**The Heuristic Pedagogue: Navigating Myths and Truths in Pursuit of an Equitable Approach to Voice Training.**

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**Abstract**

This article reflects on a five-year period of research into equitable approaches to actor training and voice. This reflection is performed as a conversation between two of the author’s voices; the pedagogue that has lived the experiences and the academic that has framed and written about those experiences. The discussion reflects on the challenges of voicing the lived experiences of the researcher within an academic frame. The author describes a heuristic process of research that has challenged them to move out of their comfort zone and has decentred their value system in response to the experiences of acting students with diverse intersectional identities. The author draws on principles of critical and radical pedagogy to proposes an alternate framework for actor training with three interrelated strands; the Pedagogies of Method, Acculturation and Instruction.

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Daron—Are you ready?

Oram, 2020—If you are?

Daron—I think so, but I’m not sure that the person reading this is.

Oram, 2020—What do you mean?

Daron—Well, I hope they have time to sit with our discussion and not rush through it.

Oram, 2020—Why?

Daron—There is the possibility that if they sit in a comfortable place with plenty of time to read, or “listen in”, to this dialogue, that they might feel something shift in themselves, and then they might try and make sense of that in relation to their own belief systems.

Oram, 2020—Why does it matter?

Daron—Well, as part of my heuristic research I’ve adopted a process of deep listening that now informs my teaching. It might be interesting for the reader to try it out whilst we discuss that work.

Oram, 2020—How would they do that?

Daron—On a very simple level, it involves attending to somatic experiences whilst listening; noticing things like the tightening of the solar plexus when a disagreeable statement comes up, or the warming comfort of agreement; taking time to experience being moved without immediately defending a position.

Oram, 2020—OK, but why are we doing this as a dialogue?

Daron—Heuristic research is commonly shared as a story. I’ve copied the idea of writing it in dialogue form from Cree/Salteaux/Dakota scholar Shauneen Pete, who suggests that ‘story as a research methodology is a decolonising approach’ (2018, p. 173).

Oram, 2020—Is this part of a decolonising project as well?

Daron—No, not specifically, but what I have found in my research is that, by decentring dominant value systems, I’ve been able to make positive changes to my practice.

Oram, 2020—And how does that apply here?

Daron—I’m hopeful that performing this as a dialogue shifts the balance of power between me and the reader by showing that my narrative is constructed, within which, I can take multiple perspectives. That allows my reader to sit beside and eaves drop; to place their attention on the dissonance or resonance that they may feel in response.

Oram, 2020—So who’s talking?

Daron—I am performing the voice that wants to share the lived experience of my practice.

Oram, 2020—I’m guessing you want me to perform the voice that has learnt to do the academic writing?

Daron—Yes.

Oram, 2020—Do you think people will people take this seriously?

Daron—I’m not sure, but I want to experiment with how my voice can be heard in relation to yours.

Oram, 2020—And the voice that I’m speaking with began to emerge when you wrote *Research and Practice in Voice Studies; Searching for a Methodology* (Oram, 2015)?

Daron—Yes, looking back, I was quite naïve when I wrote it, but the process taught me a lot. Over the course of working with editors on that article, I found all the personal stuff, the feelings and emotions, being edited out of the work. I ended up with a “good” article, but I couldn’t help feeling my own voice had been erased.

Oram, 2020—Didn’t Diana Damian and Katherine Low from the Applied Theatre[[1]](#endnote-1) department at Central talk about something similar in their presentation at the 2018 Association of Theatre in Higher Education conference?

Daron—Yes.

Oram, 2020—And they used that lovely quote from Kelina Gotman explaining how ‘the pesky pronoun “I”, floating occasionally across pages of writing, irritates an approach to critical prose that prefers if we left our bodies – our smells, desks, chairs – at home’ (Gotman, 2018, p. 2).

Daron—Yes, it’s that resistance to the personal in academic writing that I find antithetical to the work that I do in voice training. When actor voice training meets the world of academia there’s a requirement that the writer takes a position and objectively defends that position. There seems to be resistance to the fluidity and the subjectivity of the voice and a danger that we lose touch with the sticky humanity of our subject. Part of my project has been finding a way to balance the felt experience with critical thinking. In a way, that’s what originally drew me to Practice as Research (PaR) as a methodology as it allows tacit embodied knowledge to be part of the research.

Oram, 2020—But how do you share that more widely?

