Recollections of IDIERI 7 2012, Limerick, Ireland, from a conference novice

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When asked to write a review of my recent trip to Limerick, Ireland to attend and present a paper at IDIERI 7, (July 10-15th, 2012) I wondered where to begin. There are so many recollections and moments of inspiration, a sense of excitement and disbelief that I was really there. It had been eighteen months since the 2010 inaugural drama symposium at Auckland University when conference director, Michael Finneran, put out the call for delegates to come to Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick in Ireland. I recall raising my hand and telling myself, yes I will be there. So the following reports a few highlights seen from my point of view and interpreted from my own position as a drama teacher now turned doctoral student.

Ireland is a land of storytelling and music so what better place to hold the International Drama in Education Research Institute 7 for 2012. The conference title was, Borders and Translations: Towards New Paradigms and Languages in Drama Education. At the opening ceremony in the ancient cathedral of St Mary’s in Limerick, we were treated to a performance of scenes from “Pig Town” by Mike Finn about the town of Limerick and learnt about the history and performance of drama in Ireland from Dr Lionel Pilkington. This was the beginning of what was an exciting and varied week of research in drama in education. As a conference novice with just two symposiums to my belt it was a little like walking through a Hollywood film set surrounded by the stars of the drama in education world. Everyday a feast of possibilities like a box of chocolates lay before me, but which presentations to go to? There were workshops and papers, performances and seminars. There were the six research
hubs each with a particular emphasis which, like a family would form a base to return to. There were keynote presentations from professors to emerging researchers. Four extra daylong workshops were offered as a particular treat, each led by well known faces from the world of educational drama: Cecily O’Neill, Peter O’Connor and the Everyday Theatre team, Juliana Saxton, Carole Miller and Jonathan Neelands.

To attend a workshop led by one of the key theorist/practitioners, Jonathan Neelands, who had inspired my work since my teacher training course in drama in the United Kingdom in the eighties was not to be missed. Neelands led our group through an exploration of two chosen ancient Chinese texts. The workshop was made up of delegates from Sweden, Croatia, England, New Zealand, Australia, America, Canada, China and many others. There is nothing quite like placing ourselves in the shoes of our students and experiencing the excitement of a drama workshop, especially one led by one of the world’s foremost exponents of drama in education. Part of me remained practically involved, while the other half mentally observed Neeland’s artistry and the use of conventions to take students on a journey of discovery to examine issues that affect us all in the 21st century.

The variety of research into how drama can be used to enhance and develop learning possibilities is enormous. There were papers on the use of drama in language learning, the training of midwifes and doctors, applied theatre companies and drama in schools. Delegates from a wide variety of backgrounds shared their findings about students’ attendance at theatre, the role of drama in prisons, emotion in the classroom and even the use of drama in the teaching of geometry in Greece. One of our own New Zealand delegates from the University of Waikato, Carrie Swanson, presented her doctoral research into using Mantle of the Expert within science classrooms and its encouraging results (Swanson, 2012). Excitingly, there was research presented through drama with several presentations using an ethnographic performance approach to present findings.

For someone who has spent over twenty years in the drama classroom, the findings from research carried out by the Universities of Arizona and Utah, were particularly uplifting. A research project into the, Lifelong impact: Adult perceptions of their high school speech and/or theatre participation (McCammon, Saldana, Omasta, & Hines, 2012) brought exciting results for all of us who have directed school productions. As I listened I wished I was surrounded by colleagues from New Zealand. One of the key finding was, “quality high school theatre and speech experiences can not only significantly influence but even accelerate adolescent development and provide residual, positive, lifelong impacts throughout adulthood” (McCammon, et al., 2012). We could have raised a glass of champagne and patted ourselves on the back, but more importantly the findings are available and might help teachers in those dark moments when we question our purpose or need to justify school drama to parents, governments and colleagues. It is an example of why research matters. An interesting aspect to this research is that Johnny Saldana is one of the foremost researchers using performance methods to present findings and a reader’s theatre script exists for this project.

Several keynote presentations highlighted the difficult times in which we are living and emphasised the important role that drama in education has to play, albeit buffeted from all sides by governments. Kathleen Gallagher, describing her research across continents, spoke of the, “melancholia” (Gallagher, 2012), that teachers can feel which might stem from their sense of powerlessness and their feelings of being ineffective against the rising tide of social
problems. Teachers, Gallagher stated, bring ideals to the classroom yet can experience disappointment and often feel under siege. She felt this may be a feature of all teaching but was particularly acute in drama because of the nature of the work which can lead drama teachers to either, “wither under the weight” or use “bravado, which is a survival instinct” (Gallagher, 2012).

Michael Anderson spoke about the, “postnormal” world of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and suggested that drama in education offers us hope and a way to, “imagine our way through our times to what lies ahead” (Anderson, 2012). Jonathan Neelands gave the closing keynote which also focused on the state of the world and the importance of drama and play for the development of empathy and critical insight. But being a drama educationalist is not easy, as highlighted by his statement that for thirty years he has known he is “in the margin. Thirty years of knowing it’s going to be a struggle” (Neelands, 2012).

There was a moment, one morning, for a reflection on the lives of drama in education practitioners who had gone before. John Carroll and Dorothy Heathcote were the two best known in New Zealand. Personal stories were shared by practitioners, including Peter O’Connor who had known them personally.

It was hard to believe that throughout my time in a drama classroom I had never found the opportunity or possibly felt worthy enough to attend such a prestigious conference. Yet I came away excited by the vast possibilities there are in drama in education. I also felt it was time to encourage drama teachers in the classroom to look to their work as possibilities for important and valuable research. Although the drama classroom is a busy place and teachers face paperwork at every turn, it is classroom practitioners who interact with students every day. They develop and create a wide variety of drama education possibilities dealing with a multitude of social and cultural issues. They experience both the highs and lows of the work. It is within classrooms that many insights might lie that could develop and sustain drama in education in the future. I feel incredibly privileged to have attended the conference and when IDIERI 8 comes around in Singapore in 2015 perhaps there will be more delegates from the drama classrooms of New Zealand able to attend and present their research findings to inspire practice in the 21st century and to be inspired.

References


