

The Creature Methodology: Reflexivity and the Applied Theatre Practitioner in Training

Dr Nicola Abraham¹

Faculty of Arts, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London, United Kingdom.

Abstract:

This article focuses on the Creature Methodology, a tool to enable students to critically frame and analyse the imposition of their social constructs onto those they work with. This article will unpack the pedagogical approach for this drama in education strategy noting the possibilities it presents for promoting reflexive practice.

Introduction

In this article, I will focus on a methodology I have developed and used with undergraduate students to teach them how to be reflexive in their practice working with community groups. Part of this process involves the ability to engage in what radical Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire termed “cultural synthesis”. Freire defines the term as follows:

In cultural synthesis... it is possible to resolve the contradiction between the world view of the leaders and that of the people, to the enrichment of both. Cultural synthesis does not deny the differences between the two views; indeed, it is based on these differences (Freire, 2014, p.181).

Understanding how one’s social constructs might impact interactions with people from another culture is essential to maintaining a responsive approach to practice. Cultural synthesis places emphasis on developing an awareness of one’s own context and how this may clash with the social norms, values and modes of behaviour from people living in a different culture. In the UK, particularly in areas of London, we have students from increasingly diverse backgrounds collaborating, and working with diverse communities. However, this also involves a new set of challenges for identity politics. One of the dominant challenges is finding a way to enable students to recognise their own subjectivity. Finding a way to engage with complex community needs through drama is very important, but knowing how to do this whilst valuing the experience, resistance and challenges facing a specific community is essential. Similarly, teachers working with increasingly diverse cohorts, need to respect different views to engage students in their learning practice. As a lecturer, I too, must acknowledge the diverse positions of my students to enable them to understand the impact that the imposition of their own positionality might have on those they work with. To address this, I use a specific practice to model reflexivity. The practice is called the Creature Methodology, and it borrows from Process Drama, Mantle of the Expert, and Forum Theatre. It is designed to help students recognise what values they might project onto those they work with by assessing the impact of any such projection in a safe fictional space. At the end of the session it is imperative

¹ E-mail: nicola.abraham@cssd.ac.uk

to reflect upon what happened during the workshop and to discuss what the group have learnt from the experience.

The Creature Methodology

The Liminal Servant

It is important to mention that this is a team-taught session and requires two facilitators to play the roles of Creature and the Head Scientist. The teacher-in-role approach for this session requires the facilitator playing the 'Creature' to start by communicating non-verbally with the group, whilst the Head Scientist introduces the pretext. The Teacher-in-role approach may take multiple forms. Cecily O'Neill (1995) denotes four distinct types, one of which is most relevant for The Creature Methodology:

Liminality describes a state between one context of meaning and action and another... Working in role, the teacher can lead the students across the threshold into the imagined world of drama, a place of separation and transformation where the rules and relationships of classroom life are suspended (O'Neill, 1995, p.66).

In this sense the teachers-in-role support students in giving suggestions to Creature to address the problem that I will later describe. Creature's role is to respond to ideas from the group that have been discussed, problematised and refined by the Head Scientist. Exploring the projection of social constructs within a fictional world can help students to feel less inhibited with the pressure of judgement. Allocating students roles is important. It gives them permission to experiment, take risks and explore possibilities within the drama. To put the teacher-in-role in context, I will now explain the 'pretext' for the liminal world in the Creature methodology, the role that the participants play and how this is set up as an agreement between the teachers-in-role and the students.

The Pretext

Cecily O'Neill's model of Process Drama requires a pretext. The function of a pretext is to establish "atmosphere, modelling appropriate behaviors, moving the action forward, and challenging the participants from within" (O'Neill, 1995, p.61). In the Creature Methodology, the fictional frame provided is that of a dystopian world in the future that takes place in a science laboratory. The Head Scientist explains that 20 years ago scientists kept a baby away from any human contact to see if it would survive. Within the world of the drama, this is a reality facing the human race, since people are no longer able to live on the surface of the planet and may spend months at a time alone underground. The scientific programme aimed to understand how humans might adapt to living alone, and what might be learnt from observing this phenomenon. Once this context has been established with the participants, it is time to propose a problem that they, as students in role as experts from the scientific community, must resolve.

Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton have worked extensively around Mantle of the Expert, an approach that enables students to be in a position of inquiry, to creatively engage with a topic, and to feel a sense of discovery in their exploration of an open-ended problem through taking on the role of 'experts'. Discussing the "metaphor of the mantle", Viv Aiken (2013) states:

Mantle of the Expert draws on three teaching modalities: inquiry learning; drama for learning... and what we might call “expert framing”, which involves children being positioned as adult experts. This reframing asks the children to “frame” or think about their learning in a new way (Aiken, 2013, p.36).

In this sense, the frame of MoE provides a safety net for participants to experience complex learning through improvisation, dialogical exchange and an open-ended challenge to resolve. To discuss the application of this technique to the Creature Methodology it is important to understand how participants contributed to the resolution of the problem.

In the Creature Methodology, participants need to address the implication of a funding cut for the Creature experiment, where the experiment will have to end by either exterminating the subject or by trying to humanise the subject. It is the responsibility of the group to help, and, in their capacity as experts, to teach Creature what it means to be human. To help participants get into role I ask them to think about their professions and provide them with a few examples to model my expectations i.e. a psychiatrist, a sociologist, a teacher etc. The adoption of a character provides participants with a protective shield, which allows them to experiment with their responses in role. However, there are limits, for example participants do not actually have the expertise their characters have, so their knowledge comes from their own (limited) experience. Thus, they are asked to make their social constructs visible through their interactions with Creature. The participants’ suggestions are instantly reacted to by Creature who has a microchip in its brain, which can be ‘programmed’ by the Head Scientist in response to the experts’ suggestions. For example, if participants suggest that Creature should have emotions, the Head Scientist mimes inputting this data into Creature using a sound effect to show the transfer of information. The teacher-in-role playing Creature must then immediately respond by demonstrating different emotions. (It is often the case that the participants don’t like this reaction and will want to either sedate Creature, or counter the continuous performance of different emotions by helping Creature learn to moderate its reactions to specific situations. This of course, is a demonstration of subjectivity in relation to what students think are appropriate as reactions to particular situations, which can be unpacked in the reflective discussion after the methodology has concluded.

Participation & Agency

Though the initial set up of the methodology draws upon the work of Heathcote, Bolton and O’Neill, it also draws from the participatory theatre models of the late Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal (1979, 2000, 2008). To enable participants to choose what level of risk they want to take in the workshop, opportunities for participation build up in layers:

- **Level One:** Direct Interaction
- **Level Two:** Verbal Suggestions
- **Level Three:** On-Stage Interactions/Improvisation

Level one involves direct non-verbal interactions between participants and Creature. This may involve Creature playing with someone’s shoelaces as if it were a curious child, or hiding behind others, or mimicking gestures from the group. The reaction of

participants to this approach is what Boal might term “simultaneous dramaturgy” where “the spectators (or in our case the teachers-in-role) ‘write’ simultaneously with the acting of the actors” (Boal, 1979, p.102). The purpose of level one is for the teacher-in-role playing Creature to develop the childlike and animalistic nature of the character, which can be shy and simultaneously playful when provoked. The Creature initially has no language skills and has not come into contact with humans before this point. It is thereby physically inquisitive (Creature acquires language skills if and when the participants suggest this). The Head Scientist functions as an intermediary or active connector between the group’s suggestions and Creature, moving within the frame of the fiction, whilst posing questions for clarity drawing upon participants’ ‘real’ knowledge and suggestions throughout the methodology.

As an intermediary, the Head Scientist is heavily involved in the facilitation of level two: verbal suggestions. This is a process of action and reflection. Linda Candy and Ernest Edmonds (2010) describe this type of approach as a responsive practice, noting that this method is a “cyclical process of putting theoretical knowledge into action and revising theory as a result of the outcomes” (Edmonds, 2010, p.427). In this respect, when participants are requested to provide skills, thoughts, ideas or other human aspects to give to Creature, they are asked to justify their choice, which often results in moments of self-reflection. The Head Scientist additionally asks for clarity, particularly because Creature often only takes on the most basic aspects of an idea, for example, its emotions may not be understood, and are often played to extremes: i.e. Creature isn’t just happy, Creature is ecstatic. Participants are invited to think more analytically about their choices, and/or to teach Creature to ‘control’ its emotions in action.