Daron—That’s part of the problem. Eventually, I found my way past PaR to heuristic research, which draws on my own lived experience. I’ve still had to devise ways of getting my voice into the articles that I wrote, such as quoting from my own reflective journal etc.; hence this experiment.

Oram, 2020—OK, so, where it the story set and how did it start?

Daron—It began when I started teaching on the BA Acting: Collaborative and Devised Theatre course at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. One of the most exciting things about working on that course is the diversity of students who come to train. That diversity has included, race, ethnicity, geographical spread from across the UK, socio-economic background, neurodivergence, physical ability/disability, mental well-being and, internationality.

I began by training these students in the way that I always had, the way I’d been trained myself and the way I had been taught to train others. Over time I became more and more aware that things were not going as I had hoped; this was the impetus for my research. I am eternally grateful to my colleagues and students on the course for giving me the support and opportunity to experiment with and develop more equitable approaches to training.

Oram, 2020—So, where did you start?

Daron—The first aspect of research was neurodiversity, working with students who are dyslexic and/or dyspraxic learners and then I went on to explore approaches to speech and accent training, considering race, class and regionality. Now I’m looking more at voice and text approaches. That said, these issues are not easily separable, and those identity characteristics often intersect.

Oram, 2020—And this is where the heuristic research methodology came in?

Daron—Yes. What’s been interesting for me is how much it’s transformed me as a person and as a voice teacher.

Oram, 2020—In what way?

Daron—One of the key elements of heuristic research is a sense of immersion, seeking for moments of illumination, which contain the potential for personal change. When those moments have occurred, it’s been like having a veil removed and seeing everything afresh. So, for example, within the neurodiversity work there was a moment when I recognized that the “problem” did not lie with my neurodiverse students but within my pedagogy, which was discriminating against those students (Oram, 2018a). Adopting a social model of learning difference decentred the values that I had adopted from the socio-medical model of learning support more common in Higher Education.

Oram, 2020—Was there anything particular that helped you to make these discoveries?

Daron—Yes, the focus groups, which were run by an external facilitator. The students knew that I would eventually listen to the recordings, which is a potential limitation, but not having me in the room helped the students to open up. This is where my deep listening practice began.

Oram, 2020—Boaventura de Sousa Santos, talks about deep listening as a practice that helps to challenge the dominance of Eurocentric thought. (de Sousa Santos, 2018, pp. 176-9) Does that bear any relation to this?

Daron—Yes, deep listening helped me to find a way to decentre “colonised” listening practices within speech training (Oram, 2019). When listening to the focus group recordings, I was unable to defend my position or explain my teaching back to my students. I had to sit with the “affect” of hearing how my teaching, using traditional training methods, had negatively impacted my students. Listening deeply, I experienced discomfort, and this moved me to a place where I could begin to perceive my own value system; to delineate my comfort zone. In the accents and dialects work, I began to see my own whiteness in relation to the experiences of my black students and students of colour. I could see how my white liberal perspective had blinded me to the negative impact of my training on these students; how my own experiences as a neurodivergent queer from a working-class background had been used to defend my position; this prompted me to begin to make changes.

Oram, 2020—In your second article on neurodiversity (Oram, 2018b), you use a quote by critical pedagogue Paulo Freire about cultural invasion where he says:

Well intentioned professionals eventually discover that certain of their educational failures must be ascribed, not to the intrinsic inferiority of ‘the simple men [sic] of the people,’ but to the violence of their own act of invasion. Those who make this discovery face a difficult alternative: they feel the need to renounce invasion, but patterns of domination are so entrenched in them that this renunciation would become a threat to their own identities, it would mean abandoning all the myths that nourish invasion. (Freire, 1996, p. 137)

It sounds like that relates to your accents and dialects research as much as the neurodiversity work?

Daron—Yes, absolutely. Freire and other critical pedagogues like bell hooks have become increasingly valuable in framing my research and informing my practice.

Oram, 2020—How else have you incorporated your understanding of Critical Pedagogy?

Daron—It’s changed how I see the teaching process. I’ve started to identify three strands to voice and acting pedagogy that I currently describe as, “Pedagogy of Method”, “Pedagogy of Acculturation”, and “Pedagogy of Instruction”. The Pedagogy of Method is the practice that’s done on a daily basis, the practical voice exercises, lying on the floor, breathing, sounding, moving, and so on. One of the things that’s been important for me to become aware of is that these methods are not universal, they are themselves culturally bound.

