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CAPTURING THE EPHEMERAL:
REFLECTION-IN-ACTION AS RESEARCH

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Abstract
This paper considers two different methodological approaches to 'capturing' and analysing reflection-in-action in process drama teaching. Reflection-in-action, the 'thinking on your feet' that drama teachers constantly do, is ephemeral and difficult to record. In the first project discussed here, a teacher researcher study, examines the problem of representing the reflection-in-action, working around the central question of 'How can I as a researcher describe and document my reflection-in-action when working as a teacher in process drama?' The second project, an interview-based research project, developed some of the findings of the first study through a series of interviews with drama practitioners. This paper considers these methodological approaches in terms of the possibilities they provide, the limitations for the study of reflection-in-action in process drama and some possible applications of the approaches investigated for future drama research.

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Why this paper?
Different research questions pose different methodological problems. In this paper I describe my ongoing fascination with reflection-in-action, particularly as it plays out in process drama. I emphasise the need for researchers to find a method that deals with the nature of the problem being researched, as choosing (or developing) an appropriate method often presents a dilemma. Reflection-in-action provides a particular set of problems for

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research that I have attempted to articulate whilst describing the approaches I have tried (some successfully, others not so successfully) on this part of my research journey. In thinking about you, the NJ readership, in the writing of this paper, I have tried to imagine the reasons you might read this paper — for interest’s sake, doing a post-graduate degree, to inform your own research or simply to see what other people are up to — and address potential questions you may have about this usage of methodology. Pulling together the methodological thinking behind these two different approaches to a similar set of questions, I notice the gaps in this work, the ‘what I have failed to do’ as well as what has been achieved. This reminds us yet again of the complexity of teaching and the multiple roles we play simultaneously in our work. The research questions that are raised for me are often related to this complexity — about what occurs between us and our students in the classroom space — the external influences that shape the transactions between us and the possibilities for how that classroom space might be transformed into a place of engagement and wonder.

Reflection-in-Action and Process Drama

Reflection-in-action fascinates me — what do drama teachers think about and notice whilst they are working? How might that thinking shape their decision making and subsequent action? Schön describes reflection-in-action as the artistry of practice that enables practitioners to ‘cope with the troublesome ‘divergent’ situations of practice’ (1983:62). In order to reflect-in-action, a drama teacher must allow himself or herself to ‘experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he [sic] finds uncertain or unique’ (ibid.:68). Drama teachers reflect-in-action every time that they think about what they are doing while in the process of doing it. The process of reflecting on the novelty of the current situation through professional knowledge developed from prior experience can serve to generate a new understanding and enable the drama teacher to act upon and change the situation and develop new theories of practice.

As drama practitioners we intuitively understand reflection-in-action — the ‘thinking on our feet’ that we do in every lesson. We reflect-in-action to decide how to act upon the surprising, puzzling, unique and unexpected responses we get from our students. Reflection-in-action informs the artistic decisions we make as we meld the divergent and unexpected ideas from our students into the next question in the drama or alternative ways of seeing the situation we are dealing with in the dramatic world. Process drama requires that we remain open to the students’ work and build upon what we receive from them — the decisions we make as teachers leading the students through the dramatic process based upon our artistic knowledge, understanding and experience of dramatic form. Often in the process of reflection-in-action we invent new forms of drama or experiment with new ways of constructing meaning through unique uses of dramatic form.

Why Research Reflection-in-Action in Process Drama Teaching?

In recent years a great deal of high quality work has been done in articulating process drama practices. This has made it much easier for teachers to learn process drama techniques and plan for process drama work in their own classrooms (Morgan et al., 1989; Neelands et al., 1991; O’Neill, 1995; Heathcote et al., 1995; O’Toole, 1990). Some texts, such as Miller et al. (2004) and O’Toole et al. (2002) pay considerable attention to discussing the reasoning behind the specific choices made in the selection of

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particular drama conventions at each point in time or they make explicit what the focus of each episode of the drama might be. Understanding the reasoning behind the specific choices made at different points of the drama enables teachers to be mindful of aesthetic and pedagogical aims. Reflection-in-action is necessary in process drama work. Because process drama is created in-action, the decisions made by the teacher on the spot (the teacher’s reflection-in-action) influence the outcome of the drama. In my own teaching, my research showed that the best lessons were those when I was focussing on the aesthetics of dramatic form and the least successful lessons were those when my reflection-in-action was not focussing on forwarding the drama (O’Mara, 2000). Reflection-in-action is the ‘process’ of process drama that prevents it from becoming a set of dramatic scripts constantly regurgitated without change — a process drama canon. Even when one is using a drama ‘written’ by someone else, it is the dynamism of the experience — the tweaks made in the moment —that give ownership of the work to the participants and enable the dramatic experience to speak powerfully to all involved.

