plays to suit new contexts, playwrights blend creative techniques and critical inquiry to force spectators to reconsider the canon and its influences. And if allowing readers to see familiar texts in a new way is fundamentally creative, then critical writing and research can be considered creative, too: as Sonia Massai observes, “every rewriting is a critical reading and every critical reading is a rewriting” (255; also see Thompkins 1996, Burnett 2002).
Scholarship on dramatic adaptation offers fascinating insights into the relationship between creativity and criticality, but how can those insights be transformed into productive methods for developing skills and changing attitudes in the classroom? Rather than teaching the students how to appreciate this intersection of creativity and criticality by reading the products of adaptive dramaturgy, we wanted to give them the skills to DO it.

Adaptation makes creativity visible as a set of tools and techniques that can be learned and practised, not an innate gift. Asking students to analyze and interpret texts privileges certain kinds of thinking and learning, and asking them to “create” is intimidating for those who do not think they are “creative”; but asking them to perform analyses through adaptation allows them to practise critical reading skills and creative skills simultaneously, while allowing them to use the existing text as a scaffold eliminates the intimidation factor.

Adaptation also offers a means to investigate classic texts without creating the impression that they deserve nothing more or less than unqualified admiration, or taking their canonical stature for granted. In “Aiming the Canon at Now,” Susan Jonas questions the reasons we “do the classics”:

The canon is as unavoidable and frustrating as is the English language. Both may be enlarged and amended, but remain as necessary as the designated pole to an explorer. Furthermore, to avoid the canon is to leave it as is; by wrestling with it, we can reshape it. (1997: 245)

In addition to transforming the canon from content to be covered into tools to be used, adaptation turns ideas into action, a critical step in developing creative skill. Although many believe that people simply “are” creative, creativity researcher Keith Sawyer points out that:

only an action theory can explain creativity. Creativity doesn’t happen all in the head, as the idealist theory would have it; it happens during the hard work of execution. That’s why explaining creativity requires a focus on the creative process. (2006: 255)

And performance may be the best, if least accepted, way of both studying and developing creativity:

Our creativity myths are [so] deeply embedded in our culture … that they’ve interfered with our scientific progress in the explanation of creativity. These myths have led us to neglect performance creativity, even though it, of all types of creativity, provides us with the best window into the collaboration and improvisation of the creative process. (2006: 250)

We hoped our interventions would enable students to recognize that creativity and criticality are not mutually exclusive, by creating coursework that required and rewarded both, and to measure the efficacy of the interventions by gathering both quantitative and qualitative data.

**Methodology**

The pilot project ran in conjunction with a second/third-year Theatre/English course, Dramaturgy of the Real.[iii] Dramaturgy automatically connotes a blend of critical and creative skills, theory and practice; the course is taken by a large number of both Theatre and English students and therefore offers an opportunity to assess what differences, if any, distinguish them.[iv] The experiments consisted of two areas of intervention: the format of
the course blended traditional “scholarly” and “practical” spaces, that is, it combined lectures with a weekly seminar devoted to practice-led research projects and discussion; and the assessments would, similarly, comprise both “critical” (i.e. individual reading and writing) and “creative” (i.e. theatre practice) exercises. Student volunteers from the class filled out surveys at the beginning and the end of the course, and participated in focus groups at its conclusion, thereby providing data on the efficacy of our interventions.

At the core of the course was an adaptation-based project, which we called the “performance research” or “practical dramaturgy” project. The 81 students met twice a week in lectures, and once a week in groups of about 20 for a two-hour seminar (as opposed to the conventional format of three lectures plus a one-hour tutorial).[v] This reduced the amount of time students spent in passive consumption mode, and increased the amount of time they spent interacting with others, taking control of their own time, practicing skills, performing activities, etc. It also dramatically increased the contact time between the instructor and the students, and developed a stronger sense of who “the class” was.

