

Drama teacher education: teaching and learning through and from community

Robin Pascoe, Senior Lecturer Arts and Drama Education, Murdoch University, Perth Western Australia r.pascoe@murdoch.edu.au

How this section of the paper relates to the overarching theme

In this paper we are exploring the concept of drama teacher education as catalyst for creating communities of drama educators – drama education as an induction into a community of drama educators. In particular, I highlight two related concepts: creating a sense of a shared learning community within the group of students; and, teaching from community – being a member of the drama education community and bringing that community into focus through the design and implementation of the drama teacher education program.

Throughout this paper I interweave narratives from my 2010 students and their experiences with reflections on the pedagogical choices made in shaping this course.

Teaching through community: Creating communities of drama education students

Students come into the darkened drama workshop leaving behind the searing glare of Summer. There is gentle music and they are invited to join the warm up leading into a process drama exploration based on *Woolvs in the sittee* a picture book by Margaret Wild illustrated by Anne Spudvilas.

By contrast with almost every other unit at this University that begin with a dry unpacking of Unit Guides and Assessment requirements, this unit begins with a process drama – sometimes an unfamiliar concept. The practical, embodied experience is unpacked and explored – the focus on moving from the practical to the theoretical is embedded from the opening moments of the unit.

Students express surprise and then mostly delight. Leanne observed: *after the long summer break I was expecting to be eased into the semester but bang we were right in there, exercising muscles that had been sleeping.* And Teeghan was indignant about *sweating into warm ups on Day 1.*¹

Fast-forward fourteen teaching weeks to the end of semester performance project in which students practically apply their concepts to developing and performed a group devised project. This project is based on the requirements of Year 11 Drama syllabus. The project aims to develop community as well as have drama education students experience what their school students will undertake. As a project drama education students find this task challenging: *There is so much to do and so little time* (Said).

Group devised drama is such a fantastic opportunity... it encourages taking ownership and to present relevant and engaging learning which in turn engages students. (Meaghan)

(The project) has taught me about the nature of group work, about myself as a group member and how I would deal with it in the classroom. It was theory in practice. (Dylan)

Working with likeminded people reminded me of what I had almost forgotten w at least had dimmed. I am passionate about drama. It was the reason I wanted to become a teacher in the first place. I felt inspired and excited to be involved

¹ Student voice comments are drawn from Learning Journals that are integral to the learning approach.

in this project. This revelation alone made the project worthwhile and I believe in the long run a more effective drama teacher. (Alinesui)

Who would have thought that we would be here when we think back to where we began at the start of semester. (Robin, unit coordinator)

As drama educators we are open to the concept of creating communities of learners. For example, in outlining the teacher-learner partnership in drama, Neelands (1984) discusses the “learning contract for drama” as an investment made by both teacher and student to a shared commitment to a dialogue in the drama classroom. Similarly, Mendell and Wolf (2003) explore the importance of creating communities of learners who have open and receptive minds who work together to develop productive drama ensembles taking risks, asking for and accepting help, sharing the load, resolving conflicts constructively and bringing out the best in others. It is therefore no surprise that in drama teacher education we model our learning communities on those we hope to create in drama classes.

Drama teacher education is a partnership. It relies on building contracts of trust and collaboration. Importantly, this is modeling the behaviours and attitudes that are essential to successful drama teaching in schools. As a result, we work on the floor of the drama room to explore a concept before we discuss that concept in theoretical terms. This is a relatively radical concept in teacher education in Australia which places considerable priority on cognitive and highly theorized approaches. For some students it can come as a shock – one student’s learning journal talked about the sense of being outside comfort when the first workshop began with warm ups and drama activities rather than the conventional outlining of the unit content and assessments.

We work together on a collaborative performance project that serves several purposes. Firstly, it builds community amongst the students so they learn each other’s strengths. It also models the curriculum expectations of students in schools. In other words, the drama teacher education students themselves do a drama project that is expected of students in schools; they are placed in the shoes of their future students, experience the same issues, frustrations and challenges. They have learnt about drama through experience (building on the concepts of Dewey, 1934).

Intrinsic to building community is each student building a sense of identity and self-incorporation, one of the key outcomes of arts and drama education. Through their reflective journal writing and portfolio building students engage in internal conversations (Archer, 2007), a reflexive dance between agency and expectations. In doing so they necessarily identify their own aspirations and dispositions about their future as drama teachers. As Sternberga (2010) points out, high-quality teaching requires an awareness of the sources for making pedagogical decisions, namely, personal values, beliefs and understandings. This provides powerful rationale for the reflective/reflexive journal writing in the unit including the requirement for each student to complete the unit by making a statement of values and aspirations.

