

Of mermen and monsters: a slippery story of drama in education and related classroom practices

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The account of the evolution of a classroom teacher (me) that follows is suggestive of a degree of agency and creativity that is rarely acknowledged. Teachers are currently positioned in ways that underline their instrumental role – their duty to students, parents, school and government to ensure that students achieve. A lack of faith in teachers' capacity to innovate on their own terms means that creative practice in schools is routinely overlooked or mistrusted (Jones 2009, 78). My own history serves to illustrate the complex ways in which teachers develop their practice, and the cultural and political influences that play their part in the process. This article ends with some comparison between my own experience and that of my student teachers as they embark on their teaching careers nearly thirty years later.

KEY WORDS

Drama in education; role; community; filmmaking; agency; creativity; pedagogy

A reminder of the past: The Merman, 1989

My story starts with an experience that I had during my pre-service teacher education course. It was in Birmingham on a Friday in March 1989. Jonathan Neelands came as a visiting lecturer and involved us in a memorable drama that seemed to be addressed directly to me, to my interests and background. Although this electrifying experience happened in a pokey teaching room with a group of people whose names and faces are now lost to me, the activities of that Friday afternoon became a kind of touchstone for my own drama practice - at the same time that I found (and continue to find) them a source of tension and confusion.

The drama started with the black and white drawing (by Charles Keeping) of the trussed-up figure of a merman and of an eleventh century village from Kevin Crossley-Holland's (1976) version of an ancient East Anglian legend, *The Wild Man*. Neelands also introduced us to the following text (that appears on the final page of Crossley-Holland and Keeping's short picture book):

A merman was caught at Orford in Suffolk during the reign of Henry II (1154- 1189). He was imprisoned in the newly-built castle, did not recognise the Cross, did not talk despite torture, returned voluntarily into captivity having eluded three rows of nets, and then disappeared never to be seen again. That's what the chronicler Ralph of Coggeshall says in his 'Chronicon Anglicanum'.

We posed questions that provided the focus for the ensuing drama. When Neelands asked for volunteers to take on roles from the story, I chose the priest. I was a History graduate fresh from studying the Anglo-Saxon era and the early Middle Ages and I wanted to play the role in a way that revealed the powerful alliance between the established church and Norman lord and landowner in feudal society. I felt frustrated that I could not quite embody this figure of authority as I summoned it up in my mind (not unlike my early experiences in the classroom).

We devised scenes related to the appearance and capture of the merman, one of which included demands for tithe cuts following the abrogation of our fishing rights, and through the process began defining the emerging themes of power and oppression. This built up to a whole-group scene that involved everyone bursting into the church to tell me, the priest, about the merman. My line, 'What is more important than praying?' was presented as a challenge to the beliefs of the twelfth-century villeins and their demands for immediate action; yet I wasn't convinced that my peers were assuming their roles with sufficient respect for the historical context. I was relying on Neelands to attend to the nuances of my role play, but when he took on the role of the Norman lord he revealed his plan to torture the merman in the interests of scientific research. I was confused: this seemed more relevant to the Enlightenment than the early Middle Ages. Afterwards I was irritated that I had not remembered to wave the cross at the merman (as suggested in the text) to bring the terror of the unknown and ungodly into play in a symbolic way. In my notes on the session I wrote 'I struggled to find authenticity in my role play as a priest' and 'the drama itself took little heed of the context'. But I thought about little else for days

afterwards. I had never had an experience quite like that before. I was hooked like the trussed-up merman.

In his commentary on doing this drama with another group, Neelands writes: 'These improvisations were slowly and carefully built so that the class had the chance to consider the detail and the implications of their actions' (Neelands, Booth and Ziegler 1993, 4). Looking for implications in the detail is something that the kind of research that I am engaged in and this drama practice share. It is a notoriously slippery process. At the time, as I struggled to understand its potential for learning, I wrote:

Either we can hope that the experience will have left a residue or resonance in the mind that will later emerge as meaningful (with recall) or, as Brecht suggests, we can make the meaning clear and ensure that it is understood at the time. I would opt for the second route though I see the value of the first.