The lectures introduced the concepts of realism and dramaturgy, and the material and cultural contexts within which dramaturgy and realism developed between 1880 and the present. The seminars were used to explore plays in more depth and through the lens of readings on dramaturgy. Dramaturgy was approached as a broad concept, rather than an individual vocation, because while there are almost no professional dramaturgs in New Zealand, any theatrical endeavour benefits from the awareness of all the members of the company of issues pertinent to “dramaturgy”: the purpose or politics of a given performance, the identity of the target audience, the scenographic or semiotic coherence of the piece, etc. The concept of “adaptive dramaturgy” was also discussed in the seminars, particularly as expressed by Jonas in “Aiming the Canon at Now” (1997).

Within each seminar, groups of four to six students used adaptive techniques introduced in readings and seminar exercises to create and perform short performances based on classic ‘realist’ texts by Strindberg, Chekhov, Williams, etc. Each group created two performances over the course of the semester. Their objectives were to explore and critique the functions, forms, limits, and values of realism, and they were asked to ‘perform questions’ rather than pursue answers; the assignment brief advises that “there is no right answer here: every path you choose has its own risks and rewards.” Each group was free to do just about anything except stage a scene from the play as written. We demanded – and rewarded – interrogative, experimental approaches to the text, partly to combat the notion that doing theatre is un-serious play-time rather than “serious” learning, and partly to reassure the students with aversions to/inexperience in public performance that they would be assessed on skills within their comfort zone, and not on “acting” skills. Following the performance, each group led a discussion about the critical and creative rationale for their adaptive choices. In addition to being generally enjoyable and stimulating, the discussions allowed students to explain their “dream” version of the performance, what they might have done with a higher budget and a fully-equipped space.

The other items of assessment, and the format of the course, were also adjusted to reflect our desire to develop a more learner-centred pedagogy. Other assessment items included a weekly short writing assignment and a final research project of their own design. The latter asked students to develop a project that reflected their own interests in “the dramaturgy of the real,” which could take any form they could successfully justify using the assignment criteria.
and course learning objectives: most students wrote essays, but several chose more “creative” forms, and one group created and produced an original play. The weekly journal was designed to give students more opportunities to interact with teaching staff and with each other, and to help them improve their (generally poor) writing skills through regular opportunities to practice and respond to feedback. Students could also use this assignment to discuss and develop ideas about their final project with each other and teaching staff.

In order to assess the effects of these interventions, we briefed the entire class on the nature and goals of the project and recruited student participants from the class, who consented to respond to two anonymous surveys (one pre- and one post-) and participate in a focus group at the end of the course. Co-investigator Ralph Upton – a recent graduate of our programme and well-known to many students both as a senior peer and a member of the successful Binge Culture collective – was introduced to the class, and we made it known that he was part of the research project, but not the assessment mechanism, so that students could trust that what they said to him would not affect their marks. Twenty students (25% of the class) responded to both surveys and twelve of these (15% of the class) attended one of three focus group sessions with Ralph.

One of our biggest challenges was deciding how and what we could actually measure. There is no consensus on how to measure creativity, for example, and local experiments by colleagues, notably Suzanne Boniface and Amanda Gilbert, suggests that critical thinking, too, may be domain specific (Boniface and Gilbert 2011; see also Sawyer 2003: 306 and Nęcka 116). We decided to try to measure general attitudes towards creative and critical thinking, and personal confidence in those areas, reasoning that improved confidence is itself significant since, a) such an improvement is likely to be based on evidence or experience, and b) an individual who believes he or she has creative skills is much more likely to practice them than one who does not. VUW students are generally aware of “critical and creative thinking” as one of the desired graduate attributes, and we did not supply an explicit definition of either, for fear that this would pre-empt their responses to the surveys and reinforce the tendency to consider them as separate and exclusive. Instead, we tried to draw attention to specific skills related to either critical or creative thinking: breaking drama and theatre down into components, identifying relevant criteria and methods for approaching a given problem, adapting texts through interpolation, editing, plotting, etc. We used both quantitative and qualitative methods to gather more comprehensive evidence. Given our inexperience in conducting this sort of research, it seemed important to allow the participants to speak for themselves as much as possible.

