This is the published version


Available from Deakin Research Online

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30001763

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner

Copyright: 2002, Taylor & Francis
A Challenge, a Threat and a Promise: Drama as Professional Development for Teacher Educators.

Jo Raphael - Jo O'Mara
Deakin University

I was sitting in my office marking papers when the familiar chime from my computer alerted me that I had new mail. The email message was to inform all in the education faculty of an upcoming professional development day.

Dear Colleagues,
At the instigation of the Education Major Committee, the Pre-service Courses Committee is offering a FULL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT DAY ON PEDAGOGY—not on pedagogy in schools, but on how we might improve our own on-campus teaching.

The e-mail went on to list four possible topics to be explored on the day and there at the top of the list was ‘drama as pedagogy’.

Having spent most of my life as a student of drama, a teacher of drama and now a lecturer in drama education in the faculty, I am a great believer in the power of drama for teaching and learning. As well as being involved in preparing teachers of drama and theatre, I am regularly using drama in classes to enable reflection on students' practice as beginning teachers. As I read the e-mail, part of me felt jubilant at the thought that some other members of staff outside of the drama area were also considering the value of drama for teaching and learning in their own classes.

I imagined that one or two other colleagues with experience in using drama as a methodology might be interested in collaborating with me in the planning and delivery of this session. The idea of sharing the risk appealed. I wrote the following tentative reply to the organiser of the Professional Development (PD) day.

Hello,
Just wondering what your ideas were in regard to the drama topic for this PD day. Since drama is my area I might be able to offer some input. Please let me know.

Cheers
Jo Raphael
Jo O'Mara

The e-mail informing us of the upcoming professional development day initially aggrivated me; it asked for role-play and the wording seemed to me to imply a lack of real understanding about dramatic form. 'They want some simplistic role-play', I thought, not really conceptualising who 'they' were; 'drama again is the fill-in bright and happy starter'. Reading the invitation I was a little excited; how fantastic to be actually working at a university that values pedagogy and is prepared to promote drama in the education faculty without drama first having to argue how it fits into the key competencies! I felt reserved about working with Jo, who I liked but I had no real understanding of her practice. How would we work together? How could we present this in a meaningful way? How would more senior academics respond to our work?

There was a risk there, a risk of being found out - as being seen as evangelists for a form that may be seen as marginal and lacking in intellectual rigour. There were also great possibilities—to work with a potentially like-minded colleague in a form that we trusted.

A Challenge

Accepting the challenge, we met and agreed to work together to plan and deliver the session. We soon discovered, to our great relief, that not only did we share the same first name, we also shared common understandings about educational drama. We agreed however, that it was highly likely that our colleagues' understandings were different from ours. The simple brief we were given, 'How can one use role play/drama in tutorial classes and lectures?' alerted us to the need to broaden our colleagues' general understanding of drama. We aimed to provide a deep aesthetic experience in order to enable them to understand the form more closely. As a once only opportunity, we realised that this session needed to make an impression. Since it was not possible to cover many aspects of drama as pedagogy, or develop many skills in using drama, this session needed to be memorable and thought provoking; we hoped it would be the start of a continuing dialogue about the role of drama in our practice as teacher educators. In order to achieve these aims, we decided that the session would need to involve the participants in drama work and provide a model of ways of working in drama. It was this that led us to focus the drama on the role of the teacher educator.

A Threat

There was a sense of trepidation and risk in preparing a professional development session for our senior academic colleagues, most of whom had many years of university teaching experience. Although we had been invited to present this session on drama, we were aware that involvement in drama could be confronting for some. We did not want to alienate participants by involving them in something that would cause them to feel uncomfortable or embarrassed.

78
We deliberately designed the session to engage the participants at a deeper level on an issue that was relevant to us as tertiary educators. As a topic for exploration, we selected something in which we felt everyone was a stakeholder and to which everyone would have something to contribute. We would use the form of drama to explore the topic deeply and to exemplify engagement and empathy development through drama.

**A Promise**

In planning the drama experience in this way, we were ensuring that the participants would experience drama in a positive, non-threatening way. We intended to engage them with a relevant topic that could lead to a multi-layered exploration as well as shared understanding of the issues. This would provide opportunities for reflection through role.

The structure also allowed us to actively involve participants in the experience of some examples of educational drama practice that they may be able to incorporate into their own teaching. Participants would be simultaneously learning through drama and learning about drama. Learning by doing.