Twenty-eight years later, I have come to see the value in the first route. I recognise that I did Brecht a disservice in suggesting that his goal was to produce a didactic or agitprop form of drama or theatre that would simply deliver the goods to a more or less receptive audience. I did not recognise the subtle ways that Neelands was 'leading a class with questions' as Wagner says of Dorothy Heathcote's work (1976, 65). In 1989, my instinct was that my interpretation was right and I was frustrated that others had not derived the same meaning from the drama. At the time, I could not understand Neelands' insights about the way that classroom drama accommodates many narratives and different perspectives. I did not appreciate the openness of Neelands' plan:

The purpose of the drama was to use this fragment of a narrative as a starting point for the students to construct their own shared development of the story. (Neelands et al. 1993, 9)

Now, looking back, I recognise how the process brought those involved together to forge some shared understandings of time, place and priorities and to be an audience to each other's efforts to craft something approximating a theatre form in this intense and immediate way. In my notes, I mention another student teacher's comment about how she also had been thinking about the drama all weekend; reading them now, her face suddenly comes into view. I remember that I felt I had little in common with her, partly because of her religious beliefs. Now I am more appreciative of the subtleties of a drama form in which we both found some space to bring our interests to bear on the story we made together.

Beowulf and Grendel's Mother, 2014-16

Keeping's drawing of Beowulf and Grendel's Mother, bound in a vicious embrace and sinking in the mere, in Crossley-Holland's (Crossley-Holland and Keeping 1982) version of the text, struck a chord. It took me some time to remember why. It was as I began planning a project around Beowulf for student teachers in 2014 that I was

drawn back to Neelands' work and my memories of the merman drama. What Neelands called a sample lesson on Beowulf is outlined in his earliest book, *Making Sense of Drama* (Neelands 1984, 9-23) and the excerpt is reprinted as the first of his collected writings (Neelands 2010a, 7-24). His description appears in the form of a transcript of a lesson that involves an extended role-play with Neelands in role as Hygelac, King of the Geats, and a student in role as Beowulf. Reflecting on the students' learning, he hints that he is interested in offering a 'useful tool for them to use in order to penetrate the text more fully and closely' (Neelands 1984, 11), an aim that was relevant to his work as Advisory Teacher for English and Drama in Northamptonshire. His suggestion that the drama's 'construction is not as significant as its *intentions*' (9) is interesting in the light of his later work on categorising the conventions (see Neelands and Goode 1990; 2000; 2015) – of which more later.

What emerges from the transcript is how hard Neelands works to build a shared sense of the context and students' roles within it: 'We're pretty fierce people you know. I hope you have a story that's suitable' (Neelands 1984, 15), he presses the student in role as storyteller, hinting that he expects a tale to fit the atmosphere of the mead hall full of heroic warriors with a shared past. He also tries to slow the drama down, to find a focus that might provide the kind of dramatic intensity that is worth subjecting to scrutiny; but rather than halting the action, as Heathcote increasingly favoured (Bolton 1998, 185), Neelands focuses the class through his work in role. His goal 'to move beyond the surface of actions' (Neelands 1984, 34) emerges through his questioning: 'We used to have to pay the Danes money or else they would invade our villages. Why should we help them?' The student in role as Beowulf brushes this aside '(*Stands*) I don't care. I'm going' (16) – a response that might be construed as more in the spirit of the heroic narrative. Later Neelands, as Hygelac, advises that they all consider the consequences of Beowulf's hot-headed response: 'Yes, and how will we need to prepare ourselves in our heads and in our hearts?' (19). There is a sense of him grasping towards the significance of the dramatic moment that the group are enacting and creating. He doesn't explain why he felt that dwelling on the cusp before the violence ensues is relevant to this class of nine- and ten-year-olds, other than noting that 'There is much to respond to in this epic legend of honour, courage, monsters, duty and sacrifice' (11).

O'Neill and Lambert also include an outline of a Beowulf scheme in *Drama Structures* (1982, 204 - 210), a volume that was effectively our departmental handbook in the school where I taught in the 1990s. Like his, their outline takes the form of a recount. They call it *Legend*, echoing Neelands' interest in the epic or quest-like qualities of the story of a community of heroes facing monstrous challenges. Beowulf fitted their 'first year integrated studies course' (205), so had a cross-curricular dimension that similarly appealed to Neelands. This volume was published during a heady moment when Bolton's (1984) *Drama as Education: an argument for placing drama at the heart of the curriculum* seemed timely.