The survey consisted mainly of Likert-type questions, such as: “Do you agree with the following statement? Creative and critical thinking are not the same thing at all, but essentially different processes.” It concluded with an open-ended question in which respondents could elaborate on their answers or comment according to their priorities. The focus groups were relatively wide-ranging and led as much as possible by the participants, although some important themes surface repeatedly, as we will see.

**Discussion and Findings**

The course and assessments went well. Both the instructor/investigator and the students reported generally high levels of satisfaction, and while the performance research projects reflected the wide range of experience, confidence, and aptitudes in the course, they were
more often excellent than lacklustre and almost always sparked lively discussions. Most students seized the opportunity to conduct hands-on experiments with the texts and take leadership of the classroom, and both students and staff considered the post-performance discussions livelier and more purposeful than their prior experience of tutor-led discussions in tutorials. Even some of the more reticent students conceded that the experience was valuable, and a few spoke of transformative experiences:

*As an English major I was worried about acting [...]. However, I enjoyed the final performance [...]. My group received a very positive reaction to our performance and it was very satisfying to know that our hard work had paid off. I felt like we had really accomplished something and the process was enjoyable. After our performance I was quite sad that it was over [...].*

In addition to writing standard evaluations on the course, the seminars, and the teaching, students were invited to respond to an anonymous mid-term survey, all of which had high response rates (56% for the course evaluations, 76% for the mid-term survey) and indicate high satisfaction with the course format, the quality of the feedback on performances and writing, and the assignments. So we are confident that we provided a high-quality learning experience, in spite of some logistical issues. But did our interventions have any effect on our students’ attitudes towards or skills in creative and critical thinking?

**Quantitative Data: Pre- and Post-course Questionnaires and Course Evaluations**

Twenty two students completed the pre course survey, and twenty completed the exit survey. Respondents were largely Pakeha, with Maori and Pacific Islanders barely represented. The volunteers consisted mainly of second and third-year university students, and included a mix of high-achieving, average, and low-achieving students. The sample is relatively small, and our data on does not allow us to track shifting responses in individuals – an area for improvement in the next round. The clearest shift between the pre-course and post-course surveys was in confidence in critical thinking. In response to the question “I am confident in my critical thinking abilities”, 73% answered in the strongly agree or agree category in the pre-treatment survey, compared with 90% in the post-. Interestingly, nine percent fewer answered in the strongly agree category in the exit survey. This could reflect that some students entered the course feeling very confident of their critical thinking, and then discovered that the term had a different application in the course than they were used to. The results then may suggest not that they got worse at critical thinking, but that the course gave them a reality check which led to a more realistic self-assessment.

*Do you agree with the following statement?*

*I am confident in my critical thinking abilities.*

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<td>Agree</td>
<td>59%</td>
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<td>Neither agree</td>
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Attitudes to a similar question on creative thinking remained substantially unchanged. Students were more likely to regard critical and thinking as interrelated by the end of the course, and more likely to have an opinion on the matter:

*Do you agree with the following statement?*

*Creative and critical thinking are not the same thing at all, but essentially different processes.*

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<td>Disagree</td>
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<td>25%</td>
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<td>Strongly disagree</td>
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Respondents were asked on a scale of “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5) whether they thought the course helped them “develop skills and confidence in critical thinking”. The mean response was 3.95. For “skills and confidence in creative practice” it was 4.10, and for “communication skills” (another core “graduate attribute” identified by VUW), the mean score was 3.95. These results are reinforced by the standard teaching evaluation, which contains similar questions: 53.3% of respondents (n=24) strongly agreed and 44.4% (n=20) agreed with the statement “This teacher has encouraged me to think critically about the subject,” and for the statement “this teacher has encouraged me to think creatively about this subject,” 60% (n=27) strongly agreed and 33.3% (n=15) agreed.