Oram, 2020—Voice practitioners like Tara McAllister-Viel, Amy Ginther, and Liz Mills, (McAllister Viel, 2019; Ginther, 2015; Mills, 2009) have discussed this issue, haven’t they?

Daron—Yes. Reading and thinking about those discussions alongside my own exploration of practice, has imbricated those concepts into my work. Within western language-based traditions of voice work there are commonly accepted principles, which include working towards a safe, effortless production of voice and a balanced delivery of speech, thought and emotion[[2]](#endnote-2). In my own training as an actor and a teacher, those principles were never questioned. Until I began this research, I simply understood those principles as the standard approach to voice training for the actor; now I see that there are many other cultural models.

Oram, 2020—How has this impacted your teaching?

Daron—At present, I haven’t rejected the practical skills associated with the free-voice in my practice; what I try to do with my students, is to make the cultural embeddedness of those skills more conscious. I try to make visible the aspects of the work that are rendered invisible by their acceptance as the norm. As part of my ongoing explorations, I’m seeing if it is possible to limit the culturally defined expectations within my teaching to three core principles; safety, ease, and the actor’s connection to thought-feeling impulses.

Oram, 2020—So, you’re telling me you are trying to teach in a way that eschews your own cultural preferences, beyond those basic principles. How’s that going for you?

Daron—Well, it’s clearly impossible. Even if I were able to do it, I’m a sole teacher, working at a “Royal” conservatory that has a very specific history and cultural capital. My work also intersects with the performing arts industry and its cultural and economic capital. I need to work constantly to decentre my practice as my own positionality only serves to constantly re-centre it. I am desperate for more black colleagues and colleagues of colour, for more disabled colleagues etc. to shift the centre far beyond where I can reach. However, in the meantime, it feels useful to keep questioning accepted truths to see if, as the Freire quote stated, those truths are, in fact, ‘myths that nourish invasion’. One of the most liberating changes that I’ve made is to say to my students, ‘I have no idea how you’re going to make sense of this work, and I have no idea how you are going to make theatre in the future’ and that includes the very real possibility of a rejection of psychological realism.

Oram, 2020—Does this relate to your Pedagogy of Acculturation?

Daron—In some ways. There’s a number of aspects to it and it’s something that I continue to question within my work. Again, it’s about revisiting and potentially decentring norms within training, for example, the request that students behave “professionally”; what does “being professional” actually mean? It’s tricky because I want to work in a creative space that functions well, but sometimes I worry that the model for professional behaviour is a model of white middle-class ableist behaviour that excludes other students—much in the way that traditional academic discourse has limited my own expression.

Oram, 2020—bell hooks talks about this, doesn’t she? When she discusses her own experiences of education, she recollects that ‘loudness anger and emotional outbursts and even something as seemingly innocuous as unrestrained laughter were deemed unacceptable vulgar disruptions of classroom social order.’ She goes on to describe how, ‘Students are often silenced by means of their acceptance of class values that teach them to maintain order at all costs.’ (hooks, 1994, pp. 177-189).

Daron—Yes, students all too often describe how they feel they have to let go of their race or class to fit in at drama schools and that reinforces the need for me to question how much my pedagogy has been shaped by the acceptance of cultural or training norms. What have I taken on to be a “good” voice teacher, to get employment at a “Royal” school?

Oram, 2020—So, what do you do differently?

Daron—At this point, I keep asking questions as I’m teaching. Do I want my students to conform to a particular mode of engagement because it will help with their learning or is it simply that it makes me more comfortable? Do I require students to talk about the work in a particular way in order to reinforce my knowledge or can I allow multiple perspectives and structures of language to be used when discussing the work? By avoiding the Pedagogy of Acculturation, and by identifying the cultural embeddedness of the Pedagogy of Method, I am beginning to move towards a new Pedagogy of Instruction, which is where I bring my reading of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière into dialogue with the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire and bell hooks.

Oram, 2020—So, you’re the one bringing in the French philosopher, interesting…

Daron—I thought you might say that and, yes, I recognise that Rancière represents a certain white male Eurocentric academia and that reinforces a particular cultural perspective. I don’t propose to understand the full depth and breadth of Rancière’s work, and, in a way, I think that is helpful. What I have experienced is that by engaging with thinking beyond my immediate experience, *alongside* my deep-listening and heuristic research, I’ve further de-stabilised my value system and opened up new approaches within my practice.