**Reflection-in-Action as a Research Methodology**

Although reflection-in-action is central to teaching practice, it is not generally recognised and celebrated as a legitimate form of professional knowing and very little attention is paid to reflection-in-action in any field. Three factors that contribute to this are:

- **professionalism** is still mainly identified with **technical expertise** (Schön, 1983).
- reflection-in-action is a **process** that relies on both **tacit** and **circumstantial** factors.
- reflection-in-action is **ephemeral**, difficult to capture, describe and quantify.

If professionals consider themselves technical experts who deal with constant, unchanging problems, they may shut off their openness to reflection, their acknowledgement of the uniqueness of the different cases with which they deal. They may disregard novel elements of the situation, thereby preserving the constancy of their knowledge in practice. Uncertainty threatens; indeterminacy is a sign of weakness. Because reflection-in-action is a process that relies on both tacit and circumstantial factors, it generates new courses of action in the moment of practice. Being open to the possibilities each moment of practice potentially holds, means being open to an indeterminate, less definite path. Practitioners tied to systems of problem solving may not be open to acknowledging the tacit dimension of reflection-in-action that occurs even in technical work. They may attempt to create definite principles of action applicable to every situation, but the process of reflection-in-action relies upon being open to the uniqueness of every experience.

Reflection-in-action is by its nature ephemeral, difficult to capture, describe and quantify. This is the major difficulty I have faced in my research, attempting to describe and document reflection-in-action in process drama. Because reflection-in-action is so elusive, this research is at the most qualitative edge of the spectrum — ‘What am I thinking about as I do this?’ In a description of reflection-in-action, (Loughran, 1996) describes spontaneous (perhaps subconscious acts) as similar to reflection-in-action. Schön notes:

Reflection-in-action has received surprisingly little nature. It is an ephemeral episode of inquiry that arises momentarily in the midst of action and then disappears, giving way to some new event, leaving in its wake, perhaps, a more stable view of the situation. (1983:125)
The practitioner's inquiry is not simply an investigation of how to get to a certain result, but the way of solving the problem and the problem to be solved are worked out together in action as the practitioner frames the problem. Practice and theory, doing and thinking, come together in the moment.

**Documenting my own Reflection-in-Action**

The first project I draw on in this discussion is my PhD thesis (O'Mara, 2000). In this qualitative teacher researcher case study I examined my own reflection-in-action as I worked in process drama. I taught a group of Year Seven students drama for a school year, working with them from 2-5 hours per week. The methodology was so problematic that I developed one of the central questions around it — 'How can I as a researcher describe and document my reflection-in-action when working as a teacher in process drama?'

The other questions were framed to lead into an examination of reflection-in-action in process drama teaching. Even though I finished the thesis in 2000, a central question, "What is the scope of my reflection-in-action when working as the teacher in process drama?", still engages me — sparks fly and my interest is reignited whenever I revisit it. Developing a research question worthy of ongoing investment has been extremely valuable to me — good research questions sustain and focus one throughout the research process.

**Attempting to Capture the Ephemeral**

I used video and audio tape to record the classroom events and interviews, setting up the recorders around the room, leaving the recorders running for the entirety of every session. While initially the students were distracted by the cameras, they soon became used to them and ignored them for the most part — or sometimes used them to record their work or leave messages for me. While this method meant that some of the action fell outside the frame, it was less distracting and easier to organise than having someone operate a video camera.

In the initial stages of the research, I made many attempts to try to record my reflection-in-action as it was happening before concluding that it was actually impossible to record reflection-in-action — the act of vocalising it and concentrating on expressing thought alters the nature of the actual thought process. Keeping running observational notes regarding my reflection-in-action during the class time as I taught was useful. I realised when I attempted to keep such notes, however, that thinking about my process of thinking about the act of teaching drama became my focus in action rather than the teaching itself! The most bizarre method I experimented with was to carry around a hand-held tape recorder and talk into it about what I was thinking about during the lesson! The earnestness with which I undertook this surprises me now — no prizes for guessing that this ludicrous method did not work! In fact, it was a distraction, as the students thought I was playing some sort of spy game with them, and the recording took my attention away from the class. Eventually I came to the realisation that it was not possible to record reflection-in-action in this way and these attempts were distorting the actual teaching and reflection-in-action process.