**Qualitative Data: Focus Groups and Short-answer Questions**

The qualitative data, including responses to survey questions, course evaluations and focus groups, is much richer, and indicated some positive results we had not anticipated. Students spoke powerfully and volubly about the positive effects of collaborative learning, open discussion, and interaction, and about the value of combining theory and practice by exploring the plays using creative and critical techniques from readings and lectures. They often cited the opportunity to learn in and through collaboration as the favourite or most important aspect of the course.[vi] The focus group respondents were especially articulate in describing the value of this work in terms of creative and critical thinking, confirming research suggesting that most creative breakthroughs result from collaborative effort, not individual inspiration. They described for us precisely how this works, and in doing so, they even unconsciously demonstrated the process in action. Here are some of the strongest recurring themes from the focus groups. While the comments cited here focus more explicitly on aspects of collaborative work than on creative and critical thinking, we still view this as significant in terms of our original question, because as stated above, one of the myths we sought to challenge was the belief that creativity is an individual trait and that creative products can and should be viewed as the result of individual effort. Many of our participants strongly perceived the benefits of working collaboratively to produce better (creative and
critical) outputs, and for some this perception contradicted their previous experience of group work being onerous, stressful, and pointless.

1. Ownership of ideas and personal investment: “it gave you your own kind of voice”

Students responded strongly to being asked to develop and plan original projects (in both the performance research and final projects), rather than selecting topics from a pre-fabricated list. In other words, the emphasis was on problem finding, not problem-solving, and research suggests that problem-finding abilities are both teachable and a good marker of general creative ability (Corcoran 2011, 31-34; Mumford et al 2003, 61-62; Sawyer 2006: 72-73). For some students, this was the first time they had thought of learning in terms of asking a question rather than answering one. Several spoke of how the task helped them become invested in what they are doing.

Ralph: So how would you usually approach an essay in the humanities?  
S: Well normally the question’s just given to you and you go over course content and decide what’s relevant, but with this one, at first I was like “no! we have to do this, this is so difficult!” Then in the end I thought it was really, really good because it gave you your own kind of voice, as opposed to just regurgitating […] what the lecturers have told you, you’re actually having to think. Format your own idea, and then see what other people think and back them up.  
H: Yeah I found […] that I had to sit and just think about what I was trying to say, for a lot longer than I usually do.  
S: Me too.  
…
K: […] with 201 [a theatre course taught by James the previous semester] I would leave the lectures and be like “yep that’s it cool, I’m done for the day,” but with this I want to go home and I want to think about it. And I get excited.

Participants often expressed this sense of investment implicitly, when they talked about what the course allowed them to do rather than what it made them do. The coursework became an opportunity to seek intrinsic pleasure, rather than obligation to perform a task for extrinsic reward – which, again, has been shown to be associated with high creative ability (Sawyer 2006).

“you got to think critically on someone else’s creative interpretation.”

“So it’s more- you get to explore themes that are provoked [provoked] though the play, without having to stick directly to the play”

“…and that hour long seminar afterwards where we get to talk about what we’ve done, that’s sort of where the pay-off is.”

“…in first year you don’t get the chance to be as creative.”

“…[we] weren’t allowed to be creative [in another course].” (Emphases added.)
2. Collaboration engenders more and better ideas: “you sort of just bounce off each other.”

Although researchers have long debated the efficacy of “brainstorming,” the focus group participants reported that group work enabled creativity by generating not just multiple ideas but also better ones. They theorized that when they work on their own, they typically stop generating ideas as soon as one good one comes to mind. But working in groups seemed to overcome the tendency to fixate on the first idea. We see this as the group work encouraging a cyclical, process-oriented activity rather than linear, product-oriented one. Many used the image of “bouncing ideas” to describe the process whereby new ideas are not just generated but also tested and improved, which the following transcript makes visible.