It is the role of Creature, once it has been given basic language skills, to become a secondary facilitator or “Joker”. A Joker is a facilitator who acts as a “problem-poser” for Boal’s participatory theatre form “Forum Theatre” which is an approach that enables spectators in an audience to “intervene directly in the dramatic action and act” (Boal, 1979, p.102). The Joker questions ideas and exposes contradictions in instructions given by participants. For example, it is often the case that participants provide a moral framework i.e. tell Creature that it must know right from wrong, but additionally provide another idea, let us say activism, which can sometimes interfere with and compromise either Creature’s actions, or cause Creature discomfort. For example, Creature may be told that bullying is wrong, so it may say “I will hit the bully so they don’t hurt the person they are bullying again”. In this instance, it is the role of the Head Scientist to ask the participants to clarify their position.

Drawing to an End

The scenario continues as described until “time is up” – I usually tell the group they have an hour to humanise Creature and to decide whether or not Creature will be able to survive in the world. In my experience, the urgency of the task can cause participants to make “knee-jerk” decisions without thinking about their reasons for taking a given approach. For example, in a recent iteration of the workshop, students were conflicted about their last instruction; they could either teach Creature about money and building a home or they could teach Creature the importance of love and

building relationships with others. In the panic they chose the former, but regretted their decision when the drama reached its conclusion.

Whilst the drama unfolds, the Head Scientist writes all the suggestions and enacted scenarios on post-it notes. This is important in order to lead to a discussion after the session about the decisions made and about how choices changed in moments of tension i.e. during the last 5-10 minutes of the methodology. This approach can enable students to identify their reactions in moments of crisis, to know themselves better and to think about alternative reactions that may have been more constructive. It also offers participants a chance to consider what their values – as made explicit through their interactions with 'Creature' - are. Not surprisingly, the lessons learned from this experience can resonate for some time.

Conclusion:

The Creature methodology is a hybrid practice. It intends to promote a sense of reflexivity. Reflexivity is an important tool to prevent the imposition of potentially damaging subjective ideas onto those we work with. Kim Etherington (2004) discusses the ability to be reflexive as a responsive approach:

To be reflexive we need to be *aware* of our personal responses and to be able to make choices about how to use them. We also need to be aware of the personal, social and cultural contexts in which we live and work and to understand how these impact on the ways we interpret our world (Etherington, 2004, p.19).

The Creature methodology draws participants into a reflexive state where they can examine their reactions and, as Etherington suggests, consider their choices. The students who have taken part in this methodology have had different experiences depending on the diversity of views held by each group. However, they have predominantly reported that even months after the session, they still find themselves contemplating their decisions, imagining how they might have done things differently, and talking about what they have learnt from this moment. The protection of a liminal space provided opportunities for them to be playful, but also to address an important topic that I hope will continue to inform their journey towards learning to become reflexive in the pursuit of cultural synthesis.

Bibliography

- Aiken, V. (2013). *Connecting Curriculum, Linking Learning*, Wellington, New Zealand: NZCER Press.
- Boal, A. (2008). *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles, A. & Maria-Odilia Leal McBride & Emily Fryer, London, United Kingdom: Pluto Press.
- Bolton, G. & Heathcote, D. (1995). *Drama for Learning: Dorothy Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert Approach to Education*, Portsmouth, United Kingdom: Heinemann: A Division of Reed Elsevier Inc.
- Candy, L. & Edmonds, E. (2010). Relating Theory, Practice and Evaluation in Practitioner Research, *Leonardo*, 43(5), 470 – 476.
- Etherington, K. (2004). *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher: Using Our Selves in Research*, London, United Kingdom: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Freire, P. (2014). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc.

O'Neill, C. (1995). *Drama Worlds: a framework for process drama*, Portsmouth, United Kingdom: Heinemann: A Division of Reed Elsevier Inc.

Biography:

Nicola Abraham is a Lecturer in Applied Theatre Practices at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. She has conducted participatory theatre projects with vulnerable youth in both UK and international contexts over the past 10 years.

nicola.abraham@cssd.ac.uk

Word count: 2444