

## THEATRE AS EDUCATION

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### Abstract

My privileged opportunity to work with renowned Drama theorist, Dorothy Heathcote, in Melbourne in the 1970s, set a foundation for what I now call Theatre as Education research. Formerly a teacher of Secondary Drama, I became very experienced at creating plays with my students, based on their own ideas, or inspired by the stories of the community. When working in a tiny country town in Victoria, I took my Drama class to visit the Senior Citizens in our community, and collect anecdotes of their youthful experiences. The adolescents asked, 'What was it like- here in this town - when you were my age?' The responses were candid and sometimes less likely than fiction. We wrote a one-act play, which incorporated the many different dialogues, and we performed it for the town. Our co-researchers were the special guests, taking front row seats. They watched their lives re-enacted, and an inter-generational bond was forged.

This paper will present my approach to creating plays out of chaotic, narrative data. There has emerged a kind of formula, which is flexible enough to apply to groups of students or adults, with varying abilities in qualitative research data collection and in the performing arts. I have used the Theatre as Education formula to showcase research data in both schools and at academic conferences, as well as in print. This paper presents a step-by-step approach to collecting, analysing, interpreting and restructuring oral data for performance text. It will also present some examples from published plays, which were born of narrative. I believe Theatre as Education works as both an engaging pedagogy for teachers, and an innovative framework for the presentation of primary research data. I would like to share my approach with you.

### Theatre as Education

I observed a very thorough Grade One lesson recently, when on my routine rounds to visit Primary Education students doing professional experience. The children were using slates to learn spelling, via the current *gradual release* pedagogy – *I do, you do, we do* (Levy, 2007). The pace was cyclonic. I am hoping it was just because I was there as an observer and making things worse. I am not sure that I when I was in Grade One I would have been able to do as well as these children, given my dyslexia, but most of them seemed to be keeping up. For the one or two who did not immediately meet the objective, the class would pause and wait, so that under the weight of their gaze, the individual could try again (and again) until it was right. Was that concentration I saw on those little faces, or anxiety? Certainly all were engaged. No one was smiling.

Later that day, at the same school, I was talking with my Pre-Service Education students who had been working with Grades 5 and 6 classes. One of them commented that the children seemed to lack the confidence to take initiative or to be creative. It was a possible consequence resulting from a teacher-driven curriculum, which we had discussed in our Arts Education tutorials earlier in the year, but I was surprised that the student could recall it and recognise the syndrome in her pupils. How can teachers, who are sometimes expected to micromanage learners in the name of accountability, balance their teaching with strategies to empower learners in the name of creativity?

I worked for many years as a Drama teacher in Secondary Schools, and later as a Theatre in Education performer, writer and director in Primary and Early Childhood institutions. I would like to share some of my approaches to doing theatre as education, and engaging adolescents with writing and performing plays, based on community issues. The plays I will talk about are ones that I have created in the

classroom with my students, based on research data, collected, analyzed and interpreted for performance ethnography by the students themselves.

This paper is deliberately autoethnographic, as I am reflecting upon and analyzing my own experiences within an educational context. There are many approaches to autoethnography (Ellis, 2004; Ellis, Jones, & Adams, 2013; Jones, 2015), and this one attempts to draw reflexively on experience to produce a qualitative outcome. The outcome here will be the model for using theatre for education, which I describe later in the paper. I ask the reader, when assessing the rigor of this research, to consider whether the sample-size limitations of my first-person experiences may be offset by the depth of description that can only be gained and explained through autoethnographic research. I will firstly discuss the pedagogical advantages of working with theatre-based methods, and then offer a step by step summary of my Theatre as Education approach, as it has evolved after thirty years of teaching. So, although I am telling my story of teaching theatre for education, I am also offering an analysis and an outcome, which may be useful to other educators. My hope is that teachers will engage with the concept of Drama as pedagogy, and that children might enjoy more arts-based activities to inspire and empower their learning.

### Children Growing Strength through Creative Risk-Taking

Dorothy Heathcote created a 'Teacher in Role' approach to Drama in the 1970s, which she called the Mantle of the Expert (Heathcote, 2004). As a Drama student at Melbourne University around that time, I was in the privileged position to train under Heathcote, when she visited to conduct workshops in her Mantle of the Expert approach. She was just starting to develop it then. It was a play-based approach to improvised drama, which as I will argue, brought to the classroom the same sorts of positive learning qualities of student empowerment and intrinsic motivation that seems to be inherent in Theatre as Education research practice. Probably I developed my research approach under the influence of Heathcote's methods, although I was not conscious of the connection until recently.

The drama lesson using Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert cannot be planned in the way that contemporary teaching plans are expected to be predictable and finite. The teacher, in role, plays out a character who has some authority, in order to influence and steer the drama as necessary. The students assume roles of their own, and some kind of situation and purpose is established. The rest is improvised, and anything can happen. Children 'playing' roles must take emotional and artistic risks with their characters. The whole class make it up as they go along, and support one another, as the story-making becomes their common goal. This improvised approach to doing Drama is good training for teachers and students who wish to progress to improvising, writing and performing plays based on actual anecdotes they have collected from real research participants. Allow me to elaborate a little on this, so I can better explain the common pedagogical advantages of 'