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Research Article

Performativity and creativity in senior secondary drama classrooms

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Abstract:

This article examines the intersection between the senior secondary drama classroom, creativity and neoliberalism. Informed by a research project involving fifteen Western Australian drama teachers and thirteen students, it considers the drama classroom as one site where tensions between the performative needs of neoliberal education assemblages and the more humanistic desires that drama teachers embody are enacted. This paper suggests that drama education can be a powerfully transformative vehicle for creative and innovative thinking because of its spatially unique classroom environment and embodied nature. However, collisions between rhetoric and reality, social good and economic return, what is performed, and what is enabled or constrained can mean that young people are denied opportunities for choice and the capability development that drama education brings.

Keywords

Creativity; drama, education, high-stakes testing, neoliberalism, performativity

Introduction

We are on the brink of an era where unbalance would be the rule and as such human beings need to be more creative than ever before to survive. Have the arts a role in all this? Have artists a responsibility in this context? (Dal Farra, 2013, p. 1)

At a recent Creative Innovation 2015 corporate conference in Melbourne, Australia, Dal Farra's, central message to today's business leaders as the keynote speaker was "innovate or die" (Baldwin, 2015). We can understand this rhetoric in

terms of more than a decade of the 21st century, where we are experiencing change at a rate possibly never before seen in human history. Puccio, Murdock and Mance (2011), for example, argue that our increasingly complex epoch requires new and more *creative* mindsets to tackle 21st century social, economic and environmental problems. These creative mindsets are those central to arts education generally, and drama education particularly. However, the agendas that drive the corporate world and increasing measures to privatise public education can mean that this “public good” remains backstage to economic values rather than those reflective of a broader creative and humanistic mission (Conrad, 2015).

As arts educators, drama teachers have a well-established role to play in nurturing creativity in students where public good is realised through the development of young people’s capabilities. Numerous studies have revealed that drama has a positive impact on the development of students’ communication skills, socialization levels, emotional intelligence, social skills, empathic skills and empathic tendencies through aesthetic engagement in the art form regardless of their grade levels (Cahill, 2002; Collard & Looney, 2014; Ewing, Hristofski, Gibson, Campbell, & Robertson, 2011; Ozbek, 2014; Russomanno, 2014). In our view and taken more broadly, we believe we are beyond the point of providing “proof” on the impact of drama on students’ cognitive and affective capabilities, the richer and more productive foci being on interrogating **how** drama can improve student’s capabilities, and the enablers and constraints to it. The focus of this research then became the drama classroom, in its different forms, as a site both shaped by differing often competing agendas, and a place where tensions can be productively engaged. In order to do this we considered young people, drama teachers, the curriculum, and the impact of the neo-liberal project on them.

A qualitative, ethnographic research project based on interviews with 15 drama teachers and 13 of their students examined how the drama classroom environment and curriculum influenced adolescent identity development, or “becomings”. It is this later notion that is important in the way that it allows us to distinguish between simply being and becomings where there are “trajectories of movement and growth” (Ingold, 2013, p. 8) and so an “unfolding of the-world-as-it-might-be” (Mangiameli, 2013, p. 150). This article explores how the open classroom spaces and improvised characterisation activities integral to drama influenced young people in places of “transition” and hence, adolescent becomings.

Our research raises the following questions: “Is capitalism’s desire for *performativity* greater than its need for *creativity*?” and more particularly, “how might this mitigate drama’s innate potential for generative possibilities?” We engage with these related questions through five sections where we consider the call for “greater creativity”, a brief consideration of creativity itself, the drama classroom as a *creative safe space*, then an elaboration from the student’s perspective on some important dimensions of this space that engenders creativity and human flourishing. Finally, we address some of the tensions – including the press of performativity (Garoian, 1999) – and how different agendas shape and frame what is enacted in this enabling and constraining site rich with generative possibilities.

The link between drama and creativity

Creativity is widely accepted as being essential for innovation, social and economic development and human dignity (Collard & Looney, 2014; Michalski, 2011;

Nussbaum, 2011). At the recent 2015 Spring Meeting of the World Bank Group and the IMF in Washington, D.C., the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund spoke about the need for “innovation” and “collaboration” to revitalise the global economy (Lagarde, 2015). Vis-à-vis business, an IBM poll of 1,500 CEOs identified creativity as the no. 1 “leadership competency” of the future (International Business Machines, 2012). As Collard and Looney note, “Creativity is core to progress in knowledge societies” (2014, p. 348).

However, in a zeitgeist of “reform” and “austerity measures”, whether or not business, governments, the IMF and the World Bank actually *invest* in creativity and innovation, and for *what purpose/s* is another matter addressed in the final section of this paper. What is clear given the status of these comments is that the consensus of these world influencers is that global prosperity — and indeed survival — requires creativity and collaboration “measured” through performance; for example, performance in this context is that which is reducible to high stakes testing.

What progress means in this context represents only one viewpoint driven by the idea that prosperity can only be understood in economic terms. Drama teachers, however, often respond to other imperatives where flourishing is key (Lambert, Wright, Pascoe, et al., 2015).

Given the attention to creativity and going from the global to local, what unique role does the drama classroom play in fostering creativity in the next generation of Western Australian youth? Given the sometimes competing agendas of neoliberalism and creativity, what might this mean? Each of these questions are now considered in turn.

Creativity considered

Whilst there are many of definitions of creativity, neuroscientist Jung defines creativity as “the ability of the brain to use abductive reasoning, to solve adaptive problems in the environment, in novel and useful ways” (2015, p. 1). In the literature on creativity in education early research assumed that creativity was a fixed “gifted” trait and focused on “divergent thinking” and “ideational fluency” (Cattell & Butcher, 1968). However, contemporary research focuses not so much on how many innovative solutions students can discover to address a problem, but how useful and simple those solutions are (Runco & Albert, 1986). This means that all students can develop divergent innovative thinking for problem solving.

Creative or “open learning” – where the outcome is unknown — requires an educational climate where students are able to use the senses, imagine, think and reason without having the “answers” already proscribed (Miller, Looney, & Siemens, 2011). This requires teachers to adopt pedagogy that encourages: “openness to new experiences” (Amabile, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1987); curiosity (Edwards, 2001); questioning and reflecting critically on ideas from diverse sources (Atchley, Keeney, & Burgess, 1999; Sternberg & Kaufman, 2010; Torrance, 1972); a willingness to take intellectual risks (Bandura, 1997); and collaborative learning (Dawson, Tan, & McWilliam, 2011b). What is important to note is that these are all attributes of learning through drama (Wright, 2011) and sits in contrast to what is measured through high stakes testing (Wright, 2015).

Research also tells us that responsiveness to change, flexibility and fluidity are dispositions strengthened through arts practice (Wright & Pascoe, 2014). Not only does drama have these attributes, but also they are developed through effective

drama education. Collard & Looney also highlight the link between creativity and drama noting that, creative classrooms are student-centred and that the combination of physical activity including “the use of the body and all the senses”, performing, collaborative learning and imaginative storytelling was an ideal environment for optimal creative learning (2014, p. 353). As such, the drama classroom is ideally placed to provide students with opportunities for creative learning where students utilise their senses through embodied practice (Davis, 2010). Drama, when taught well, asks students to be imaginative, to think and to reason through improvisation and playbuilding. It also requires of students that they adopt an openness to new experiences through performing and reflecting on drama from other cultures. Drama can develop curiosity, questioning and reflecting on divergent political ideas. Moreover, the drama classroom can be a collaborative learning environment as most tasks are done in groups. It is also important to understand that opportunities for openness and creativity can also be constrained various factors including the curriculum and the teacher (Lambert et al. 2015). Consistent across the literature (Nicholson, 2011) and highlighted by our respondents in order for creativity to be promoted in the drama classroom, and for risks towards growth to occur, the site or place of inquiry and transformation must be “safe”. It is to this characteristic that we now turn our attention.

Drama classrooms as safe spaces

As Wright and Pascoe note, “The Arts are now well understood as “sites” where human dispositions of creativity, imagination and innovation are developed, and where personal, social and cultural capital is developed as outcomes” (2014, p. 3). The teachers in our research project echoed this in their comments. Andre, a government school teacher observed:

It comes down to the teacher. If they’re going in there with this real grrr type of approach into the classroom, then you’re not going to get that kind of expression and creativity in the kids, which I think is really important.

This point of view was amplified by Liz:

The drama classroom is safer in terms of students expressing themselves; it’s much freer. I often have kids coming in and saying, “I feel like there’s room to be creative; there’s room to breathe; there’s room to work in a different way. It’s much more open, it’s freer, it’s collaborative, it’s creative. (Independent school teacher)

According to the Australian Curriculum, collaboration, imagination and creativity are central to drama (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2015), and this was reflected in teachers’ comments on their educational philosophy and pedagogy where *time* was linked to creative safe places:

You can’t teach a concept in 30 minutes without actually playing around with it, without doing it, and some kids just don’t get it straight away. And you can’t squish being creative into 30 minutes or an hour so you can’t actually put a time limit on it. So it’s not a, “Okay you get to be creative five times a week” you know. So I think having time is something that you need and that’s why I do after school rehearsals for two hours because that’s where the magic happens. (Liz, independent school teacher)

It is interesting to note that this observation was consistently expressed across government, independent, and Catholic school sectors.