O'Neill and Lambert's version differs from Neelands' in its emphasis on game structures within the narrative. They explain that the story appealed because it lent itself to a structure with 'clearly defined tasks' (O'Neill and Lambert 1982, 204). The

teacher (apparently a man – Alan Lambert rather than Cecily O’Neill, perhaps) managed to exercise some control over a ‘large and unruly group’ (204) through the commanding role of Beowulf, by initiating a series of tests to judge whether his warriors were fit for the quest. The first involved stealth in a version of Keeper of the Keys (207). In its orientation, there seems to be more emphasis on developing some cohesion through activity rather than debate. Though I taught several of the drama schemes in this book, I was never drawn to *Legend*. I have always been interested in the talk engendered through forms of role play that involve interrogating a problem - building tension through situational or contextual constraints rather than the explicit rules of a game. The game play in the *Legend* drama also assumed or imposed an agreed way of proceeding in ways that I found problematic – an argument that I will return to later.

Teaching in the present – the echoes of the past

Our two-day workshop about teaching Beowulf, formed part of a Digital Transformations research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council¹. Our aim for the two-day workshop was to introduce the student teachers to different approaches to teaching a canonical text, through different media, including drama and filmmaking. On the first day of the Beowulf project we took the student teachers through something of a whirlwind series of activities based around the section of the text that focuses on Beowulf’s fight with Grendel’s Mother (Heaney 1999, lines 1345-1676). We filmed the activities that the student teachers were involved in and recorded their reflections throughout the process. We transcribed and analysed the video observations and discussions, the films that the student teachers made and the writing in role that they created. Once the student teachers had begun teaching I conducted semi-structured interviews at different stages throughout their PGCE year, about the ways that the approach had informed their practice and the tensions that had emerged for them.

The drama started with storytelling as an economical way of enrolling or framing the participants (student teachers) as a mix of Danes and Geats in the mead hall of Heorot. It crossed my mind that positioning the group as archaeologists centuries later might address my concerns about misinterpreting or somehow failing to respect the historical context. I considered the way that Heathcote framed historical events and narrative, as realised in her popular Mantle of the Expert approach (Heathcote 1985; Heathcote and Bolton 1995). Yet now my priority was to demonstrate how student teachers might engage with a dramatic episode from the poem in manageable ways, intended to help them (and by extension, their students) to ‘pry open’ the text (O’Neill and Rogers 1994, 48). The drama led up to some writing in role, of particular relevance to English as well as their drama classrooms. I focused on creating an atmosphere through narration, storytelling and low lighting, to generate a sense of the fear of the unknown and the supernatural that Hrothgar’s description of the Grendelkin’s lair hints at.

I planned my narration to echo the text:

All those years we sensed his evil presence. The shadow-stalker, the misbegotten spirit, Cain's ancestor, banished and accursed. I know the smell of him, like a stagnant pool. What about you, what have you seen or sensed, heard or smelt out on the moorland, in the twilight ...?

This served to situate the group in a particular imagined time and place, with a reference to what had happened (Beowulf's fight with the monster, Grendel) and the impending violent encounter with Grendel's Mother that became the overriding concern that defined us as a community. I positioned the students in ways that gave them some scope for making their own choices about what they were witness to – an economical way of inducting them in to the make-believe or edging them into role (Wagner 1976, 34). Prompting an answer from everyone in turn around the circle made a particular demand on individuals. In other contexts, I might suggest private exchanges in pairs or ask for a gesture or still image as a response. Here I wanted us to author the next episode of the story together, generating a heightened awareness of the choices of words, tone and register that play their part in defining the parameters and distinguishing features of an imagined cultural context. Afterwards one student teacher, Adam, a Beowulf enthusiast, recalled this section of the drama, 'we were describing what we felt, what was going on – the eyes in the mist constantly watching, feeling his breath and it was how we as a community felt about that'. He recognised the way that this reflective activity involved the participants in talking their way into the story by articulating an imagined memory or feeling - echoing the tone that I had set. The activity also served to position the players in the action, so the mention of 'what we felt' implied the beginnings of a clearly defined communal concern - a model that Heathcote commends (1975/1984, 93).

I later assumed a role a bit like the character described as 'Unferth the boaster' in Heaney's translation (1999, line 980) and was able to develop the story by modelling an attitude of scepticism and fear that students in role might either copy or subvert. I drew on O'Neill's model of the use of dramatic irony as a provocation in in-role interactions, involving the teacher playing characters that have dubious motives, so that the class are prompted to question and probe (cf. O'Neill and Lambert 1982, 166-171; O'Neill 2006, 144). Some picked up on the signals that they might take me on in a way that generated more texture and (therefore) potential for tension and conflict in their responses to this make-believe scenario. Maybe there are echoes in this of Neelands' attempts to initiate some reflection or to challenge the powerful imperative that monsters are there to be fought. Through the process I was continuing to signal the contextual boundaries that defined how our imagined community in this context *might* behave.