Most importantly, the pretext for our drama would be compelling and even slightly contentious. It would present possibility for whatever wide-ranging ideas that the participants would bring to it. It promised a sense of unpredictability, excitement and fun, far beyond the usual range of expectations of a Faculty PD day.

**Shifting Worlds**

Jo Raphael began the professional development session with some introductory comments about the nature of drama both as an art form that is highly accessible as well as being a mode of learning that challenges participants to make meaning of their world. She quoted from a national drama advocacy statement that explained:

- Drama is the enactment of real and imagined events through roles and situations
- Drama enables both individuals and groups to explore, shape and symbolically represent ideas and feelings and their consequences.
- Drama has the capacity to move and change both participants and audiences and to affirm and challenge values, cultures and identities

In delivering this introduction, Jo R. was 'in role' as the drama educator giving the kind of opening presentation that any audience of academics might expect. These opening lines were well received and our colleagues seemed attentive, although we noticed that no one took notes. While we both believed in these statements about the nature of drama, they were set up to create a space for the disruption to occur.

---

1 NADIE, 'Drama Makes Meaning', National Association for Drama in Education now known as 'Drama Australia', 1995, p.2.
Jo R. went on to explain that drama engaged groups in working together to explore issues and themes of importance and relevance to them, adding that participants involved in the drama work agreed to believe in the fiction. The audience seemed focussed and receptive. She explained that pre-texts are starting points for drama, and may include a story, a poem, a song, a picture, a photo, an article or an object...

The final words of the introduction were interrupted.

A Bag is Left

Jo O'Mara: Sorry Jo, is this your bag? It is just that it is a bit smelly!

Jo Raphael: Looking at the offending bag which is a back-pack in an unremarkable maroon colour that looks a little worse for wear. No it's not my bag but I do know where it came from. It was found in the corridor near the School Experience office. It belonged to a student who left it there a while ago and never returned to collect it.

During this time the participants shift into the drama—they implicitly agree to suspend their disbelief and move into the dramatic world. We passed the bag around for people to remove and describe the contents. The bag contained:

• an overly ripe orange
• tissues
• a pen
• a lecture pad
• a partially completed application form for ‘Special Consideration in Assessment’
• a list of things to do, related to study, work and personal life
• a form for the variation of enrolment details
• a completed School Experience report, indicating that at the end of this practicum the supervisor deemed the student was ‘at risk’ of failure

As the contents were revealed, a scenario and a character began to develop. Participants began to identify traits of the imagined owner and ascribe meaning to the contents. The name, ‘Paula’ was written on one of the forms (by us), and the group began calling the student Paula and constructing her as female. Collectively the group was creating the imagined owner of the bag. Questions were asked to deepen understanding and develop the character. What do we know about this person? What do we think has happened? At this point there were conflicting readings of the contents. Was this a student who was in difficulty and struggling with a range of external pressures or was this a student who was simply slack and disorganised? We had deliberately
chosen a pre-text designed to create ambiguity within the participants’ responses. This initial ambiguity provided an opportunity for multiple possibilities to be explored and different storylines to emerge.

**Stares and Whispers**

We called our colleagues together and suggested to them that when a student is on the margins and not coping particularly well with their course, they may slip through the system. The majority of people may not really know that student but have ‘heard a rumour’ or ‘witnessed a detail’. As teacher educators we may not particularly know the students who are feeling the least connected.

We asked the question: ‘What were people who ‘knew of’ the student, rather than actually knowing her, surmising about her situation?’ We invited our colleagues to play a game designed to explore this idea further. We gathered together in role as people who know Paula only by name or reputation. We all invented one rumour that we had heard about her and then we milled around swapping rumours and spreading gossip with no factual basis. The rumours grew with re-telling and the energy level was high within the room.

‘Someone told me that she cheated on an assignment’ is exchanged for, ‘She never wanted to be a teacher’. Someone whispered, ‘I heard she failed’. These unchecked exchanges generated a heightened level of engagement and excitement. As well as being fun, the game gave participants the licence to be extreme and liberated them from taboos. We included it at this point to enable absurd scenarios to be created with which we could then contrast more realistic portrayals of the student’s situation. We silenced the rumours with a question.

**What do those who ‘really know her’ say?**

The group contemplated this question. Moving into role as Paula’s friends and family, we positioned ourselves in a relationship with her. We thought about what we knew of her personally. We formed a circle and each of us gave a piece of information about what we knew of Paula. This worked towards developing an empathic understanding of the fictional student and enabled us to move beyond the rumour-mongering position of someone who does not know her very well. The mood contrasted sharply with that of the Rumours Game. With the instruction that we were building a profile of the student and we should not contradict what had already been contributed, each participant shared one sentence with the group and these thoughts reflected their various relationships with the student, their concerns and fears for her.