As Liz points out, creativity doesn't just happen instantaneously, it needs time and it needs a suitable environment. The responses of teachers also highlight the tension between a commodified view of creativity and innovation and what happens in their classrooms where a safe environment of collaboration and trust is required before the "magic" of creativity can happen. It is this link between sites where relationships of trust can be developed and what might flow as a consequence that is missing from the rhetoric of creativity of "innovate or die". What this means is that teachers can play a significant role in fostering creative thinking – if the school culture and curriculum allows it – by demonstrating creativity and providing *safe* and "*congenial environments*" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

In our research, drama teachers described drama classrooms that were congenial environments for fostering creativity and this reveals that it is the teachers themselves who are critical in building relationships of trust. However, whilst the drama teachers interviewed believed that their classrooms were safe spaces, the potential for harm to occur in an environment where students are encouraged to articulate their thoughts, feelings and attitudes, is tremendous. Were the teachers' beliefs about their safe spaces reflected in student's responses?

The "different" space: student's perspectives

Drama students in our study noted that drama was a creative subject that assisted them with everyday life, and fostered heterogeneous becomings that enabled them to move beyond restrictive social and cultural norms. What this references is the developmental power of drama learning where role and identity formation are key. From our interviews for example, it was evident that girls could embody powerful "masculine" characters and boys were able to feel free to dress in drag. More specifically, these examples reflect how acceptance of difference, openness, tolerance for change and ambiguity, challenging tasks and goals, risk taking, and absence of rigid sanctions for minor and harmless mistakes characterise congenial environments for fostering creativity (Amabile, 1990; Olivant, 2015).

The students interviewed also remarked that drama operated differently from other subjects because of the unique spatial environment, the open-endedness of the tasks, and its requirement to embody various characters. Elizabeth, for example, linked role, embodiment and identity development.

Drama helps with every day life. You can't just say, "Oh I know this" and spit it back out. It doesn't work that way. In drama you get the opportunity to be put into a new situation and you have to work out how to respond to that.
(Independent school student)

Di, a government school student, also linked drama, creativity and identity development.

There's a dynamic there that sometimes people who haven't experienced drama and the creativity and the improvisation, don't have. Yeah definitely it's shaped me as a person.

What is important about these safe spaces was also the support for difference that links the classroom with relationships of trust. Zac, an independent school student described this in an evocative way.

I'm gay, so obviously having to act, I always acted differently in drama because I felt like out in the school yard I'd get bashed. And it was an actual genuine fear. But when I stepped into the theatre like, I could finally be who I truly was.

The data from the student interviews supported the drama teachers' claims that the classroom space was a congenial environment that fostered creativity. Student data showed that drama is an affective form of creativity because it is embodied and relational. Embodied learning is a very powerful tool for fostering creativity because not only does it involve physical activity (Collard & Looney, 2014, p. 353); but the physicalisation of the "other" leads to a deeper personal understanding of difference and the issues associated it than does rote learning (Bresler, 2004). It is the case, for example, that students literally put themselves in another's shoes. As one student shared:

With my original solo performance¹, I was a terrorist and so I did a huge amount of research on the emotional side of terrorism and why people become them and at the same time in politics I was doing a parallel assignment on human rights issues. I was looking at terrorism in Australia and like legally what it means and whether it exists or not. Embodying the character sort of gives you a rounder understanding...you have a closer relationship with it. You feel more emotionally attached to it. You get to understand it a lot more because when you're just learning about it like text-book or reading it off the internet, you can learn to recite facts but you don't what you're missing. Whereas when you go to perform you...you're forced to become the person so you have to understand them. Cos you can't not love part of your character, or you can't do them justice. (Miranda, independent school student)

Consistent across the student respondents were reports that kinaesthetic or "embodied" learning gave them a deeper and more complex learning and understanding of the other. And it is this kind of creativity where sociality and the social imagination are key that requires the right "congenial environment" that fosters risk-taking and collaboration (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Miranda, for example, highlighted the safety afforded by role.

Well, like you can kind of get it all wrong in drama and try it all again, cos you're not ... there's this protection, the fact that you're not being yourself. You can let down the barriers that you have there. (Independent school student)

And it is these elements of safety that have benefits that go beyond the classroom itself where the inner and outer world are linked.