My thinking about the relationship between the real and imagined classroom communities has changed since the 1990s, in ways that it is worth teasing out further in order to reach an understanding of the pedagogical orientation of this form of classroom drama.

O'Neill and Lambert argue that:

In the teaching of history there is a need for authenticated realities, and drama is to do with imagined realities... In using an historical basis for their drama, pupils face the challenge of creating an alternative and convincing world while maintaining points of comparison with the real world, so that the two can be fruitfully related. (1982, 17)

In the 2014-16 Beowulf project, my approach felt very pared down compared to my memories of the merman drama. The historical points of reference were minimal. I introduced a shift in register and tone and relied on what the student teachers already knew, alongside the images we had shown them of the Anglo-Saxon world and the poem itself that they had read in different versions. I am much more aware now of the significance of 'the complex web of hybrid discourses' (Burn and Durran 2006, 292) that are brought into play when creating drama or media texts based on a stimulus like this, derived from a theoretical frame of reference related to media education (Buckingham 2003; Burn and Durran 2007; Burn 2009). This approach is also associated with a particular strand of English teaching that recognises the potential for learning in what Haas Dyson (1997) calls a 'permeable' curriculum, involving some openness to texts that students enjoy outside school, that they are likely to draw on in generating readings of texts that they encounter in school. A minority of the student teachers involved had encountered Beowulf on their English degree courses or at school. More reported having some sense of warrior cultures derived from their viewing of film and TV, most popularly the TV series, *Game of Thrones* (Benioff and Weiss 2011 - 2017) or for several, it emerged, the film of *Beowulf*, scripted by Gaiman and Avary (Zemeckis 2007).

A sense of community

Central to our drama was an acceptance of the material reality of the monsters that figure in the Beowulf narrative. The 'points of comparison with the real world' (O'Neill and Lambert 1982, 17) came into focus when the student teachers created still images of their nightmares - and we discussed these with some allusion to the experience of fear and the ways that it can conflate a perceived threat so that it becomes a significant concern for a group of people. Following this activity, the whole group gathered around what we suggested was the haunted mere (home to the Grendelkin) as a prelude to some writing in role.

A venture such as this relies on those in role agreeing on a common concern with the implication that they share the bonds of a community or group. Of course notions of what Williams (1976, 66) refers to as 'that warmly persuasive word', community, have changed over the last three decades, partly because of the ways in which the term is used to define a lack – as Williams (1961/1975) recognised in noting that a defining feature of 'the organic community' or "'wholeness" in society', (256) is 'that it has always gone' (252). In the environments that I have worked in, the transitory urban demographic and intersection of different combinations of people from all over the world is a distinguishing and complicating feature of our community. A form of warrior community may have been summoned up in individual imaginations as we created the drama but in the process each participant drew on points of reference,

attitudes and orientations that I now know I cannot assume are commonly held. In 2015 I am concerned that in offering this as a model of community in the Anglo-Saxon era I run the risk not only of misrepresenting the past but also the present moment. My sense of the complexities of the multicultural classroom derives in part from years of working with students who were newly arrived, doing drama in increasingly open and spontaneous ways to facilitate mutual understandings and the exchange of ideas, without necessarily assuming shared values or experience. The Beowulf drama was framed by different constraints and imperatives (in part to do with foregrounding the text, making it central to the experience) but working together to summon up the fictional world was as integral to the process as in the merman drama - a source of tension in itself.

The most obvious analogy that I can find in my own experience of the kind of drama that I have been drawn to is the union meeting. This model of community appeals to me because it offers a space where fears are aired and collective actions agreed upon through argument and debate. The discussion may be underpinned by our shared values and broad political orientation but the work that the union is engaged in means that there is plenty of scope for disagreement and tensions to emerge and there is often much at stake. We have to work at constructing a communal sense of purpose and there are challenges or barriers to this process that we overcome partly through careful attention to the ways that we engage with each other. There is not necessarily this kind of consensus in school classrooms and assuming a commitment to the ensemble through the creative process is as problematic in school as it is in the union meeting.