‘I have noticed that she is withdrawn. I am not sure why’ remarked a friend wistfully. Her younger sister remarked that, ‘Mum and Dad always encouraged her to become a teacher’. Her teacher reported, ‘Paula was always really diligent and organised at school’. Even her dog had a voice, ‘Paula pats me for comfort’.
Whilst our portrait of the student was open-ended, we were beginning to be able to imagine reasons why a student might fall in forms to withdraw from the course, might be deemed 'at risk' in their teaching report, why she might need 'special consideration'. As a group of teacher educators we were looking beyond the paperwork to the individual student.

**Glimpses from the Past**

The participants were asked to form eight groups of four or five. Working in smaller groups allows individuals to collaborate closely and contribute to the negotiation of the task. Each group was asked to prepare a thirty second naturalistic scene showing an event or moment in the student's life leading up to the student leaving the bag behind in the corridor. The scene could have been from any time in the past—hours, days, weeks, months or even years ago. The scene should have hinted at why she reached this point.

The groups were given five to ten minutes to develop their scenes. They were able to use the information that we had built up about the character previously to indicate what the problems were that had caused her to be a student on the edge. Further inspiration could be taken from any of the clues suggested by the artefacts contained in the bag.

As we wandered around, we glimpsed scenes being created in which the student was involved in a range of critical incidents. In one she was at the university, battling with bureaucracy and struggling to get clear answers to her questions. Another group portrayed her at home dealing with the conflicting demands of the members of her family. In another scene she was the idealistic high school student with great expectations of her future career and yet another had her as the student teacher struggling through a lesson with Year 8s.

Two of the groups volunteered to show us their scenes. There was not sufficient time to view them all and this was not necessary as the process of working to create the scene within the group was more important than the performance. Viewing two scenes gave a sense of how groups had interpreted the task.

**Distilling the Moment**

In the same groups, participants were asked to rework their scene in an abstract style. Groups presented their scene as ten seconds of action leading to a freeze where all actors held their positions in the scenes. Groups decided on a phrase to express the essence of that scene, which could be spoken by one or more of the characters during the freeze.

The groups animatedly debated and discussed what were the most essential elements of the scene. All groups presented their scene at the conclusion of this preparation time. The resulting scenes were varied and perhaps because of, rather
A Challenge, a Threat and a Promise

than despite their brevity, were often profound. Each was followed with applause as well as a collective laugh or murmur from the audience, indicating understanding and recognition of the issue being presented.

We took this opportunity to point out the power of drama when it moves from naturalism into abstract representation. This point had been clearly illustrated in this exercise. Both of the naturalistic scenes shown previously had been clear enough although one of the two had taken considerably longer than the thirty seconds suggested to make its point. Through the process of reworking the scenes in an abstract mode, the participants were involved in deeper analysis of what was actually going on in that scene. They had to ask, ‘What is superfluous?’ and ‘What is critical to the moment?’ The participants were actively involved in making meaning for themselves and then effectively communicating this meaning to others.

This workshop modelled a range of drama strategies that went beyond the commonly employed strategies of role-play that some of our colleagues were already using in their classes. The benefits of role-play are limited when there is a lack of understanding about educational drama. The narrow way that role-play is commonly used and the benefits of applying broader based principles of educational drama are discussed in detail by Smigiel and Taylor in separate studies of the use of role-play in vocational training settings.

Inside Her Mind

What might Paula have felt as she left the university? What were her thoughts on the journey home? Participants were asked to consider this and to invent one thought that Paula might have had as she left university. We all filed into a narrow corridor outside the main room we had been working in. We stood facing in towards each other along the walls of the corridor, making two lines and having eye contact with the person opposite. A colleague volunteered to represent Paula making her way home. She began walking, progressing slowly from one end of the ‘thought tunnel’ to the other. As she stepped by us, we each spoke our thought.

Some voices cut across each other, and created a chorus of thoughts. The ideas represented many that we had already explored and some new ideas. ‘I wish I had not cheated’. ‘I want to be a teacher’. ‘I do not know what to do next’. The overlapping and sometimes contradictory thoughts reminded us of the confusion we can experience when we are in crisis. The experience of the thought tunnel, while abstract and symbolic, was evocative and strangely real.