I struggled for ways to understand my own reflection-in-action process and came to see the patterns of my work over the year. I felt uncertain about the inquiry and where I was heading with it. Schön's explanation that this dilemma of 'rigor or relevance' (1983:42)
arises more in some areas of professional practice than in others, gave me a different way of seeing the situation. He describes that, in professional practice ‘there is a high, hard ground where practitioners can make effective use of research-based theory and technique, and there is a swampy lowland where situations are confusing ‘messes’ incapable of technical solution (ibid.:42). I was researching the swampy lowlands, muddling through messy moments of practice. I took note however of Schön’s understanding that:

The difficulty is that the problems of the high ground, however great their technical interest, are often relatively unimportant to clients or to the larger society, while in the swamp are the problems of greatest human concern. Shall the practitioner stay on the high, hard ground where he [sic] can practice rigorously, as he understands rigor, but where he is constrained to deal with problems of relatively little social importance? Or shall he descend to the swamp where he can engage the most important and challenging problems if he is willing to forsake technical rigor? (ibid.:42)

I descended further into the swamp, knowing that by staying there I could engage in what I perceived to be the most important and challenging problems. For a long time however, it was very murky down there.

By the time I finished the data collection at the end of the school year, I had significantly developed my understanding of my working processes as I reflected-in-action while teaching process drama. The after-class reflections in my field log and ongoing analysis of the audio-visual record and transcripts brought my reflection-in-action into sharper focus. As I worked I became more aware of reflection-in-action and trained myself to recall it in my field log in much the same way that some people train themselves to remember their dreams. However, I had few ideas regarding the presentation of the data in a form that could reveal reflection-in-action as it occurred. I took comfort in Baumann, writing that the struggle of trying to integrate inquiry into one’s work enables teacher researchers to:

come to know themselves better as teachers and persons, learn to understand their students and families in ways heretofore unknown, increase their professional esteem and credibility, share their learning with colleagues locally and beyond and, most importantly, help their students develop intellectually, socially and emotionally. And that is what a dynamic, reflective, action-orientated research pedagogy is all about anyway. (Baumann, 1996:31)

Through my struggle with the integration of inquiry into the work, I came to understand the working of my reflection-in-action processes more closely. I then faced the difficulty of finding a form to present this information in a coherent way to the reader. How could I share my own learning with my colleagues? I am ever aware of the extent to which the struggle of this research has extended my understanding of self significantly — my close examination of my beliefs and process as I reflect-in-action, forcing me to confront the inconsistencies in my work as well as to value its strengths. I see myself continually reconstructing myself in the teaching act, reflecting-in-action, attempting to make sense of every moment.

Finding a Form that Reveals Patterns

A short extract in Heathcote and Bolton inspired the methodology used for the analysis. Bolton was examining Heathcote’s opening of a drama entitled, ‘Cancer: Finding a Cure’. He writes that she began the drama this way:

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They say that scientists who try to find out about what makes people ill get their money from the government in Washington, and the President signs their checks. [A very brief pause while she makes general eye contact, not stressing any particular student . . . She suddenly sees this as an unproductive first step — the work would be focused immediately on ‘applying for grants’ activities; so she changes her premise] . . . If we were going to be scientists, we’d need a place to work. (Heathcote and Bolton, 1995:88-89)

Reading this from the perspective of reflection-in-action, I realised that this moment captured Heathcote’s reflection-in-action where she changed the focus of what she was saying to avoid a potential restriction in the drama. Heathcote and Bolton’s book is structured as an ongoing dialogue between them, so it is reasonable to assume that Heathcote explained her reflection-in-action retrospectively as ‘seeing it as an unproductive first step’. In this fragment Bolton describes a moment of Heathcote’s process of reflecting-in-action, alerting us to the shift she makes from ‘signing checks’ to ‘place to work’. Bolton then analyses Heathcote’s entire opening speech to show the way her language shifts and changes and how the contract between her and her students is negotiated. He writes, ‘Of course the teacher does not know for certain that her intention is going to have any of the implications she thinks she’s trailing, but she’s watching for signs of growing or receding interest’ (ibid.:89). This description opened the way for me to be able to rethink how I might present and analyse my data to show the focus of the teacher’s reflection-in-action.

