Editorial Essay

Drama New Zealand is proud to have initiated the publication of a new series of free e-journals entitled the New Zealand Journal of Research in Performing Arts and Education: Nga Mahi a Rehia. This is the second e-journal that I have overseen as an editor, the first with Te Wananga O Aotearoa and now as a partnership with the University of Canterbury. We recognize the financial commitment made to this journal through Drama New Zealand subscriptions and also through the University of Canterbury’s School of Literacies and Arts in Education.

Drama New Zealand has been committed to publishing print journals since its inception in 1985, but this e-journal takes our publications to a new level of international scrutiny. We welcome feedback on all of the articles contained in the journal via this Drama New Zealand web site. Everyone is welcome to register on line and invited to leave a comment. Critiques or questions are welcomed!

In the process of bringing the journal together Drama New Zealand has worked closely with members of other New Zealand and overseas subject associations from the fields of Music and Dance. We are most grateful to all those teachers and academics, who have given generously of their time, had a role to play in this publication, both as contributors and as peer reviewers.

Our web master, Ian Allan also deserves a vote of thanks for his hard work. The organization of a co-ordinated launch with participation by people across the globe on 19 August is also another first for our organization and we are grateful to Tracey Gaskin of the University of Canterbury and our branch secretaries for their involvement.

New Zealand has a newly established national curriculum document in place. A summary of the Arts component of this curriculum can be found on the Ministry of Education web site; The National Qualifications authority NZQA, is also undertaking an alignment of Achievement Standards and Unit Standards in Drama and our members have been involved in both activities on a paid and voluntary basis.

It is important to ask, what is the place that Drama has in the New Zealand Arts Curriculum and how does it fare in relation to other performing arts subjects? We can now acknowledge that Drama exists as a subject in its own right and that schools are expected to make provision for the delivery of drama programmes for years 1-10. Younger teachers may be

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unaware of the proud history that Drama New Zealand has in advocating for the development of Drama curriculum and assessment documents.

Drama New Zealand (formerly the New Zealand Association for Drama in Education: NZADIE) has since 1985, consistently lobbied for and obtained; the inclusion of Drama in the national curriculum, the development of government funded resources and advisory networks; recognition at a national and international level of the association as the first port of call for information on New Zealand drama in education matters, and the on-going provision of quality pre-service and in-service training. Discussions have taken place at the highest level of government on various matters including meetings with the Minister of Education.

Members of Drama New Zealand are renowned for the contribution they make to pre-service Drama training through mentoring student teachers on extended practicum. For a significant number of students this is the only ‘practical’ work they get in Drama. Unfortunately under the current system, there is no guarantee that a newly qualified secondary Drama teacher will have ever directed or acted in a play before being thrown in at the deep end of classroom teaching!

Drama New Zealand is currently in the process of developing a Strategic Plan – the first of its kind in its twenty-four year history. Why now? As a professional organization for teachers from early childhood to tertiary and for all those who work in theatre in education or youth theatre, Drama New Zealand values its autonomy and independence from the government. It has always maintained a critical eye over the impact of government policies in the arts and has not been afraid to speak out about matters affecting teachers. It has also taken pride in the provision of exciting conferences, welcoming colleagues from overseas, some of whom like Robin Pascoe from Drama Australia, form part of our editorial board. Our members also make frequent contributions to the International Drama Theatre and Education (IDEA), Drama Australia, National Drama (U.K.) and Scypt conferences and committees.

Once upon a time in the 1980s Drama teachers felt that they could have an influence over curriculum and assessment practices simply by communicating directly with the National Curriculum Officer for Drama (Sunny Amey). Regional Inspectors listened to teachers when they voiced concerns about resourcing difficulties and reported these concerns to the principal. They passed on information to principals in others schools and to drama teachers about examples of ‘best practice’.

Today by way of contrast, ‘best practice’ for secondary Drama teachers is proven by arbitrary means. Paper and video examples of student work are ‘independently assessed’ by unnamed persons and the results are reported to the school as a ‘pass’ or ‘fail’. In reality this is a form
of behavioural modification for teachers. For ultimately it is the teacher’s ability to complete administration tasks effectively rather than their classroom practice which determines their so-called effectiveness as Drama teachers.

Drama New Zealand with its volunteer committee and no central office or paid secretariat somehow needs to somehow represent these causes, question assessment policies and report not only to its members but also to the Ministry of Education, principals, teacher unions and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA)! No wonder we need a Strategic Plan! I wonder if this is an experience held in common with Music and Dance organizations? It’s at time like these that we learn to value our contact with our Drama friends across the world.

It is important in this regard to acknowledge the contribution to this research e-journal that has been made by Drama New Zealand’s esteemed patron, Dorothy Heathcote. Mrs Heathcote is the most public drama teaching figure in the world. She has taught classes of children in five continents. The numbers run into millions. We are most gratified by her continued interest in and support for our organization. Dorothy Heathcote’s influence is reflected in the emphasis given in the Drama Curriculum to the use of Process Drama; particularly in Primary School education.

Drama New Zealand is, however, cognizant of the diminishing support given by the Ministry of Education to aspects of Performing Arts education that have been taken for Drama. Until recently Drama had its own identifiable person in the Ministry of Education who had responsibility for the provision of Drama in schools. That position has been disestablished and replaced with a single official responsible for all of the arts.