A: Going with what K said, I sort of bounced off the others, so, “ohh I liked that idea,” and you sort of just bounce off of each other. …

Ralph: You have this idea of “bouncing ideas” around amongst groups; [...] did you guys have that experience of being able to get new perspectives from other people in the group? K: Yeah, I did, just because I’m the sort of person that takes a while, like usually it will take someone else to say something, and I’m fine once I’m bouncing back off someone, but usually I can’t say my idea... cause I’m usually not very confident in group situations. …

N: Because if all the members are there to keep doing better or gaining more, then of course you’re going to keeping pushing each other’s ideas. You’re not going to be just like “cool! First idea! Yeah, sounds do-able, the easiest one...” Ralph: As you might if you were by yourself in front of your computer. N: Yeah... or... yeah. I mean it’s just that thing of, um, forcing you to be able to articulate yourself as well, articulating yourself in discussion is different to being on paper. For other projects I’ve done, [...] I got to the stage where I couldn’t think anything by myself. …

CH: Your ideas are changed by other peoples, or challenged. I find I always enjoy that, when someone’s there to bounce an idea off, and then they’ll respond, and it’s like “I actually hadn’t thought of that.”

…

S: … it made you think critically about the text. I mean, my first group work [...] helped me to formulate my ideas for my final assignment because it... bouncing ideas off other people and generating different ideas about... and themes in the play and things like that, which you might not have considered when you’re just reading it.

In this passage we can see how collaboration builds the simple image of “bouncing ideas” into an important insight about how – and why – collaboration leads to more and better ideas than individual effort. While divergent thinking has often been identified with (and too conflated with) creativity, the kind of activity described and demonstrated here indicates creative AND critical thinking, because new ideas are evaluated and improved, particularly in
the process of developing performance research projects, because this process forces the
group to select and develop some ideas and relinquish others.

3. Collaboration Builds Confidence: “I think talking about my ideas with someone gave
me confidence”

Working in groups and sharing ideas not only generated more ideas, it also provided
opportunities to test those ideas, incorporate feedback, and build confidence. Focus groups
revealed that dividing the students into work groups for the performance projects had the
unanticipated benefit that students used discussions with teammates to help them work on
their individual projects, after the group projects were finished.

A: Like at the beginning of the course when I was reading the course outline, it [the final
project] was intimidating firstly, but as it came closer to the due date I was like “mmm, this
could actually be quite cool.” It became quite exciting, and bouncing off other people with
their ideas thinking, ‘that sounds cool, what could I do,” you know, and I think talking about
it, we talked about it in the seminars and sort of helped other people with it, that really gave
me confidence in my own ideas, and made me talk about them and then they threw their ideas
at my ideas and it built from there.

Ralph: Is that the way you’ve approached essays in the past or is it different on this course?

A: It’s different because I’ve never had that before, I think talking about my ideas with
someone gave me confidence with it, and that was quite an effective way of building my ideas.

H: Group work’s so time consuming, but it’s so valuable.

Ralph: Why is it valuable?

S: Because, like, you hear other people’s opinions other than what James thinks or what you
think, like because its being assessed you’re not just idly saying things, you’re actually
attempting something that’s viable.

Working in the collaborative communities within the seminars and performance research
groups provided an opportunity to develop and test ideas before submitting them for grading,
and this process both exemplifies productive links between creative and critical thinking, and
enhances individual confidence in both abilities. These excerpts also show another common
theme in all our qualitative data: responses frequently link various elements of the course –
lectures, seminars, and assessments – which indicates an effective synergy. Students enjoyed
the ways that each element of the course informed the others.

In the post-course questionnaire, students were asked if they thought their attitudes towards
critical and creative thinking had changed since the first survey. Although several students
thought their attitudes had not changed, they often clarified that this was because they had
always considered creativity and criticality to be “symbiotic,” as one put it. Others did
perceive change:
I’d say my answers have definitely changed as a result of my experience in this course. Working collaboratively with people I had only just met, I still did better than when I was working by myself. It’s easier to motivate and to keep an eye on the overall workload in a group.

I have more faith in my ability to learn from group work.