This experience does not mean that I am wary of engaging students in a collective endeavour – I am just more careful now to consider the terms on which they might engage with it. I am more conscious that there are likely to be different points of entry into the fiction that I need to plan for. I try to take account of ‘the range of cultural conditions which inform an individual’s viewing position’ (Freshwater 2009, 28). Also relevant here is my stronger sense of the need for students to feel that they have some agency, that they are not simply positioned by the narrative or by the teacher’s expectations. As Baumann points out in critiquing the competing demands of security and community as our experience of life in the twenty first century becomes increasingly fractured, atomised and uncertain,

We all need to gain control over the conditions under which we struggle with the challenges of life - but for most of us such control can be gained only *collectively*.

Here, in the performance of such tasks, community is most missed; but here as well, for a change, lies community’s chance to stop being missing. (Bauman 2001, 149).

The metaphor of the classroom as a crucible where community is redefined and reconstituted as students enact the curriculum together (Barnes 1976) remains compelling, especially since the constituency of the twenty-first century classroom offers such opportunities for cultural exchange and production (Yandell 2016, 179).

Yet in the current climate students are often asked to embark on tasks in ways that fracture or fragment the potential for learning that there is in joint endeavour. I still see value in forging a sense of common purpose through the drama. David Davis, the tutor on my pre-service teacher education course, prompted us to analyse the lessons that we were planning with a view to determining whether there were opportunities for joint action - one way of bringing the possibilities of this powerful alliance in to focus. That Davis commended the film *Aliens* (Cameron, 1986) as a useful model in this respect brings me neatly to an analysis of the ways that we tried to account for different points of entry into the Beowulf fiction and to find some accommodation of a variety of attitudes, interests and identifications.

Accommodating another perspective

Burn, Durran and Franks pose the question, 'Is it possible to derive commonality out of diversity as part of a learning process in school?' (2006, 69). Creative approaches that do not recognise diversity as a significant resource or platform for learning are problematic, as my stories suggest. One of my student teachers was particularly concerned about the relevance of the heroic Beowulf narrative to the girls that she was teaching and was unsure what roles that they might take on. O'Neill and Lambert (1982, 204) mention this but regard it as a passing concern overcome by addressing the mixed class as 'loyal followers' engaged in structured challenges together. In Neelands' drama, girls play both the Beowulf and storyteller roles, as I did the Priest. I felt I was not able to address the problem of identification with the role of the warrior that is so clearly gendered through our drama. This bothered me, although I am not immune to the eagerness that more typically (though certainly not exclusively) men and boys seem to greet the text with.

The second time that we embarked on this project, we were more alert to the question of female roles and my colleague, Morlette Lindsay, set up some writing in role in a different way. After reminding the warriors what might lie in store for their hero Beowulf, at the bottom of the mere, once he reached the lair of the Grendelkin, a day's swim away - she suddenly moved into the centre of the circle and crouched down in a position of vulnerability. Very briefly she embodied the role of Grendel's Mother, offering through her posture and expression a suggestion of the female monster's perspective as she 'sensed a human / observing her outlandish lair from above.' (Heaney 1999, lines 1499-1500). As an observer, I felt something of a jolt arising from this disruption of the narrative that had the effect of unsettling the identification proposed in the warrior drama that had preceded this activity. O'Neill and Rogers (1994, 50) explain the potential drama has for 'encouraging a range of interpretations through re-framing, de-familiarising, and changing perspectives on the event' that was realised in this brief moment of role play. And in returning to my records from my early days of teaching I note that I had recognised that there was potential in Heathcote's proposals for framing participants into '*a position of influence*' (1982/2015, 76) through a series of approaches to role that offer different points of view.

The shift in perspective that Morlette's intervention offered was reflected in what Sophie, one of the student teachers, wrote as Grendel's Mother:

And he is coming to seek me out, even here - I sense him and I am afraid.
Dark memories blacken the waters around me, stories that will never be sung
in great halls and echo through time. When he takes my life I will fade into
obscurity, a flicker in his memory, a footnote in his story. All these years I've
had no one upon which to unburden my thoughts and so they linger here,
polluting the mere that he now wades through. He is coming.

What I am struck by in Sophie's writing is the way that she manages to address the absences in the text (the female footnotes to the story) as she gives voice to a voiceless and nameless character. It was at this stage that we introduced the shift into working in a different medium that offered the students opportunities to develop these understandings and insights. It is these possibilities that I am interested in interrogating further.

Filmmaking

Thus far I have focused on my background in drama teaching and the formative influence that this had on my teaching. In the 2000s, I became increasingly interested in the potential offered by filmmaking in the classroom².

