

The mattering of drama

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In 1992, I had my first – and very short - article published in a magazine called *2D* (referring to Dance and Drama). In it, I argued for a balance of Drama in our UK curriculum teaching, entitling the piece *Not the Drama Quarrel*. Many grounded and ground-level drama teachers had been finding the intense critical debates and, yes, quarrels, around “drama as social process” or “drama as theatre” wearisome. *Not the Drama Quarrel* was an attempt to say that most drama teachers I knew were more than happy with where we had arrived – a balance of text and theatre together with socially engaged, potentially issue-based, improvisation-led drama – and were wary of continued arguments by those writing books and articles in drama. In that article of a generation ago, I suggested that, in the wake of those testy discourses of the 1970s and 1980s, drama had failed to achieve its own position in the United Kingdom’s National Curriculum, part of the 1988 Education Reform Act.ⁱ It was present under English, only. Despite this, drama in schools in the United Kingdom thrived because head-teachers have been given the space to embellish the National Curriculum; the subject of drama has fitted well in an educational system with increasingly complex constituent youngsters. It is a flexible enough subject to satisfy the most academically able as well as those with cognate vocational skills. The discipline has grown and expanded over the last decades, with drama teachers frequently offering some of the most exciting opportunities and experiences for young people in schools.

In 2016 in the United Kingdom we are engaged in a “debate” with our government’s Department for Education (DfE) that resonates with those memories of 1988. The DfE seem determined to squeeze out the arts in the curriculum by establishing the EBacc (English Baccalaureate) for 90% of pupils at the age of 16. Effectively, this has a core of seven non-arts subjects leaving space for one more subject only – with a plethora of contending subjects for that eighth place. Once again, drama is in danger. The arts in schools have already declined: a decline in timetabled lessons, a decline in teaching staff and a decline in take-up by pupils.ⁱⁱ I write this article as the consultation on the EBacc closes (the end of January 2016) knowing that this attempt at the deracination of the arts in schools has galvanised a wide range of arts advocates, university lecturers, key influential people from the arts industry and others. It is to be hoped that this collation has some effect.

Ironically, the main United Kingdom audience for this magazine - the independent sector - is not bound by statutory education law and can continue to offer a healthy arts provision with no concerns for government short-sightedness. Of course, there has been profound and demonstrable support for, and belief in, drama and the arts as a necessary part of *any* curriculum, state or otherwise, from the independent sector up to head-teacher level.ⁱⁱⁱ NISDA (the National Independent Schools’ Drama Association) have been voluble in their expression of support, for example, as I found out at their national conference in 2013 at St Paul’s School for Girls. There is deep, cross-sector, concern for drama in schools.

It is an entirely appropriate time, therefore, for those of us in the United Kingdom to pause and consider, indeed, “why does drama matter?”. In this piece, I want to dwell on that mattering of drama: why it matters and what is the impact of the matter that is taught. I write with the United Kingdom as my “case study”, as I am immersed

in this country's arts education although my points are likely to be transnational. These eight points have overlaps and are not comprehensive.

1. Contribution to the economy

There is something very puzzling about the pressure to reduce arts in schools in a society where the arts contribute so extensively to a nation's GDP (this is the case in many countries and not just the United Kingdom). Such a government philosophy is at odds with the external commitment to the arts expressed by the UK's prime minister and the chancellor of the exchequer. The latter, George Osborne, protected the UK's Arts Council in the budget cuts announced in November 2015, assuring us that cuts would be a "false economy" saying: "[O]ne of the best investments we can make as a nation is in our extraordinary arts, museums, heritage, media and sport" and recognising that £1 billion investment returned a quarter of a trillion pounds. In a recent Arts Council report, Richard Russell calmly reports that "[e]very pound of public funding going to the Arts Council's national portfolio organisations pays back £5 in tax contributions from the sector as a whole" and that turnover in the arts increased by 22% in three years, from 2011.^{iv} Just a week before writing this piece, David Cameron said: "*And if you believe in publicly-funded arts and culture – as I passionately do, then you must also believe in equality of access, attracting all and welcoming all. ... That doesn't mean just opening up a few times to children from a deprived area, it means taking all creativity and ingenuity of those who work in the arts, and applying it to this vital challenge.*"^v