The analysis of the data was a lengthy process. Through closely reviewing the tapes and reading transcripts, I drew out the themes that emerged from this data that were relevant to the reflection-in-action process. After much analysis (viewing, reviewing and cross-checking), I saw that I could recreate my reflection-in-action by bringing together elements including knowledge of how I work; written reflections in the field log; the study of self-in-action from the tapes; and the transcripts, containing a great deal of immediate reflection-on-action. I had collected an overwhelming amount of data over the year — the transcriptions of over one hundred hours of teaching were just the beginning! I selected one particular process drama unit and wrote vignettes to illustrate my reflection-in-action in this unit. Upon the advice of Juliana Saxton, I chose a sequence with a ‘failed’ lesson and this revealed much about reflection-in-action as well as what enables a drama to succeed. I wrote the classroom vignettes from my perspective as the teacher with a re-creation of my reflection-in-action. This was a manageable task because I had already studied the patterns of my reflection-in-action as well as having recorded very detailed field reflections, as most transcripts were written with reflections added on the evening of the teaching. The ‘shaping of a believable final product is part of a seamless whole research process ethically conceived and carried out’, writes Ely (1996:168). Denzin writes that, ‘Authentic understanding is created when readers are able to live their way into an experience that has been described and created’ (1994:506). The vignettes, whilst not recording reflection-in-action with the accuracy I had initially hoped for, do take the reader into the classroom and enable them to experience a sense of the teacher’s reflection-in-action in these moments.

**Documenting the Reflection-in-Action of Others**

In late 2004 I began a research project, *Quality Learning through Process Drama*. The aims of the project are:

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- identify the uses experienced drama teachers make of drama teaching strategies in process drama to improve learning for all students  
- categorise how each dramatic strategy is best employed at each point of the drama to achieve maximum quality learning  
- establish how experienced drama teachers decide which strategy to use and how they modify their work (reflect-in-action) at each point of development of a process drama.

In my funding application I used the results from my thesis to argue the case for completing this project:

... process drama can be used to add complexity to students' understandings of an issue or question, with the art form itself encouraging the tolerance of ambiguity. It is a radical, transformative pedagogy that engages a broad range of students, including those whose learning styles do not match the dominant educational philosophies of most school environments. These research questions are important questions to ask because, although process drama has been documented, discussed and theorized, there has been little work done on how process drama teachers make choices about which strategy to use while they are thinking on their feet. Deciding which strategy to use at each point of the process drama is an important skill that is necessary to teach in this way.

This work, whilst fitting into my faculty's priority area, also builds directly on my thesis findings. The project (which is ongoing) has enabled me to broaden and generalise these findings through structured interviews with other process drama practitioners. In the discussion of this project, I will focus on how I developed the questions in an attempt to record the reflection-in-action of other practitioners as well as to extend my initial findings.

Using Interview Questions to Investigate Reflection-in-Action

I interviewed twenty-five experienced drama practitioners about the strategies they use in process drama, how they use each strategy, what outcomes they believe each strategy produces and how they make decisions in action about which strategy to use. I defined 'experienced' as meaning drama teachers who are comfortable, competent and known for their work using process drama. Many were university teachers engaged in training pre-service teachers. I knew all of them already and had 'done drama' with most of them and knew that they were skilled in the use of process drama. The interviews focused on the use of dramatic form in the classroom in an attempt to be able to describe how and why process drama practitioners selected particular dramatic strategies at different points in the drama.

The questions were designed to encourage the practitioners to discuss their practice in detail and to lead them to recall reflection-in-action in their teaching. I was hoping to be able to collect examples of drama teachers reporting on times when they had changed their minds when they were working, as in the example quoted earlier from Heathcote and Bolton, as well as other examples of how reflection-in-action worked for individuals. The interviews were structured to begin with some general discussion of techniques, starting with teacher-in-role and students-in-role. There was a wide range of uses of these conventions reported, which I am currently compiling and will report on elsewhere.