Much of my interest in developing a bridge between the two ways of working stems from an experience of making a film based on a process drama developed with a group of bilingual students in 2008. We started with a story that involved a community under pressure and a journey, in the drama in education tradition that I have described. Our starting point came from a traditional story set in Afghanistan and I was surprised by the way that popular culture clearly became a more prominent point of reference as soon as we introduced a video camera. The teenage boys we worked with came from all over the world, many recently arrived from Sudan, Eastern Europe, Iraq and Afghanistan - and yet they all seemed to recognise and respond to the horror genre. Once they decided that the wolf in the story was a werewolf, the tone of the drama shifted and the film itself became scarier as we shot it, in chronological order, over two days. I was surprised by the way that the camera seemed to address the students in this very particular way - prompting them to draw on shared cultural resources or aspects of a 'common socio-cultural landscape' (Haas Dyson 2003, 8), and to struggle to communicate with a particular clarity in consideration of the wider audience that the portal of the camera lens implied. The reference to horror facilitated our shared understanding in working creatively, enabling the students to create a powerful story together that clearly referenced a familiar genre.

I have continued to explore ways of marrying process drama with filmmaking with student teachers and school students. This has involved experimenting with making the shift from drama to video more seamless by justifying it in narrative terms, so that the participants are framed in a loose kind of role as they create and view their films (see Bryer, Lindsay and Wilson 2014). Sometimes the films they make are framed as something caught on CCTV, for example.

Working in the medium of film with explicit reference to the approaches associated with media education or Media Studies offered us a different orientation in the Beowulf project. We framed the filmmaking activities with a brief analysis of images of Grendel's Mother drawn from books, films and other media. This activity informed the student teachers' approach as they made short films about Beowulf's fight with the monster so that through the process they explicitly addressed questions of identity and representation. Each small group of student teachers made choices about the action - how to show this unusually strong female monster almost overpowering the hero, Beowulf. In the process, we shifted the focus from the possibilities of engendering some sympathy for 'the monstrous-feminine' (Creed 1993) to the question of how to enact the battle in a way that foregrounded her strength and control. The Zemeckis film (2007) emphasises the female monster's reproductive powers, with a highly sexualised Angela Jolie motion-captured in the role, although this was not obviously a feature of the translation that we were drawing on (Heaney 1999). Associations with the female alien in *Aliens* (Cameron 1986) seem apt. Spontaneous drama was not necessarily the obvious medium to explore these interesting aspects of her identity. With this particular focus and an approach that drew on a spontaneous and messy form of montage rather than continuity editing, the student teachers found ways to disrupt a version of the 'male-gaze' (Mulvey 1975) inscribed in the Zemeckis film. Through their unexpected embodiment of the roles and rendering of the battle sequence the groups managed to represent Grendel's Mother's experience and to give her as powerful a presence as Sophie had voiced in her writing.

The influence of Morlette's poignant role play was particularly in evidence in the images that students developed of the female monster before the fight - with expressions suggestive of both vulnerability and defiance providing a central focus for her impending engagement with Beowulf. Jackson (2007 162) draws an analogy between the framing provided by the boundaries of a photograph with the way the proscenium arch delineates space for dramatic action. He identifies the way that '*the point of view of the onlooker*' is constructed through 'the angle of the camera, the depth of field, the distance from the object and so on' (162, his italics). The specificity of working in this medium offers the makers of this form of dramatic narrative a particularly powerful tool to direct the gaze of their prospective audience. The tablet technology that we used was also significant because of the way that it filled a gap in the processes of creation associated with drama in education. The visual affordances that this form of filmmaking brings into play seems to offer an opening up of possibilities for criticality and review throughout the process of making. The actors were able to see themselves in their still images, on the tablet screen, immediately after taking each shot - facilitating the kind of reflective pause that Heathcote favoured. In this instance, the student teachers were briefly in role as they acted in front of the camera but the spontaneity of the process was sustained because of the limited time frame and the tablet devices they were using. From their comments as they viewed themselves intermittently, I inferred that the process heightened their awareness of the way they were generating new readings of the story. Their adjustments to the ways that they looked and moved suggested that they were able to make more deliberate choices about how they

used their bodies to capture particular expectations of the genre - and to challenge the ways that Grendel's Mother is or has been sidelined.