And the UK government is considering *introducing a system that squeezes the arts in schools*? How is it possible that our DfE can actively work to discourage young people from following such an economically successful career path for the country – and for themselves? The matter taught in drama leads to careers in the performing arts industry. From courses in acting, applied theatre and drama education, costume construction, design, lighting, performance arts, props, puppetry, scenic art and construction, sound, stage management and technical/production management, about 230 graduates from BA degrees at Central graduate each year into a flourishing industry. The Cebr report of 2015 states that the average arts and cultural worker is paid "well over the national average", with a 4% rise in employment between 2010 and 2013.^{vi} The arts and cultural industry thrive on trained, creative young people – and such people earn a living. If this training doesn't start in school, we will have to rely solely on those parents and caregivers with the appropriate cultural capital to encourage children to participate in the arts *outside* school. Clearly, that's unacceptable. Is it seriously a possibility that ministers haven't made the connection between an expanded arts and culture industry with the rich and diverse arts curriculum of recent decades?

2. Modelling a live/ly collaborative society

There is an increasing fear that society is moving further towards digitally inhabited lives of comparative solitude or distance. Amongst others, Sherry Turkle debates this in her book *Alone Together*^{vii} suggesting that we are in danger of losing our ability to communicate with each other verbally and in the same physical space. We are alone, albeit connected to uncountable numbers of people digitally. She points to the influence this has on the young, who have grown up with mobile phones and an ever-present expectation of instant – but distanced – communication.

I have less patience than I used to with some of the old adages around drama: it builds confidence, you learn to collaborate, you learn to express yourself,

and so on. Perhaps this is just after decades of use and, as is the way with such repetition, phrases lose meaning. I *am* interested in different nuancing, in reimagining and re-envisioning some of these ideas, however, when it is timely to do so, as it is now. I see a strong reason to promote, to model and to advocate *live* and *lively* groups of young people who are engaged with discussion, physical creation and exchanges of aesthetic and philosophical ideas in a common exploration of artistic theatre practice.

Drama is the *first* and *most effective* subject in conjuring productive activity in young people and this reinforcement of collective liveness is urgent. A school system that does not encourage interactivity and expends the value of such activity, is an impoverished one, encouraging Turkle's being alone together instead. This cannot be tenable.

3. An accessible participation in an art

Quite possibly, this is personal opinion. I believe that all young people should have the opportunity to "do" the arts. This is part of a long biography of such believing, with the influence of people like Malcolm Ross, Ken Robinson and many others in the 1980s confirming all I was naively espousing as a new drama teacher. These people were around at exactly the right time for compounding and embedding my personal arts-belief system: that the arts are a human right in a civilised society. A UNESCO report reminds us:

Culture and the arts are essential components of a comprehensive education leading to the full development of the individual. Therefore, Arts Education is a universal human right, for all learners, including those who are often excluded from education, such as immigrants, cultural minority groups, and people with disabilities.^{viii}

There is a case to be made for drama as the *most* accessible participatory art. Even before young people aspire to the arts as a profession, all can participate in apposite improvisation sessions in drama studios, classrooms or alternative offsite spaces. It is a deeply inclusive art form as one glance at the work of seminal companies such as Chicken Shed demonstrate (www.chickenshed.org.uk). Every child matters – and every child can access drama.^{ix} It is the most accessible of participatory arts.

4. Practising life-views

Much has been made of "role-play" in drama. Rather like some of those adages mentioned above, it is staple fare for drama teachers. I have fond memories of remaining in role for a 90-minute GCSE drama session (with pupils of 15-16) as a frightened mute in the corner of a drama studio. The group's response to me and the way I found a character and life-narrative from their input remains with me, twenty-five years later. Yet "role-play" has a faded reputation and perhaps rightly (I did puzzle over what was learnt in that session about a girl called Sadie). A teacher who relished the joy of texts as well as the improvised adopting of roles, I remain convinced in the value of practising life-views, framing ways of behaving and speaking about important issues in contemporary society, in non-threatening, well-managed, "safe" environments. Drama does this. No other subject has that particular meshing of "being" that allows a holistic engagement with the world. This is undertaken in thematically-based improvisation sessions – or through understanding Shakespeare.

