Resource Review: Outside the Square by Melissa Newton-Turner

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A teaching unit developed for senior drama classes

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Reviewed by Christine Morgan

At conference we were privileged to have a group from Brisbane who were sharing a unit of work that had been created around a script and performance that is ideal for secondary students. It is an extensive unit covering 10 weeks work and while it is designed around an Australian story the ideas of Belonging to self, Transformation, Same but different and Outside the Square have a universality which make them equally applicable for New Zealand students.

The resource is a set of DVDs which provide in depth work based around the script The Pink Twins by Sue Rider. While the material is not cheap in New Zealand dollars, the content and quality of the 3 DVDs is good value for money, as it provides material that can used at a variety of senior levels. The resource is a valuable classroom tool for developing the vocabulary and approaches for the discussion of live theatre (NCEA external standards) and for teaching students the art of bringing performance alive on stage as required by the creating and performing standards. At the same time it explores ideas contained in the play.

DVD 1 has an assessment task that is written for the assessment criteria for Queensland where the material was produced. It requires some simple adjustments to be ideal for use with NCEA standards. The directing task, in particular answers the ‘only a few students can do this’ and ‘how can this be organised’ questions around the level 2 and 3 directing standards. Because the conditions of assessment are different in Queensland, most New Zealand teachers would want to modify the time constraints of the task to meet the requirements of the New Zealand assessment standard they are addressing. However, the task as it is written, models tight time constraints for the group work suggesting that, if students have been scaffolded into the task, they do not necessarily need weeks to prepare work for presentation. It should be noted that New Zealand has developed a list of elements that is not necessarily the same as those used in other countries, including Australia. If the list given in the task is modified to avoid confusion for students sitting NCEA externals, contrast, movement and language should still be included in the teaching and assessment requirements.

DVD 2 provides the teaching information and the content that students need to be able to carry out the assessment tasks. For students to gain maximum benefit from the material they
would need to be engaged in the work provided not simply watch the video excerpts. However, there is also a place for video chapters to be used as specific teaching material for a variety of NCEA standards. While 10 weeks suggested for the delivery of the total package is a significant part of the secondary teaching year in New Zealand, the unit of work provides a model for effective teaching, with a focus on learning with assessment taking a much briefer period of time because the students have been scaffolded into it.

DVD 3 is a recording of the 2009 production of the script. It is sensitively filmed and is an excellent example of ‘contemporary eclectic theatre’ (Sue Rider’s description of her style of directing) and a clear description of a current theatre style. A wide variety of conventions are used effectively in telling the story, providing students with practical examples of story telling that are not simply dialogue. Her directing style is effective pre-teaching for the devising standards and would also inform student script writing and directing.

While the work is specific to the given text, given time, it would be possible to adapt and rework the methods for other texts. Certainly the focus of the work provided gives students a strong base to work from.

This is an excellent resource that I would strongly recommend to all drama teachers. Given the time and work that preparing the resource would have taken I believe this is excellent value for money.