Problems With Process – Sshh! Don’t use the P word

Abstract

This paper, an extended opinion piece, addresses the teaching of pre-service drama teachers at the Faculty of Education, The University of Auckland, with particular reference to teaching process drama. It considers what pre-service drama teachers need to know and how this connects with process drama. Process drama is described. The paper then addresses the tutor’s personal experiences. It concludes by asking questions and making recommendations for a way forward. After a description of the context in which this teaching takes place, the paper switches to the first person to describe personal experience and observations.

Introduction

At The University of Auckland, Teaching Drama 1 and Teaching Drama 2 are the papers for pre-service drama teachers within the Graduate Diploma in Teaching (Secondary). Teaching Drama 1 focuses on drama for years 9-10 and occurs in the first semester while Teaching Drama 2 covers years 11-13 and is taught in the second semester.

What do pre-service drama teachers need to know?

The task of educating and preparing pre-service drama teachers for teaching year 9 and 10 drama in just 36 hours is daunting. They need to become familiar with the relevant levels and strands of the New Zealand Curriculum. In this New Zealand context they need to have ‘practical knowledge’ about drama. This includes knowledge of the elements, techniques and conventions of drama and how these can be combined and selected to create meaning. They need to develop awareness of different cultural and historical approaches to drama through understanding ‘drama in context’. They need to be able to communicate, respond, critique and reflect upon the drama that they and their school students will be involved in. In the New Zealand Curriculum this is called ‘communicating and interpreting in drama’. They also need awareness of how to create meaning, and develop ideas on how to structure, interpret and perform drama known as ‘developing ideas’.

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Pre-service teachers need to know how to select resources that will appeal, yet challenge and stretch their students in schools. They need to be aware of assessment issues, and how to write assessment tasks and schedules. They need to be familiar with the requirements of the New Zealand Curriculum that are necessary for teaching years 9-13. Heathcote ( Heathcote, Johnson, & O'Neill, 1984 p.27) also talks about the need for pre-service teachers to have a thorough knowledge of various theatre forms and genres and a broad knowledge of classical mythology and biblical stories. In the New Zealand context it is important for pre-service teachers to engage with Maori and Pasifika mythology and theatre forms. Neelands (Neelands, 2003) includes much of the above whilst also encompassing the areas of class dynamics and management.

The pre-service teachers have a total of 14 weeks of placement in schools, they have compulsory education papers and must study at least three other papers that are specific to their subject areas. The influence of this one paper depends on the direction and pedagogical approaches taught and experienced in these other settings.

**Process drama**

Teaching Drama 1 in the first semester introduces pre-service teachers to the ideas and practice of process drama. The New Zealand Arts Curriculum explains process drama in the following way:

*In process drama, which is not intended for an audience, participants build belief in roles and situations and explore them together, negotiating, interpreting and reflecting on role and meaning* (Crown, 2000,p.36).

Process drama often involves whole class work and was pioneered by Dorothy Heathcote, even though she has never employed this term. Her earliest description of what she did was of ‘a conscious employment of the elements of drama – to educate’ (Wagner, 1976 p.13). Process drama indicates classroom drama that is sequenced around a particular theme through which students and teacher alike are able, through various dramatic conventions, to grapple with important dilemmas and questions. It is not intended for an audience, other than the participants, though
process drama can also be used in devising and while exploring and preparing to perform plays. It is strongly related to dramatic play, (O’Toole & Dunn, 2002), with the teacher able to participate using ‘Teacher in Role’ (TIR). The term ‘process drama’ was coined by Cecily O’Neill, (O’Neill, 1995) after John O’Toole’s term, ‘processual’ (O’Toole, 1992). Planning Process Drama (Bowel & Heap, 2001) was to follow. Process drama can deepen understanding about social/historical/fictive events and deepen students’ understanding of how drama works. Process drama encourages us to reach beyond the classroom walls. Drama is always ‘about something’ (Bolton, 1992). In process drama content is given high priority so through drama young people can explore and express their understandings about our world. With this in mind there is a strong commitment to introducing pre-service teachers to process drama on this course. As O’Neill says:

We must attempt to produce theatre teachers who are not merely knowledgeable and skilful in teaching young people about theatre, but who can motivate, activate and engage students in and through theatre (Taylor, Warner, & O’Neill, 2006, p.120).