Coming into this unit I didn’t really know what to expect. I just thought that I would teach drama because it would be a bit of fun and would complement my media teaching but I have learnt that drama teaching is so much more. The comradeship in a drama class is much stronger than in a media class. I want

to pass this enthusiasm on to students and get them excited about the process of drama because I found the process almost as fascinating as the performance. (Dylan)

Teaching from community

Week 10 note: The unit has progressed through exploring topics such as using improvisation and scripts in drama; the physical nature of voice and movement; the syllabus requirements K-12; group devising drama; selecting performance texts; design. In week 10 of the fourteen weeks, students move to explore managing drama in schools – the responsibilities of being a professional drama educator in schools. Topics include managing budgets, managing people (colleagues and administrators), managing performing arts facilities. This induction into the world of being a drama teacher in a school – so beautifully encapsulated in *Help I'm becoming a Drama Teacher* (Norris, McCammon, & Miller, 2000) – is an eye-opener for these students: *after this session I was overwhelmed, managing drama as a subject in school seems so complex – copyright and photocopying; budgeting (I can barely budget myself let alone for an actual subject in school); censorship; managing people... Help!* (Renate).

Each of the concepts of managing drama is taught through improvisations and role-plays and through stories from schools. For example:

I've got this mate called John who teaches drama and who decided to do his production of A Midsummer Nights Dream set on a beach in the hippy seventies so he brought in a truck load of beach sand but forgot that the local church group had a regular booking of the drama room every Sunday ... (Robin, unit coordinator)

Each of us teaches in differing ways – that is our strength. In reflecting on how I teach my own drama education students at Murdoch University and how I structure their learning, I identify the significance of teaching from community. This is evident in a number of ways. For example I teach often through stories drawn from my experience and from my knowledge of the drama education community both locally and beyond.

Stories are powerful ways of teachers structuring learning (Egan, 1986). This is more powerfully reinforced through the sources of the stories that I draw into the drama teacher education program. They are grounded in the actual, the local and the immediately relevant.

Further, I find that my teaching of drama teacher education students draws on my own place in the drama education community. I have various overlapping roles; for example, I am chair of the Senior Secondary Drama Committee for the Western Australian Curriculum Council; I am also the Chief Examiner for Drama responsible for guiding the practical/performance and written external examinations; I have a broader brief as Chair of the John Curtin College of the Arts Council and as a member of the Advisory Group working on the Australian National Arts Curriculum (ACARA). All of these roles contribute to speaking with experience and authority. For example, in Western Australia we are in the throes of implementing a major reform of all senior secondary education with complex threads and sometimes-contradictory directions. To induct students into the complicated world they will work in requires a real knowledge of the twists, turns and history of the reform and how it applies to drama in schools

Most importantly for me as a tertiary-based educator, I also have a range of experiences as a drama teacher through working with groups of secondary students on projects. I fortunately draw on the experiences of my own children in schools as well as my own drama teaching practice. As I sometimes say to my own students, I have made most of the mistakes in teaching drama! This is not an “I know it all” approach. Rather it is about acknowledging our learning comes through our experience even when it has been less than successful.

I recognize that my own career in drama teacher education provides particular strengths and that not every drama teacher educator has these credentials. But the principle I am articulating here is an important one. Drama teacher educators, to have credibility with students, need to teach from community – teach from their own community. They need to be connected with community, knowledgeable and experienced in the relevant details of the local community. They also have their eyes lifted to the broader community beyond the local. For example, recognizing how drama is assessed in another Australian state and comparing it to local practice is informative, critically empowering and necessary. Without such perspectives, practice becomes inward looking with dangers of stagnation.

Aliensui observes in her reflective journal: I have a sense that in this course we are in the drama classroom as much as we are in the university through the stories told. I have a sense of how important my networking with other drama teachers will be if I am to survive in this drama teaching game. I am happy to admit to feeling a bit worried... as scary as it is to admit for the first time I have doubts about my ability to meet the criteria for “successful teacher”. But I tell myself “Toughen up, girl” because I am going to be successful. I can see the way forward and it’s through my mates. I am not alone.

I conclude my last workshop for students by asking to look to the person on their left and the person on their right and to remind them that they are part of a community. Their “buddies” are the people who will sustain them as they enter their drama teaching careers; the networks they make – easier now through technology such as social networking sites and Web 2.0 etc – will be their lifelines as they face the inevitable challenges. These rites of passage are poignant moments for my students (and for me) but they are necessary because they signal the trust in process that lies at the heart of our work as drama educators – but applied to our drama education students not just our drama students.

Conclusion

The transition from being student to being teacher is a fascinating journey. One of my doctoral students is currently investigating the drama teacher practicum and the narratives of culture shock in changing roles from student to drama teacher, so I am particularly conscious of this journey and what is necessary to sustain focus, commitment and to consequently thrive in the different role. I have seen too many drama teachers in schools falter and burn out and therefore the need for drama teacher education that is sustainable and sustaining. In my own experience, community has been essential to my own sustained career and is essential in the future careers of my drama education students.

Preparing this paper for the IDEA2010 Congress has helped me reflexively consider what I do and how my drama education students learn. I have come to recognize that the concept of inducting my students into a drama teacher guild is more than just a useful metaphor. It is a defining component of my practice. For a variety of reasons I came to drama teacher education later in my career and this has proven to be valuable because I bring to the task a sense of drama teacher community – a guild of drama teachers.

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