---

The Discussion Begins
Due to the relatively short time available on the day, we were not able to have the extensive discussions then that the session had begun. We asked some questions to promote further reflection. Might the student give up her course? What messages are there for us as teacher educators?

We left these questions unresolved and moved to finish the ‘professional development’. We invited comments and discussion from our colleagues. Although many of them had used role-play before, some seemed surprised by the depth of the work. One colleague reminisced wistfully about a time when the university was a teachers’ college; Dorothy Heathcote had been to Australia and there was time and space to work extensively in this way. For some of our colleagues, this session was simply a reminder of the power of drama and the way that they had used it in their own classrooms.

While this was the conclusion to the session, it was the beginning of conversations about the applications of drama as a teaching and learning methodology in our practice as teacher educators. As we broke for morning tea the conversations continued. We were surprised by the queue of people who wanted to talk about the drama, the student or their own experiences.

Process drama is about raising questions, not providing answers. We ask our participants to ‘tolerate the ambiguity’, rather than providing them with any solution. Because of this, process drama can be a lasting learning experience; the learning continues after the actual drama session has finished as people continue to reflect upon the multiple possible meanings created in the dramatic world. Participants commented to us days and weeks later that they could not stop thinking about Paula, the character that was created, wondering what might have happened to her. One colleague commented that she was surprised at the level of her engagement; for her it was impossible to believe that the student did not exist. It is the strong empathy or empathic attunement that the participants feel for the character that creates such intense engagement. For our colleagues, this was a useful exercise because they had to change their perspective and adopt the point of view of the student rather than that of lecturer or administration staff. As Heathcote claims, ‘Drama is about shattering the human experience into new understandings’. 6

Early on in the drama, a couple of responses had been made that suggested that the imagined student was ‘obviously irresponsible’, ‘disorganised’ and ‘a hopeless case’.

---

These are views that are sometimes held by university staff when they view the problem from the perspective of the inconvenience that the student creates, without necessarily taking into consideration the particular circumstances of the student. Once we had created a possible mosaic-like picture of this imagined student we developed empathic attunement with her.

Process drama creates complexity and raises questions. The exploration of the possible experience of one student through the form of process drama, gave us an emotional experience that changed our perceptions of what life can be like for students in a way that power-point simply cannot do. The workshop was a success from the point of view of providing members of the Faculty with an opportunity to interact in a different way, to collaborate and be part of a community of learners. Although a world apart, our thoughts reflect those of Morris7 in her professional development work with generalist primary teachers on the Northern Cape of South Africa.

...the drama workshop, because it used the pretend world, the imagination of the participants, vocal and physical engagement and multiple ways of encouraging people to communicate, opened up spaces in which new ways of communicating and interacting could be explored. And the teachers grasped those opportunities because, for the most part, they were thoroughly enjoying themselves.

Future Possibilities

While presenting a threat and a challenge, the work with our colleagues promises possibilities for us all. We are now confident of the potential of using process drama as part of the induction program for new staff. We have also realised the benefits that come from working together in the form. Working with a like-minded colleague means that one is not solely responsible, and is able to step in and out of the drama. Because the work relies on what the participants give you to move forward, it requires a great deal of reflection-in-action.8 Working with someone else enables a greater mind space for reflection-on-action,9 whilst one is leading a part of the session, the other is free to observe and plan the next section. We both found this extremely beneficial. This enables the practitioner to be freed from some of the tasks, to 'fill in the gaps', find loopholes and pick up the threads. It also provided us with an opportunity to de-brief in detail, both of us learning from the collaboration.

The professional development drama workshop has already given rise to further use of drama as pedagogy within the Faculty. Examples of the use of drama have ranged from individual lecturers trying a few strategies to enhance learning within

8 For a more complete description of reflection-in-action in process drama see J. O'Mara, Unravelling the Mystery, unpublished PhD dissertation, Griffith University, 1999.
their tutorial classes, to collaborative projects involving students across year levels. Lecturers within the Faculty are aware that there is no use espousing pedagogical theory without embedding the ideas into their own teaching practice. This is just the beginning; there is plenty of scope for the further use of drama and there seems to be a new kind of openness to discussing our pedagogy, employing drama strategies and developing new collaborations amongst colleagues. While we were involved in writing this article, a new e-mail chimed in from the organiser of another Faculty professional development day saying that there had been 'a very strong recommendation' that we be invited to contribute to it. We took up the challenge.