When I return to Heathcote's article 'Signs and Portents' (1982/2015, 75) I feel a jolt of recognition in her attribution of her role conventions to avant-garde theatre and film. Heathcote's analysis of the way that her role conventions mean that, 'The actual moment in time can be isolated, tried again, turned around, and re-played with different solutions' (42) reads more like a description of the process of editing than of the kinds of activities that happen in drama classrooms. She favoured approaches to role that, 'Unlike television with its fast moving actions/images... function more like still photographs or photographic slides, causing infinitesimal decisions to be made by the children' (77). In this instance actually taking still and moving images and editing them together to create an impression of animation, facilitated the slowing down of time, the potential for a closer interrogation of a dramatic moment and the interpretation of the text from different perspectives. In my experience the spontaneity and invention of much improvisational classroom drama is key to engagement in role play with all the potential that this has for opening up debate and concerted action. But the practical processes of shooting and editing and the concerns foregrounded by media and film education that frame such activities, acknowledge questions of identity and representation in more direct and accommodating ways than drama processes tend to.

Current concerns and classroom constraints

Here I leave aside the arguments about filmmaking and return to Neelands' work, with some tighter focus on the experience of student teachers, teachers and students in schools in the current climate. In surmising about the possibilities of a blurring of subject boundaries and crossover between pedagogies it is important to acknowledge the challenges that many teachers currently face. My writing mirrors the shift that the student teachers that were participants in our research made as they moved from a safe space for experimentation into a school context where they had to negotiate ways of working. In the process I consider the impact of the theoretical frame that Neelands' work has provided on the activities of the classrooms that they encountered. I also return to my own experience to chart the way that drama practices have evolved.

I was intrigued when I noticed three of my students drawing on Neelands' Beowulf structure to plan their own sequence of lessons to teach in school. They were very generous about Neelands' work and the inspiration that they found in it, recognising the value in what one student teacher, Sarah, called, 'that sort of idea of building up that story *together*' – an insight that I was impressed with, given my past confusions. She valiantly attempted to build the whole class discussion, in role, in a sustained way and reported some issues with her timings and with managing the 12- and 13-year-old pupils' over-excitement. She was also concerned that her pupils forgot the story – that in creating their own fictional world the echoes of the text were becoming fainter. There was something in this of my concerns of long ago (to do with historical authenticity) but there was also a more practical worry that I interpreted as being to do with her management of the fiction from a role within it.

Had she lost hold of the narrative thread and in the process had the drama become less meaningful? What were they all learning and doing in this fictional context and how did it relate to her learning objective? This question of finding a focus in the spontaneity and chaos of the moment in whole group role-play is an issue of both artistry and pedagogy that underlines the way Neelands planned and introduced questions that addressed a particular concern. I was impressed that Sarah was engaging with the complex processes of learning how to work in role with a class and of a forging an imagined community together – and heartened that in her English classroom she had been able to negotiate the space to engage in this lively and messy process.

Another student teacher's overriding concern was the difficulties she had found in building in another form of focus: the required stress on assessment. In drama, Esther said, 'There was a lot of emphasis on what skill are they learning... is it thought-tracking, is it marking-the-moment?' This was not a tension that ever confronted me in the first half of my teaching career. There is an irony in Esther's issues with attempting to follow Neelands' scheme that it is worth exploring further.

Defining drama practice

Of the drama books that Neelands has published, by far the most popular is *Structuring drama work* (edited by Tony Goode), that has been reprinted about twenty-eight times and run into three editions (Neelands and Goode 1990, 2000, 2015). Davis (2014, 36) suggests, 'This must make it the widest-selling book on drama education internationally'. Around 1990 there seems to have been a drive to categorise ways of working in the classroom to ensure a future for the fledgling subject and to guide those who had not had much experience teaching drama. The latest edition itemises a hundred conventions, like 'thought-tracking and 'marking-the-moment' that Esther mentions. This matters because of the way that the book has played a part in defining the activities of drama classrooms across the UK, in the English speaking world and beyond, over the last two decades, so that it looks very different from the drama that I experienced at the start of my career.