Process techniques can be used for seniors within production work (Anderson, 2008; Bolton, 1992; Williams, 1998, 2004), but because junior courses are not tied to national assessment, there is greater flexibility for teachers and pre-service teachers to employ process drama in their classrooms.

Personal Commitment

As a result of my own exposure to process drama, initially through my work in theatre-in-education companies in the UK, I feel committed to teaching this way. There is a balance to be enjoyed between learning about the world, and learning and refining the use of knowledge of drama. I have observed young people behave extraordinarily when immersed in a fictional situation which demands responses that are both rational and emotional (Hesketh, 1994). My classroom experience in New Zealand, whether teaching drama, English, social studies or directing school productions has confirmed my commitment to the strategies of process drama.
Experiencing a Process

I have taken groups of pre-service teachers through a process drama at different points of the semester. I have experimented with giving pre-service teachers work they are more familiar with first and then introducing the subject gently, and conversely with launching into a drama process near the start of the semester. My opinion has always been that if they are to move from their comfort zone and try this method, then it has to be because the work has affected them. I try to plan work that has a potential for strong emotional impact. They must experience how a fictional situation can matter or they will not understand its potential value to their own teaching. This may seem obvious, particularly for pre-service teachers with acting experience, but many find it a struggle. Responses to this way of working over the years have ranged from curiosity to hostility, with a majority of pre-service teachers expressing negativity about the inclusion of process drama on the course. Here are some of the comments that pre-service teachers have made to me over the years, after their first practicum:

*My associate says he never does process drama.*

*Neither does mine, I never saw it once.*

*Nobody does process drama.*

*Why are we doing it?*

*We have been totally wasting our time!*

The tone of these utterances ranged from mystification to outright anger.

It is difficult to begin a new year of teaching with these responses ringing in my ears from previous years. Consequently I am always thinking about new material and how it might connect with potential pre-service teachers. Let me describe an attempt at the drama *Josepha* (Miller & Saxton, 2004). I had deliberately chosen a drama that would relate to their upcoming experience as pre-service teachers. In this drama pre-service teachers would have the opportunity to consider their responsibilities when working with high school students who might have difficulty learning in the
classroom. What would they do? How might they proceed? I thought that if we worked on something that was directly relevant to them, they would see more value in this type of work once they were in their schools. Despite reluctance from previous years I was excited about embarking on the drama with this new group.

I will describe a small part of the Josepha drama that first caused problems for my class. I began this drama in the third class of the semester, having used the first two lessons to collectively explore ideas about drama and the curriculum and to spend time getting to know each other. The pre-service teachers were curious about the term process drama having read the statement in the New Zealand Arts Curriculum, (see above). They had never heard of it. I brought the work forward in response to this curiosity, which in hindsight may not have been the right thing to do.

In my role as ‘Assistant to the Director of Education’ I asked the class, in role as ‘newly qualified teachers being sent to the Prairies who had come to attend a briefing’, to please write their names on a name-tag. I stipulated that this was to be their last /family name preceded by ‘Miss’ or ‘Mr’. (Marital status for women was a major issue then, as married women were not allowed to be teachers.) This was an exercise in building belief, an essential step in process drama. Some of the participants wrote their first names on the name tags, which of course went against what had been requested.

I stopped the drama and asked them to observe the protocol, as we were trying to create a situation that could be considered authentic for this particular time and place. Even after making this request out of role, students seemed reluctant to make changes. Possible reasons why some of them chose to ignore this request are discussed below.

Perhaps they were already creating a character, the pioneering teacher who refuses to be called ‘Miss’ – a rising suffragette heroine. In creating character, they were also beginning to create plot. This could be a sound dramatic exploration but I wanted to engage the class in drama related to the responsibilities and dilemmas of a teacher. So I wanted to keep them on the hook. As a teacher I thought it was valuable to work
through the whole drama to explore the dilemmas and responsibilities of a teacher, so I kept to the original intentions.

That I should be seen to be more at risk than the students in our work together…that in considering our work, I should identify with the students in that I want them to ‘win’; which means structuring so that they have to work to win, not giving into them too easily (Heathcote, et al., 1984 p.27).

Even though I had explained that I was insisting in the interest of authenticity, some remained unconvinced. This is curious because surely my insistence on this protocol is no different to Stanislavski’s attention to ‘given circumstances’, of which every actor trained in New Zealand is well aware (Neelands, 2000).