Oram, 2020—I suppose that in itself is a very Rancièrian approach. He does say that ‘The student must see everything for himself [sic], compare and compare, and always respond to a three-part question: what do you see? what do you think about it? what do you make of it?’ (Rancière 1991, 23).

Daron—Yes. What Rancière offers us in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Rancière, 1991)is the story of Joseph Jacotot’s discovery that it is possible to teach what you do not know. I read that story as a provocation to act in relation to my own power and authority, and to keep testing my practice against principles of equality.

Oram, 2020—And what has that meant for your practice?

Daron—The principal change has been how I understand knowledge within my teaching. For a long time, I saw the voice exercises themselves as the embodied knowledge to be passed on to my students. If we accept that those exercises, what I refer to as the Pedagogy of Method, are culturally bound then I’m giving my students culturally bound knowledge, and this has limitations when working with diverse cohorts of students.

Oram, 2020—So, how do you overcome that limitation.

Daron—Well, in line with Jacotot’s experience, I now see my role as engaging my students’ own “will to learn”. The voice exercises themselves are not the knowledge to be learned, they are merely the process of investigation. The new knowledge is the students’ embodied knowledge of themselves and that is knowledge that I cannot ever know myself. So, for example, if I am teaching the ‘sigh of relief’, which is a core component of *Freeing the Natural Voice* (Linklater, 2006)[[3]](#endnote-3), I can reduce it to three clear principles, three different ways of investigating the self: exploring an authentic impulse, exploring effortlessness by letting the breath go easily, and exploring a moment of listening or availability in between each breath. Those principles themselves are culturally bound, but, rather than applying those principles to the aim of achieving a universal “free voice”, I begin by engaging my students with the question of how they might use those principles to perform their own unique vocal identities on the stage. In this way, there is an opportunity for an “intercultural” dialogue between the students’ everyday experience of performing their own vocal identity and the culturally embedded principles within voice training for performance.

Oram, 2020—What does that look like in practice?

Daron—Unlike traditional free voice approaches, I do not begin by asking students to let go of tensions and habitual patterns; a request that is often experienced as a coded request to remove aspects of their identity. Instead, the training grapples with the demands of freeing the stories *behind* those student’s tensions; how to get their breath to bypass their tension and release their voice in a way that carries their individual identity in as sustainable a way as possible. Students start by learning how to perform aspects of their own lived experience and vocal identity and this creates a foundation for performing the lives of others.

Oram, 2020—Does that rejection of the universal free voice relate in any way to Rancière’s rejection of universal truths when he states that ‘each one of us describes our parabola around the truth. No two orbits are alike.’ (1991, 59)

Daron—Yes, and as my own orbit has become decentred and I have moved away from inherited truths within actor training this has resonated with me more and more. Rancière describes language as arbitrary. He describes the process of one person trying to communicate their personal truth to another through arbitrary language as a ‘poetic virtue’, a ‘virtue grounded in trust’ (Rancière, 2007, p. 51). This focus on trust is such an important principle to bring to an approach to actor training that celebrates difference. I ask my students to *trust* the process, but I now think that the thing that has stopped them doing so has been my *mistrust* of them; my desire to control their learning experience. I am now beginning to trust that they are learning what they need to in relation to their own orbit. I am there as a more experienced artist collaborator, but not as the one that holds the ultimate knowledge. This shift in the teacher-student relationship is essential in the development of equitable approaches to actor training. I have the power in the room, admittedly, but that is used to guide the exploration, to attend to the process, and not to critique or validate the emergent knowledge from a culturally embedded perspective.

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1. Applied theatre is theatre that tends to be made in non-traditional settings that “aims to bring about change in communities and participants from all walks of life.” <https://www.cssd.ac.uk/ba-date> (Accessed 17th July 2019) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In the UK this tradition has been developed in the work of key practitioners associated with the Royal Shakespeare Company; Cicely Berry, Patsy Rodenberg, and, more recently, Barbara Houseman and David Carey. In the US, this work has been led by practitioners such as Arthur Lessac, Catherine Fitzmaurice and Kristin Linklater. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Kristin Linklater trained at LAMDA in London, where she became voice teacher, Iris Warren’s, assistant. She moved to the US in the 1960s, where her work focusing on the dynamic relationship of the actor’s quartet; body, voice, thought and emotion, was ideally suited to the evolving approaches to psychological realism. Kristin was my teacher and mentor for 15 years. Sadly, she passed away on 5th June, as I was completing this article. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)