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By the time the interview led into the selection of how strategies were selected, we were already engaged in an intense discussion of the interviewee's detailed recollections of moments in dramas they had led. I asked directly about strategy selection, and this led into the discussion of reflection-in-action:

- How do you select strategies at different points in the drama?
- Can you think of an example when you changed your mind about the strategy that you were using as you were teaching?
- How did you modify the work?
- Do you think drama teachers have to reflect-in-action/think on their feet in this way very often?

All participants in the study agreed immediately that drama teachers had to reflect-in-action all the time and were keen to talk about this in detail. I am not sure to what extent participants were picking up on my own excitement, as I was almost breathless upon hearing the certainty of the responses, as each response was confirming an aspect of my thesis findings. Everyone could refer to specific moments when they could recall themselves reflecting-in-action and some interviewees specifically spoke about the importance of reflection-in-action to drama teaching. Here is an extract showing one response:

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<td>Do you think drama teachers have to reflect-in-action/think on their feet in this way very often? All of the time — which is why it is very tiring to be a drama teacher! . . . There are actually two levels of this because you have to have the confidence in your planning before you get anywhere near the group of students so that you've got a workable structure — even though you can subvert the structure yourself — there is that level of thinking . . . But then there is also the adaptive behaviours that you are making as you go, things that you want to extend, things that you want to truncate . . . or you get something that you didn't expect but you know is the right thing to follow, so you go, &quot;Yes, I better latch on to that&quot;, and even if it skewers your original intention it doesn't matter because you are still following a thread like the miner following the thread of gold. You just have to know where that thread is going to take you and have confidence to go there but also to know how to get back again, and that's where having experience, but also having structure and having those sets of strategies, having all those sorts of things that you build out from and then you go — ok, we'll choose this bit, move on that bit — shorter, longer — but it is reflection in practice, that as you are moving you are reflecting.</td>
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This interviewee is talking in general terms here about the value of reflection-in-action, before later describing specific examples of reflection-in-action in teaching. Some practitioners began with specific examples before making more general comments. As the interviewer, I was relying on the structured questions to lead into the discussion of reflection-in-action. Like a process drama itself, the structure of the questions was designed to frame the discussions to lead into the specific recall of reflection-in-action and, while I was reflecting-in-action, sometimes I shifted the order or modified the questions in the shape of the practitioner's response.

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These interviews were extraordinary and there is much to write about. I was struck by the ability of practitioners to recall moments of drama in detail and to be able to tell their stories so well that I could relive these moments as we completed the interviews. It is the nature of our work that we are storytellers, creating dramatic worlds, so it stands to reason that drama practitioners would be particularly good interviewees. There is a great deal of data in these interviews that I will be writing from in the next year — different stories told from different perspectives about the nature of what we do in the classroom space. I am sure that what happens in these moments of decision making, as we reflect-in-action while we work using process drama — that is what makes or breaks the success of our work as drama teachers.

Researching Reflection-in-Action in Process Drama

Researching the connections between reflection-in-action and process drama teaching is an ongoing project with many possibilities and implications. It has been valuable to take one question and research it from several perspectives using different methods. My next approach to this problem is to record a drama teacher teaching and then interview them about their decision making as we watch a tape of the lesson together. This will be an interesting way to document their reflection-in-action and, using new technologies, I will be able to map the interview responses onto the video of the actual drama, hopefully to be accessible with a click. There are implications for teacher training from this work, particularly how we might go about training teachers to use process drama. Process drama is extremely complex and the interviews confirm this complexity, particularly in the range of factors practitioners cite as impacting upon their decision making in practice. I am intending to do some further research into this area, as I suspect that one of the reasons that not as many early career teachers use process drama as we might hope is that it is difficult in the first years of teaching to read, notice and attend to the classroom with the skill required to effectively use process drama.

Reflection-in-action is necessary to achieve excellence in process drama work. Because process drama is created in-action, reflection-in-action determines the shape of the drama. O’Neill writes:

If drama is a mirror, its purpose is not merely to provide a flattering reflection that confirms our existing understanding. It must be used as mirrors often are, as a means of seeing ourselves more clearly and allowing us to begin to correct whatever is amiss. It is not merely an instrument of reference, but also a place of disclosure.

(1995:152)

Reflective practice also leads to self-disclosure and self-knowledge. It provides a way for us to see our practice in a different light, enabling us to examine and correct whatever is amiss.

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