Yes; our creative work has been fuelled by our critical understanding of texts, etc. The two skills are different and call on different thought processes, but creativity and critical thinking are symbiotic in a course like this.

Yes – I feel this course has helped me use both critical and creative methods in the same course, strengthening them both.

Students were also asked to describe how their experience of the course changed the way they thought “about or practice critical and creative thinking, collaborative work, and learning in general.” Answers here often repeated themes identified in the focus groups, several indicated a more positive attitude towards/perception of the potential value of assessed group work, and some articulated links between creative and critical practice:

...seminar discussions based on these performances helped highlight how a text can be analysed critically and creatively as a text on paper and as a performance. As such, they helped me develop a stronger overall sense of the process of dramaturgy and everything it can come to incorporate in critical and creative analysis.

This course also reaffirmed my belief that creativity and criticism go hand in hand. I think that this was a very valuable realisation to come to as this has cemented my approach to theatrical process.

It revealed how close a synthesis there could be between academia and creative work. I.e: One can treat the process of rehearsal for a show in the same spirit as the questioning or subverting within academia, that one can work against the grain of the play to bring out latent meaning.

While there are limits to what we can say about the effects of our interventions – particularly given the absence of any data about previous experiences of the course, and the absence of reliable baseline measures for our students’ creative and critical skills – we are confident that the course was generally a positive and valuable educational experience, and the vast majority of respondents to both standard evaluations and our post-course questionnaires agreed or strongly agreed that the course helped them develop both critical and creative skills.

In addition, several students responding to the standard evaluations commented on how the course acknowledged their creative/critical agency. Many students wrote that they felt empowered, saying that they were “allowed us to think as individuals,” that James “allowed questions,” and that they felt “challenged.” One respondent went further, claiming that our approach differed from that of lecturers who “love holding the power.” This comment links back to Weimer’s comments cited above, and speaks to the extent to which the course
allowed students to exert agency in their own learning (and the extent to which students appreciated this).

**Developing Research Culture in Undergraduate Coursework**

One further unanticipated benefit of the study was that simply recruiting students to participate in the study brought them into contact with the research mission of universities, often for the first time. Many undergraduates do not realize that the primary purpose of universities is to *create* knowledge, not simply transmit it to them; others have a sense that research is important only because they have heard that it is the only thing that lecturers really care about. Some students found it exciting to be invited to be a part of this process, and expressed a change in their attitude towards their own work, which they came to see as an opportunity to produce new knowledge, not reiterate lecture notes to prove they had “learned” something in order to accrue twenty points towards a BA. Others viewed the study as a (much-appreciated) signal that the teaching staff thought their learning experience was important, and a few were intrigued to learn about different learning styles. In the standard evaluations, one person wrote that teaching staff were “clearly focussed on making sure we learn rather than just pass” (emphasis in original), which suggests that this was an uncommon experience. A response to the post-course questionnaire reflects on the experience in the light of an otherwise apparently dismal experience of “learning” at university:

[The course] provided me with access to dialogue in and around learning styles, which I was grateful for. While much is often said about how to help people learning, much less is said about the different ways in which people learn [...] and I am glad to know that just because I’m not particularly adept at writing essays and critical thinking that I’m am any less intelligent. However I am probably not cut out for this university lark, as it seems to be fairly essay and critical thinking centric [sic].

Discussing the objectives of the research project in the course provided a meta-cognitive layer of inquiry which provoked students like this one to reflect broadly on the value and purpose of their studies. Others saw potential for even more work in this area.

*I would love to experience even more of a scholarly community in the class where we all lend support to the projects of each other and learn the importance of how to give and receive critical, constructive feedback to our work.*

Comments like these left the researchers reflecting on the extent to which frequent discussions about cultivating a “research culture” in our school typically (if unconsciously) refer only to faculty and post-graduate students.