In a conversation later it was explained to me that when improvising at acting school they had learnt always to go for the unusual, to get away from stereotypes, and here I was, in their eyes, asking them to play a stereotype, because I was demanding a conventional response. Ironically improvisation guru Keith Johnson insists that when improvising the most obvious response is often the most effective (Johnstone, 1981).

The pre-service teachers had not known each other long and maybe were also finding ways of introducing themselves to the group. Here are some possible motivations for their responses. “I am not a push over. I am a unique individual who will have influence. I will create conflict as this is what we are supposed to do if we are improvising. Drama is conflict.”

Maybe I also came over as too much like a school ma’am which the dominant males and females in my group could not handle. Even though the role claimed to be of low status, an assistant, it possibly rang too many bells for this group. Students who had had previous bad experiences in school could not respond to a bossy teacher. I continued with the drama as I wanted them to respond to the whole process, and to work for that emotional engagement. The students in the main found this experience difficult, possibly for the following reasons.

They were never taught this way at school or drama school.
Rather than looking at the experience as “oh that’s interesting, a different way of doing drama,” it appears to be bad drama because:

*It isn’t proper acting.*

*It isn’t proper improvisation.*

*It feels childish.*

It possibly felt childish because adults are so far removed from dramatic play. This does not explain why the students with the most problems with teacher in role were trained actors. Dramatic play can be likened to Stanislavski’s ‘living through’ (Neelands 2000) and no process drama can proceed effectively without all participants submitting to the ‘given circumstances’, the ‘context of the drama’, and collectively suspending their disbelief with the magic ‘if’. Had they not learned not to block offers? Why is Theatre Sports so palatable if whole class drama work makes them feel silly? Other members of the class who had no actor training, had no expectations about what improvisation is and is not, so were happy to go along with the drama; though the pre-service teacher with least to prove and the most experienced in terms of world theatre, film and television, was open to continuing with the process.

Perhaps the most emotionally involved person in this drama was a Samoan woman teacher with no previous drama experience. She recognised Samoan boys in Josepha. She saw the boys who found it hard to learn and felt out of place. She found emotional involvement in this drama and was able to see its value. She was also the only pre-service teacher who taught a process drama herself while on placement, and that was in a school where she had support to work in this way.

Sometimes the response has been, “This is all well and good but I don’t believe it could work with school students.” One year, I was determined that some process drama would be seen in a school. I team taught with Hilari Anderson our drama, *Along the Silk Road*. The pre-service teachers were amazed that the 12 year old students had no problem quickly entering into the fictional world we created for them, particularly taking on a role. This did not give most of the pre-service teachers any
further confidence in tackling it however, but that may be due in part to the culture of the schools where they undertake their practicums.

Process drama demands careful planning but also flexibility on the part of the teacher. Teachers have to take risks, trust their instincts and throw their plans away at certain moments.

… every drama teacher knows that the true art of teaching lies in the complex tempering of the planned with the lived (Neelands 2000, p.6).

This is daunting and hard to justify when learning is tied to specific learning outcomes which a teacher may have been directed to fulfil. It requires courage and experience, but experience in process drama can only be gained by doing it, and reflecting on it and being supported to proceed; a hard ask if few associate teachers are working this way.

**What about the future?**

Tension arises for several reasons. On the one hand I want to ensure that I teach the strategies of process drama, on the other hand when so few teachers are perceived to be doing this work should I just give the pre-service teachers what they want to help them achieve success now? A major part of my role is to observe and support pre-service teachers when on practicum and they need supporting from where they are now, not an idealised version of where they should be. It can take a while for pre-service teachers to focus on creating effective learning experiences for their high school students, particularly on the first practicum. The pre-service teachers during their early education are more likely to be concerned with themselves as students than as potential teachers. It has been found that pre-service teachers’ immediate concerns are to do with behaviour management and how to cope in front of a class. They are not in a frame of mind at the start of a course to be thinking about the needs of the school students, other than in a very idealistic way (Insley, 2003). This will necessarily have an impact on their perceptions of how much risk they can incorporate when struggling to manage school students and be responsible for planning and organising lessons and assessments.
Perhaps I overestimate the pre-service teachers I work with in how flexible they are prepared to be. Because they are adults I expect them to be more willing to take risks. I have found working with adults no different from working with young people when out of their initial comfort zone. My own experience tells me that young people are more prepared to take risks and try something new rather than challenge it straight away. With each new group I need reminding again; I can’t take short cuts with adult learners. In a way they are more challenging than young people because they are arriving in class with fixed preconceptions, as am I.