5. The uses of language^x

Mass language styles can offer freedom. They can operate as “restricted codes”, a term developed by the educational sociologist Basil Bernstein,^{xi} where to share understand words, grammatical phrasing and accenting *can* ensure a freedom from alienation. You can become one of a “club”, accepted into groups because you speak the right languages. Such homogenisation of language can reduce much that language offers, too, of course. Whilst the freedom from “othering” and alienation can be bought by sharing restricted languages, it would also be possible to argue that feelings, emotions, communication and knowledge becomes less progressive, oppressed by the need to linguistically conform.

My point here is one I alluded to above. Repetition can lead to a lack of “new” thinking. We should be encouraging our youngsters away from hackneyed, well-trodden expressions where ideas become clichés and emotions are simplified into the limits of “controlled” language. Drama promotes increased linguistic skills whether this is seeking out new words in improvisation and devising contexts or speaking and performing some new languages forged by brilliant playwrights. This is not to deny the importance of heutagogy (my own particular new language word of the month) but the encouragement of expanding language and its use offers growth in civilisation: we develop our thinking and expand our understanding.

6. Knowledge

A comparatively new discipline, drama, theatre and performance has proliferated in recent decades. I undertook an interesting - if rough - calculation a couple of years ago. With the help of my ex-professor at Exeter University (where I was an undergraduate), we calculated that there were about 200 full-time equivalent first-year drama undergraduate students in the United Kingdom in the mid-1970s. Two years ago, there were a staggering 678 “drama” undergraduate courses in our UK university guide (albeit many “combined”) – and this didn’t include some of the conservatoires. A very rough calculation of first year undergraduates in drama in the United Kingdom was about 10,000 – 12,000 students. Since the 1970s drama has become established, then, and the establishment of a subject at university level denotes its position as “serious”.

Quietly but profoundly, the discipline has grown. Deep academic roots have been established. I’m not convinced this picture of “Drama: the Serious Discipline” has been noted fulsomely enough. Drama is a subject and not just pedagogy. It has developed into a complex, gracious discipline. It has intrinsic value as a means for the uncovering and understandings of human identity, of theatrical ingenuities and aesthetic appreciations, of political imaginings and cultural possibilities, of an individual’s shouldering of performance practices, knowledge and form. It is a subject whose prosperity is evident in the growth of its complexity and diversity as it experiments with mixes of practice and theory. Drama practice (not to be confused with pedagogical process here) is eclectic and includes: skills in production management areas and theatre-related crafts; vocal and physical training; experimentation with form, style or spectacle; manners of storytelling; facilitating the thinking and workings of communities, practical interrogation of disappearing rites and more. It has a wealth of theory, grown exponentially over the last fifty years, welded together through, for example: play analysis, their productions and historical contexts; theories of sound and aurality; concepts of presence, conflict and community; politics in theatre.

Drama is profligate in its meshing of thinking and doing. It roils with subject matter. It comprises an evolving and fascinating set of knowledges.

7. A showcase – and the forging of memories

Whilst some might believe “schooled productions” do not connect with the teaching of drama in the curriculum, I have never had an issue with advocating such events and appreciating the multiple roles they fulfil. Two of these roles seem prominent.

First, pupil-performers commonly remember such productions as events held in the memory, most often with particular pride and pleasure. Out of an array of lessons and inputs into the minds and bodies of young people, the extra, the “special”, the adrenalin-invoked, the performed, remains. Recently, I met up with two ex-pupils – soon to be 50. Apart from a salutary reminder of my own age (in my defence, I was only slightly older than them!), I was struck by how much they remembered of their school productions. One said: “My father still sings *Rules* [one of the songs] to me.” This was a family memory – not just her own – that had survived for over 35 years. I have written elsewhere about the power of school productions and refer specifically to the treasured, related artefacts that remain in people’s possessions, long after the event.^{xii} Perhaps because they are beyond the quotidian of school life, such events become something that is deeply embedded into adult memory. Is this a good thing? Yes. Of course it is. That we have positive, rewarding memories of being schooled is surely highly desirable.

Second, a school itself is deemed more worthy by parents, governors, staff, alumni and pupils when it has a strong production record. There is a potent intensity and joy in the “liveness” of that moment of shared creativity, a manifestation of young people’s ability and engagement, aesthetic intelligence and heightened focus. School productions offer the opportunity for a belief in young people and their future. They are a unique showcase for a school.