**Further Research**

This project was conceived as a pilot, and we intend to continue the work by incorporating findings from our research into other courses, following the “plan-act-observe-reflect” feedback loop of the action research model (Carr and Kemmis: 1986; Norton 2009) To that end, we have identified several aspects of the course, and our method of researching it, in order to carry out another cycle of research on the Dramaturgy of the Avant-Garde in 2012.

**Adjustments to Assessments and Coursework**
Both students and teaching staff found the workload too high, particularly for the journal/workbook assignment. While students appreciated its purpose of developing writing skills through short exercises with regular feedback, they pointed out that the purpose was not being met if we did not supply prompt feedback (which became increasingly difficult). Scholarship on learning has often observed that excessive workload is an impediment to learning because it forces students to adopt an expedient “surface” approach to learning (see Ramsden 137-38, for example). Therefore, based on the experience of both teachers and students, this assessment has been scaled back from ten responses to six for 2012.

Another, more frustrating problem, was observed with the final projects. Initially, students were intimidated by the prospect of creating their own research project, rather than the more accustomed practice of picking a topic from a list determined by teaching staff. But as the course gave them increasing opportunities both to do hands-on experiments with the primary texts, gain confidence in their dramaturgical analysis skills, and discuss their ideas with peers, trepidation turned to excitement for many of them – this was a recurring subject in our focus groups. For some, the final project was indeed a culmination of everything they learned in the course: one group, for example, created and performed an original verbatim theatre piece that examined the fallout from the recent closure of one of Wellington’s most important theatre spaces. But a large number of them were appalling: 33 out of 81 students received final project marks below 60%, with 10 of these scoring under 50%, and 10 having handed in nothing at all. Some of the latter represented students suffering from various kinds of personal trauma, but we were still surprised at the poor quality and effort. Many students evidently realized that because they had achieved high marks on other assessments, they could pass the course with minimal effort on the final assignment. On the other hand, 23 assignments received A- (75%) or higher. The resulting “double-hump” on a graph may represent the fact that while some students are striving to excel, many are only aiming for a minimum pass. The next version of the course will contain more emphasis on developing and using textual analysis both to learn about plays and demonstrate that learning for the benefit of the reader.

Adjustments to Research methods

This was the first experience for either investigator in conducting this type of research, and one of our main objectives was to enhance our own learning. While we were generally pleased with the process and results, it was easy to see room for improvement in our data collection methods. In particular, we learned that we need to design better questionnaires, and that we need a mechanism that allows us to assess change over time in individual participants. We will also experiment with incentives for volunteering in order to encourage a higher questionnaire response rate and a bigger pool of participants for the focus groups.

Although we initially set out to focus on creative and critical thinking skills, the participants themselves focused on different topics, particularly their experiences of collaborative work and student-centred learning activities. While we would like to develop a better instrument to evaluate creative and critical thinking skills, we also consider it important to listen to and follow up on what the participants are telling us, so we do not intend to significantly change our approach to focus on creative and critical thinking.

Conclusions
Although our imperfect methods of gathering data mean that our results are more suggestive than indicative, those suggestions are exciting. Course evaluations reveal that the vast majority of students believe the course helped them develop creative and critical skills, and study participants overall reported increased confidence in their critical skills. Qualitative data indicates that the course led to changed attitudes as well, as students at the end of the course spoke in terms of what the course allowed them to accomplish, as opposed to what it obliged them to prove to get a passing grade: pursuing an activity for its intrinsic pleasures is a strong marker of creative ability. We also see evidence that working in collaboration to produce critical adaptations of classic texts did not simply generate more ideas, but better ones: participants reported that working in groups on adaptation-based dramaturgy provided an environment in which ideas had to be tested and developed (because the material realities of public performance demands that some ideas be selected for refinement while others must be cast aside). These students also reported that collaborative dramaturgy exercises increased their confidence in their own ideas by providing opportunities to test ideas with peers before writing them down and handing them in. Based on these results, we are excited about what we will find in our next round, when we incorporate improvements to both the coursework and our methods of gathering data.