Heathcote likened teaching drama to Sisyphus pushing the rock up the mountain (Heathcote, 1997). As long as I am doing this job I need to address what is going to make this task easier. One of the major barriers to the smooth passage of the rock is how I personally feel when this work is rejected. It affects my confidence and effectiveness, and like the pre-service teachers who feel daunted about trying this work, working when not feeling confident can lead to bad decisions. Because so little process drama is taught in school, this affects my credibility as a lecturer in drama education. Do I know what I’m doing? How can I justify teaching this when so few people are using it?

I take the rejection of these ideas personally because I am supposed to be teaching things my students can use in schools and it is hard to remember the wisdom of the words below.

I think we – the teachers and the pupils – often feel rejected in the school when it’s really our ideas that are being rejected (Heathcote et al, 1984 p.27).

I have to find a way of separating the rejection of the work from the rejection of myself, even though this will be difficult. I need to say straight away that they are unlikely to see process drama, but keep giving my reasons for doing it. I also need to be more resilient, and celebrate the small successes rather than dwell on the negative responses.

In conclusion
After a conflicted year I was given one year’s leave to work in a high school. I needed to test my doubts and to restore some confidence by teaching high school drama students. The experience of teaching for a year at Marist College in Auckland reaffirmed my commitment to using process drama when teaching students, particularly at years 9 and 10. I taught units of work on Harriet Tubman and the underground railroad (Hulson, 2006), Krystyna’s story, wartime evacuation, Prometheus (Hulson, 2006) and Mantle of the Expert units on Parihaka and Greek theatre. I am now back teaching at The University and have had a much more successful year. Because I am still teaching in a school I can bring in immediate stories from my practice. I bring in student journals so that the pre-service teachers can see the quality of writing in role that year 7-9 students are able to produce because of their involvement in their holistic, pro...sshh drama. And when I get asked “How do your students cope with this?” I am able to give them up-to-the-minute accounts.

Working in a high school has given me the credibility I needed, and it has been easier to encourage pre-service teachers who are interested in a more holistic approach to teaching junior drama, though they are unlikely to try teaching in this way unless they are supported by their associate teachers. It is hard to know exactly how much process drama is being taught in Auckland schools, but from the anecdotal evidence I have heard, there is not much. Nationally, it is possible that more of it is being taught and this assumption is based on the increase of process drama work in the conference programme for the Drama New Zealand conference held in Auckland in 2011. It is also possible that the visits to New Zealand of Juliana Saxton and Carole Miller in 2006 and 2011 have had an impact, as maybe the Mantle of the Expert conference at Waikato University in 2009.

I need to continue to teach process drama in a way that connects strongly with pre-service teachers. For those who have had actor training and have worked as actors I will teach about the different stages of these dramas using established educational drama terminology and Stanislavski’s terminology. The perceived gap between their own experience and how I am encouraging them to teach may not be so wide.
Perhaps I should stop calling it process drama. How about ‘Holistic drama teaching’, or ‘Effective drama teaching’? These terms would reflect language used in other education papers and might make the idea more palatable. Process drama sounds clumsy, and for theatre lovers there is a fear that it means no performance, even when they are shown otherwise. The debate about process and product is supposed to be moribund, (Bolton, G 1999), so why are we still using this term? Isn’t it all Drama?
References


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**Biographical Note:**

Michelle Hesketh

After graduating from Hull University, (BA Hons Drama and Theology) Michelle trained to be a secondary drama teacher at Goldsmiths’ College, London. She then worked for several years in the fields of Theatre in Education, Community Theatre, and Youth Theatre in both acting and directing roles. She also worked as a lecturer in Higher Education. Since living in New Zealand Michelle has worked in secondary and tertiary education. She is currently responsible for teaching and co-ordinating curriculum papers for pre-service drama teachers, at the Faculty of Education, The University of Auckland. She also teaches Drama at Marist College.

*Josepha* is a drama based on picture book by Jim McGugan, illustrated by Murray Kimber, about a boy in pioneering Canada who cannot learn in a classroom situation. His teacher makes a special effort to connect with him.

A drama originally devised for the IDEA conference in Hong Kong in 2006

Elizabeth Anderson, senior lecturer at the faculty of education created a unit of work based on the book *Krystyna’s Story* by Halina Ogonowska-Coates.

Based on original work by Jenny Parham.
Organised by Peter O’Connor

Convened by Viv Aitken