Without doubt, school productions are significantly improved when pupils take drama in the curriculum. There is an understanding of performance aesthetics, a care for the discipline, developed skills in sharing work and a greater status for the production because it has its roots in the work and matter of the “statutory” school curriculum.

8. Focusing attention on “matters”

This article has been predominantly considering the mattering of drama in schools. In this brief last section, I want to link with a next stage – that experienced practitioners trained beyond school in drama can change the lives of others. Sometimes, those who have taken drama at school, and probably at Higher Education level too, will go on to use it for attending to other “life” matters. In a recent research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and with participant groups in Oldham (Greater Manchester) and the east end of London, I had the pleasure of working with, amongst others, two such people, two ex-students, on a project about performing place. With youth in London and adult migrants in Oldham, we used a wide range of activities to shift the participants’ thinking and operations. As stated in the homepage of the website that summarises this work:

“Our relationship to ‘place’ is critical in contemporary lives. How we are placed or how we place ourselves has changed – and is changing - significantly. Performance-related activities can help the way we relate to place, through reformulating our relationships with the places we

know and providing approaches which aid emplacement in new or unfamiliar places.”

(Should you be interested, this website offers a comprehensive account of this work and notes the success of a range of activities, www.performingplace.org.)

My two ex-students are established and experienced practitioners in their own right and have been working in the field for twenty years and more, since leaving Central. They used sophisticated techniques and in complex circumstances to, simply, achieve some good. Cornflakes were dribbled along London pavements, remote controls were waved at trains in the hope of quietening them, tables and chairs were placed in trees for a subverted coffee morning and indoor markets were danced in. The projects worked. There is much more that could be – and has been – said about these two projects but for the purposes of brevity: youngsters felt less fearful and migrants felt more at ease with their location.

These are matters that drama can address for explicit social benefit. Experienced practitioners who study and practice the arts in school, continue at university and go on to work in the field can focus attention on the matter of the “real world” – and change that world: such important and valued careers.

Drama matters, indeed.

ⁱ This excluded Scotland.

ⁱⁱ ‘Since the introduction of the EBacc we have seen a **14% reduction in uptake of arts subjects at GCSE in secondary schools**. ... Department for Education figures published in July 2015 show that between 2010 and 2014 the **number of hours the arts were taught in secondary schools fell by 10% and the number of arts teachers fell by 11%.**’ Cultural Learning Alliance EBacc Briefing 19 Jan 2016 v2: p5

ⁱⁱⁱ See, for example, the article by Rugby School’s headteacher, Peter Green, in December 2015, in which he says, for example: “*We know that, in the world of work, creative vision, entrepreneurial skills and artistic flair are key transformational advantages that derive from studying the arts. But there is another, deeper benefit that comes from the study of arts and culture. It’s based on vulnerability. ... The student is reliant upon his own powers of interrogation, his self-belief, and, ultimately, his level of advocacy. It is a fragile moment.*” www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationopinion/12024316/The-arts-give-students-the-ability-to-cope-with-uncertainty.html (accessed 22.01.16)

^{iv} Centre for Economic and Business Research (Cebr) (2015) *Contribution of the Arts and Culture Sector to the National Economy*, p. 5/6.

^v www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-speech-on-life-chances (accessed 21.01.16)

^{vi} Cebr, 2015, p.5.

^{vii} Turkle, S. 2011. *Alone Together: why we expect more from technology and less from each other* New York: Basic Books

^{viii} (UNESCO, *Road Map for Arts Education: Building Creative Capacities for the 21st Century*, 2006) www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/CLT/pdf/Arts_Edu_RoadMap_en.pdf (accessed, 01.06.13)

^{ix} This references a government policy from 2003, Every Child Matters.

www.education.gov.uk/consultations/downloadableDocs/EveryChildMatters.pdf

^x This is a homage to Richard Hoggart's magnificent book of 1957, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life*.

^{xi} See Bernstein's *Class, Codes and Control: Volume 4 – The Structuring Of Pedagogic Discourse* (1990).

^{xii} Mackey, S. (2012) Of Lofts, Evidence and Mobile Times: the school play as a site of memory in *RiDE: the Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* Vol 17, No. 1, pp.35-52