I think drama helps you develop as a person. To work on a character you have to look internally on yourself you know. As I said before, social skills and

¹ The Original Solo Performance is one of the pieces students must perform for their final year 12 exams. This five to seven minute self-devised solo production can be about any topic or theme but must show evidence of a character journey and a chosen dramatic form and style.

confidence...all of those skills that you need to be successful in the world are developed in a drama classroom. (Yana, government school student)

What these two sets of data revealed is that both students and teachers believed the drama classroom provided a safe space, a congenial environment, to foster creativity and becoming. However, this environment is threatened in an educational climate that places little actual value on creativity as a public good and affords status to *performativity* via high-stakes testing in “academic subjects”. It is to this difference that we turn to now.

Creativity and performativity: what is felt and what is seen

In factory-like schools, you will often hear words like “performance” and “achievement,” but rarely words like “discovery” or “exploration” or “curiosity.” (Kohn, 1997)

The deleterious effects of neoliberalism and the subsequent commodification of education such as the narrowing of curriculum, de-professionalisation of teachers and a teach-to-the-test pedagogy have often been cited (Apple, 2004, 2005; Appleton, 2014; Ball, 2003, 2012; Beder et al., 2009; Black, 2013; Boxley, 2003; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Down, 2009; Giroux, 2004; Hursch, 2007; Jensen, 2013; Kenway & Bullen, 2005; Locke, 2015; Thompson & Harbaugh, 2012; Tienken, 2013). As Beder, Varney and Gosden (2009) note, this push to commodify education and performativity serves the needs of the market, rather than those of students and teachers:

The push for high-stakes standardised testing has created many business opportunities, as government funding is channelled into tests and texts rather than teacher training and reducing class sizes. This had fed a massive industry in test-related materials ... The market for school assessment, tutoring, test-preparation and services and supplemental content supplies is worth \$25 billion in the US alone. (Beder et al., 2009)

Drama teachers in this study highlight that despite their concerns with developing the creative capabilities of their students, they are not immune to the neoliberal competitive culture of performativity, and while “performativity” has meanings ranging from “performative utterances” (Austin, 2004 [1962]), to the ways gender is performed (Butler, 1990) and the performative worker mentioned previously (Ball 2003), the pressures teachers feel reflect the latter, that is where “a work climate [where] failure to perform successfully (perceived or otherwise) can have profoundly negative consequences”. It is these pressures influenced by an “attitude of valuing the ‘effective’ and the ‘efficient’ in systems where the least ‘input’ produces the greatest ‘output’” (Burnard & White, 2008, p. 674) that teachers report as tensions in their otherwise humanistic work. As one drama teacher Claire observed:

Claire: The league tables are given quite a lot of credit ... if we get in there then a big deal is made about it ... For us, it’s just getting the year 12s over the line, getting them the best marks we possibly can. We look at which kids got their first preference at university, which kids used which subjects as their top four in their ATAR — so we look at all the stats ... We get hauled over the coals if our stats don’t... (*nervous laugh*).

And later in the interview she added:

Claire: I'm a drama teacher, but that doesn't mean I don't have my own opinions and interpretation of things, and I'm having to shove that down a kid's throat as fact, and it might not be, and it might not be what they want out of it.

[Just]...let me teach them. I'm not saying I think I need to be Strasberg Studio, but let me just teach them how to act.

Our research further found that teachers face a variety of barriers to integrating creative pedagogy in the classroom, such as time limitations and lack of funding. However, the greatest barrier is cultural. For example, teachers reported first that creativity as a form of expression and bridge building between individuals and communities is not valued in the school environment for what it can do, and secondly it is not “taught” as it is not tested. The teachers in our study noted that drama has a low *status* in schools across all sectors (Government, Independent and Catholic), because it is perceived by administration as not being *academic*. Subjects such as math, science and English held the highest status because secondary schools are judged on their results—or what is performed—in high stakes testing regimes such as NAPLAN². Therefore, “academic” results from high stakes tests become a quantifiable commodity that can be utilised as a performative source of branding for the school. What this reveals is the mismatch between rhetoric and reality, and how “creativity” has been appropriated in order to serve the neoliberal project.