One of the significant differences between *Structuring drama work* and Neelands' earlier work is the way that it takes the form of a manual for teaching rather than a critical account of what the authors and/or teachers had done in a real classroom. A manual does not take account of the specificity of different teaching contexts nor does it convey anything of the complexities of classroom interactions. The emphasis is inevitably on what the teacher does or should do rather than what students offer or produce. I have done two workshops with Neelands more recently that involved working through sequences of conventions in a seamless and engaging way. Our focus throughout was on an exploration of the narrative content and I felt as if I were involved in an intense dialogue with my peers - structured in a way that took us to the heart of a significant issue. The excitement of engaging in a story like this is not adequately communicated via the kind of handbook that teachers in these pressured times are drawn to. In the most recent edition of *Structuring drama work*, Neelands' interest in the ensemble, drawn from his research at the RSC, is cited as a 'guiding principle for the making and sharing of theatre that is based on social

relationships... the very idea of conventions assumes an “ensemble” approach to the making of meanings in social circumstances’ (Neelands and Goode 2015, 1). I am reminded of the way that Bolton (1992, 51) writes about the efforts that the classroom ensemble needs to make to develop work of an intensity that ensures the participants are ‘in the “here and now” of the dramatic present’. Yet it is questionable whether working as an ensemble to create a still image, role play or moment of hot-seating that meets the assessment objectives is the same as summoning up an imagined community through a narrative. Neelands (2010b, 136) has continued to celebrate ‘the power of collective human agency to make a difference to the world’ through his work and to emphasise that ‘there must always be rich and relevant human content at the heart of theatre and drama’. Perhaps returning to his question about intentions rather than structures is relevant here – what is the purpose of the burst of communal energy that characterises the most compelling classroom drama?

Neelands and Goode’s conventions have been central to most UK General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) syllabi (particularly Edexcel) for the last two decades. In another disturbing turn in this narrative, they have been replaced by an emphasis on professional theatre practice in the syllabi that were introduced for first teaching in Autumn 2016. The reductive assessment processes that became associated with the conventions contributed to this shift in emphasis. The focus of the GCSE exam is now on working in small groups to craft moments of theatre. There is effectively no space for exploration of a play or other stimuli as a whole class which was central to the practical coursework (constituting more than half the marks) for all the time that I remember teaching Edexcel (formerly LEAG or ULEAC) GCSE Drama. The goal seems to be to locate the exam in the vocational realm rather than the domain of the classroom where drama in education has its roots. In foregrounding the priorities of theatre professionals, a remarkable and adaptable way of working that drama teachers evolved to meet the needs and interests of learners in so many school contexts, has been completely undermined. There seems to have been little acknowledgement or debate about how drama in education has been sidelined - and whether what Edexcel and other exam boards have to offer is in any way a fit replacement for an approach that has its origins in the processes that Peter Slade defined as the art form of Child Drama over sixty years ago.

Being inside a story is highly memorable. Feeling part of an imagined community that shares this involvement, developing a narrative that is defined by a series of roles and the particular perspective they offer, wrestling to voice an idea or point of view as the class summons and dismisses monsters together play a unique part in addressing a group of learners as a community - and thereby mobilising the powerful resources associated with collective action. Finding a merman left a residue in my mind that has helped to define my identity as a teacher and guided me – framing my practice in working with different media, particularly video, as well as forms of drama in education. Its echoes still haunt me, particularly in these present monstrous times. I hope that the drama teachers currently embarking on their careers will be able to define and develop their practice as I have in response to the

classroom communities that they encounter. I think it likely they may have a battle on their hands and that they will need to be clear about what they are fighting for.

NOTES

¹ For two years (2014-2016) I was involved in a research project called *Playing Beowulf: Gaming the Library* led by Professor Andrew Burn at the UCL Knowledge Lab part of the Institute of Education. The focus of the project was an exploration of the Old English poem *Beowulf* through different approaches including digital game-making, drama, filmmaking, activities around language and reference to the many translations and adaptations of the text in different media. In 2014/15 we ran a pilot project, establishing an open and collaborative way of working that involved Beowulf experts, Richard North and Simon Thomson from UCL and our student teachers as partners in the research. In 2015/16 we re-ran an expanded series of research activities as a Digital Transformations project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (see <http://darecollaborative.net/2015/03/11/playing-beowulf-gaming-the-library>). I was involved with Janes Coles and Morlette Lindsay from the English and English with drama PGCE course at the Institute of Education, teachers and students from five of our partnership schools, academics from the IOE London Knowledge Lab and the UCL English department, Michael Anderson and David Cameron from Sydney University and staff involved in education and the digital archive from the British Library. My colleagues and I engaged in school-based research and also ran a two-day workshop with our student teachers. The second day involved exploration of the possibilities offered by a computer game authoring tool. I have conflated some of the activities that we initiated as part of the pilot and the final project here.

² In referring to filmmaking I reference cultural practices historically associated with the medium of film, although in all the instances cited here we were working with digital video and editing software.

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