A significant number of secondary Drama teachers are either new to the classroom or New Zealand and have not had the opportunity to take part in NCEA training. The cuts in the provision of face-to-face Drama Advisory Services to the point where there are fewer than two full time equivalent secondary Drama advisors, has impacted negatively on Drama New Zealand members’ ability to do their job properly. Meanwhile anecdotal evidence suggests that drama teachers often leave the classroom because of ‘lack of support’.

Part of that perceived ‘lack of support’ is to do with the lack of transparency in the current New Zealand assessment system. The New Zealand National Certificate in Educational Achievement, (NCEA) requires the chief examiner, the chief moderator and all markers of any subject remain anonymous, i.e. off limits to the classroom teacher. Couple this with the diminishing accessibility of Drama Advisory Services and the lack of an identifiable National Curriculum Officer for Drama and you have a recipe for increasing conservatism in the classroom. Gone are the days of experimentation. Content may not be specifically prescribed
in Achievement Standards, but as far as most Drama teachers are concerned Achievement Standard exemplars have become a type of de facto prescription.

Is this the case for all countries? In New South Wales the names of HSC examiners feature on the Drama HSC web site for all to see. Similarly on the Drama Australia web site there are numerous examples of people who describe themselves as Drama examiners.

Drama teaching is a complex kinesthetic business. Translation; the students never sit still, the furniture moves daily, up to sixty people at a time may visit the classroom at the drop of a hat expecting to be ‘entertained’, teachers and students alike take emotional risks on a daily basis with their choice of subject matter, written journals and papers sit uneasily in an environment with no desks or safe storage, noise is a fact of life, and stage props, costumes and equipment are constantly at risk from casual pilfering, vandalism on unintentional accidents or competing requirements from commercial users of school facilities. Drama New Zealand does its best to monitor these problems and to advocate for its members but it has no mandate to engage in discussion with principals and neither do drama advisors. Is this a familiar picture across the Performing Arts or is this a problem peculiar to drama?

In order to survive, Drama teachers have learned to ‘make do’ on the smell of an oily rag. Budgets for classroom drama work and school productions vary enormously from school to school – there is no bottom line re the provision of text books (e.g. plays, films and educational DVD’s) or equipment. A significant proportion of the classroom budget is likely to be eaten up in compliance costs such as the price of photocopying, video recording and editing to satisfy internal and external assessment and moderation requirements.

The Drama Department budget may be more dependent on the relationship the classroom teacher has with the principal than any other factor. Is this the same for other performing Arts subjects? The Ministry of Education’s Arts On Line forum provides a welcome outlet for frustrations around such matters and a point of contact with Drama colleagues in cyberspace – but it is hardly a secure space in which to air one’s dirty linen. Perhaps there another form of support that would serve our needs better?

In order to survive Drama teachers often need to become specialist fundraisers, technicians, voice coaches, theatre producers, directors, stage managers, designers, set builders, marketing experts, box office and catering managers all rolled into one as they attempt to meet the varied demands of the New Zealand school community! Is it the same for Music and Dance teachers?

Drama teachers look enviously at their colleagues in the Music (Sound Arts) department. The New Zealand Itinerant Music Teachers scheme provides specialist support for Music students.
in the teaching of instruments (often available for hire cheaply from the school) and vocal coaching. The classes are largely free for the students and are included in scheduled school day in the state school context. These music teachers are well rewarded for their pains. The NZ Music Commission also provides considerable support through its educational arm to school musicians through various schemes. Dance has its own professionally funded organisation, DANZ, which supports the development of dance in education as well as professional theatre.

Would that Drama Departments could have access to funded technical teachers who would teach students such things as how to use stage, sound and lighting equipment, act for camera, or develop the voice. There is no equivalent to the NZ Music Commission or DANZ when it comes to Drama.

Regardless of the outcome of its Strategic Planning exercise, Drama New Zealand members will no doubt remain committed to do what can to support Drama teachers through the sharing of resources, organizing of workshops and conferences, publishing of lesson plans and to engage in the sort of research represented in this journal.

If we are to grow New Zealand’s Creative and Performing Arts sector and its related Film and Television industry, then attention must be paid to the needs of those who begin the process of encouraging young people use their talents in these fields: our teachers of the Performing Arts.

How can the cycle of teaching, learning, reflection and research become the norm in New Zealand Performing Arts and Education and how can the culture of the artist – educator fully emerge in our classrooms? It is my personal hope that the involvement of the University of Canterbury in the publication of this e-journal is an indicator of a growing commitment to the business and valuing of Research in New Zealand Performing Arts and Education: Nga Mahi a Rehia no Aotearoa.

On behalf of Drama New Zealand and our National President, Rachel Steele, I want to extend a vote of thanks to our hardworking editorial board members. We eagerly await your online feedback to the questions raised here and to our fine selection of papers. Enjoy. Encourage your students to make use of them in their own studies and share the URL link with your colleagues and your University Librarian. I look forward to receiving your feedback via this web site on any of the material raised here and hope to see your own contribution in our next e-journal!

Kia kaha, kia manawanui! No reira, tena koutou katoa!
Susan Battye, August 1 2008
Biography

Susan Battye is a teacher, playwright and the Managing Director of Drama Magic Ltd, Editor of the Drama New Zealand web site, International officer for Drama New Zealand and former head of Drama at Epsom Girls Grammar School. She was the founding president of Drama New Zealand.