In addition, our research further supports Berland's findings, who surveying teachers in Australia, Germany, the US and the UK, identified the low *status* placed on creativity in educational settings, a narrow curricula, and high-stakes testing as the main barriers to creativity in education (Berland, 2013). As many researchers have pointed out, assessment – particularly high-stakes assessment – is the greatest obstacle to nurturing creativity (Cachia, Ferrari, Ala-Mutka, & Punie, 2010; Cizek, 2001; Collard & Looney, 2014; Hamilton et al., 2007; Olivant, 2015). High-stakes tests for example, typically demand reproduction of a set of facts where creativity and ambiguity are excluded, in settings where failure is not acceptable (Cizek, 2001; Thompson & Cook, 2012b, 2014; Valli & Buese, 2007).

The press of performativity

Increasingly, western education assemblages adopt neoliberal performativity practices that also measure teacher quality through student performance on published test scores (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2005, 2009). Teachers in our study felt an enormous amount of pressure to “teach to the test” as Tom and Denise, both drama teacher from low socio-economic schools highlight:

Kirsten: How much pressure is there on you as a drama teacher to get good marks and statistics?

Tom: Massive. Massive.

Kirsten: So it influences the way you teach?

² The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is an annual assessment for students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9.

Tom: Yeah, I essentially teach to the exams.

This point is reinforced by Denise's observation from the point of view of a teacher in an Independent Public School.

My school is an Independent Public School. So we have an interesting structure that sort of models a business structure rather than a school in almost every way. So we have a lot of reliance on results. We have a huge *huge* reliance on teacher responsibility for those results and we are encouraged every semester to reflect on our performance as a teacher. We have to ensure our students' success and we are asked to account for anything that has not assured their success. It's a very results-driven college. Which is quite strange because our kids are exactly the opposite. The kids don't care, [they] have got so many other things that they're caring about that they just can't add anymore.

Given this context, and unsurprisingly, Jung (2015) reports that creativity is on the decline among students. Furthermore, in a 2010 study of about 300,000 creativity tests going back to the 1970s, Kyung Hee Kim found creativity had decreased among American children since the introduction of the No Child Left Behind education reforms (Kim, 2010). Since 1990, for example, children have become less able to produce unique and unusual ideas. They are also less humorous, less imaginative and less able to elaborate on ideas (Kim, 2010). Even though research shows that creativity is innate, it needs to be cultivated (Berland, 2013). And as schools place greater emphasis on learning material and taking tests, Jung (2015) notes that there are fewer opportunities for creative thought amongst students than in the past.

It is this observation that sits in stark contrast to western world leaders describing creativity, innovation and collaboration for ensuring future global prosperity, when simultaneously slashing education and arts budgets (Beder et al., 2009).

Burnard and White (2008) framed the problem as a "complex interplay between performativity and creativity agendas" (p. 667). They note that creativity is "eminently suited to the multiple needs of life in the 21st century, which calls for enhanced skills of adaptation, flexibility, initiative, and the ability to use knowledge in different ways than has been hitherto realized" (p. 668). As Collard and Looney (2014) highlight the only way to challenge these obstacles is by rethinking curricula: "Ultimately, integrating creativity in teaching and learning will require profound changes in policy and practice. Policies will need to place a higher value on creativity, supporting both open and closed learning" (p. 359).

Conclusion

A number of key findings that emerged from the study. First, and consistent with the literature, there is a link between drama and creativity. More specifically, the drama space, the embodied practice of the form, and the collaborative culture of its practice stimulated creativity.

Second, the results of our study show that drama classrooms can provide a supportive educational environment for students to meet the demands of the new

millennium, namely *safe spaces* that engender creativity, lateral thinking and collaboration. This result was consistent across drama teachers and students, and across all systems considered — government, independent and Catholic education sectors. Third, drama teachers are not immune to the culture of performativity and are both constrained by curricula and pressures to perform, but also work in the drama space to speak back to these. This is reflected in both the teachers and students' experiences. Although limited in scope, our study suggests that students and teachers believe the drama classroom provides a safe space and a congenial environment to foster creativity and heterogeneous becomings. The irony in this finding is that although drama can equip students to meet the challenges of the 21st century, neoliberal education reforms and the need for corporations to make ever-increasing profits from education have led to creativity being afforded a low status that will have a direct negative effect on students, limiting experiences, diversity, choice and differentiation.

We suggest what is required is that drama teachers have a greater understanding of how their subject can foster creativity and therefore contribute to our “knowledge economy”, add balance through their work to competing agendas, and advocate for the promotion of “difference”.

In lieu of a complete reorganising of the curriculum so that it places greater value on creativity and collaboration, what drama teachers can hold fast to is the certainty that congenial environments, collaboration and risk taking, do promote creative innovation, social cohesion, tolerance and diversity, and an “unfolding of the-world-as-it-might-be” (Mangiameli, 2013, p. 150).

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