**Works Cited**


Biographies

**James McKinnon** completed his PhD at the University of Toronto’s Graduate Centre for the Study of Drama in 2010, and took up a post as a lecturer at Victoria University of Wellington shortly afterward. His research focuses on dramatic adaptation and appropriation, particularly contemporary Canadian appropriations of Chekhov and Shakespeare, and on the pedagogical implications of adaptive dramaturgy. He is the co-ordinator of the Honours Theatre program at Victoria University, and teaches various courses on dramaturgy, modern and classic drama, and performance-based research. Email: James.McKinnon@vuw.ac.nz

**Ralph Upton** (research assistant) completed his Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Studies at Victoria University of Wellington in 2008. In the same year he formed Binge Culture Collective, who make rough-edged, non-narrative devised work. Their website is www.bingeculture.co.nz. He has been a tutor, director and workshop leader in the Victoria University Theatre programme for the past three years.

[i] Since there are no existing studies on SEFTMS students, the observations presented here are necessarily formed by the experience and opinions of the authors, one of whom teaches in the theatre programme and the other a recent (2007) graduate and, subsequently, tutor.

[ii] It has been suggested by a number of our students that these habits are formed during their secondary schooling, but neither of the researchers has any direct experience with the relatively new NCEA system, so this remains a matter of speculation.

[iii] “Dramaturgy” connotes different meanings in different contexts. In Europe, particularly Germany, it is deeply entrenched as a profession, and most theatre companies employ one or more full-time dramaturgs, who select and edit plays for performance, commission new plays, organize and lead play development activities, liaise with publicity and marketing departments and educational outreach/audience development programs, write programmes and other supplementary material, and other sundry duties. In the English-speaking world, dramaturgy may mean either research-oriented activity in the case of classic period dramas, or new play development activities. As yet there has been very little penetration into New Zealand’s theatre culture, and like many things a dramaturg is regarded as an unaffordable luxury (whereas in Germany the dramaturg is a vital core component of any serious theatre enterprise).
[iv] Almost all students in our School of English, Film, Theatre, and Media Studies are double- or triple-majors, but comments from students (collected from anonymous surveys) indicate that students who enrol in THEA 205/305 are generally hoping or assuming that “dramaturgy” is something with a collaborative/performative element, whereas those who enrol in ENGL 241/341 are hoping it will primarily consist of lectures and essays. In spite of the fact that 50% of the classroom time was spent in lectures and 60% of the assessment was based on individual writing assignments, at least one ENGL student claimed, in a mid-term anonymous course evaluation, that the course was “really” a Theatre course and shouldn’t be advertised as English.

[v] Tutorials at VUW typically include a tutor or instructor and 10-12 students. Our seminars were twice this size, which had no noticeable adverse effect on participation.

[vi] According to the standard course evaluations, the course stood out more in its effect on communication skills than creative or critical skills. While all scores were good, scores on this question were in the top 25% of all courses offered in VUW’s Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

[vii] As Sawyer Writes, brainstorming, popularized by Alex F. Osborn’s 1953 Applied Imagination, has repeatedly been shown to produce fewer ideas than the same number of individuals working separately (2006: 296-300).

[viii] Students in a course I taught the following semester said that they were reluctant to ask teaching staff for help – even when we explicitly advised them to do so – because other tutors or instructors had told them it was cheating or that their work had no value if they did not do it all by themselves.

[ix] In ten years of teaching at a Canadian university, it was significantly less common to encounter students who focused on simply passing courses. In my prior experience, most students approaching a final project with a high mark see it as an opportunity to try to get an A. In this case, many students apparently saw it instead as an opportunity to get a C without doing any work. This is not to suggest that one kind of student cares more about learning outcomes than the other, but it would suggest that the latter type of student did not perceive how completing an assignment should not just demonstrate learning but perform an act of learning. It may also indicate a survival response to the end-of-term workload crush, which can be especially hard on senior theatre majors enrolled in labour-intensive production courses; or simply fatigue.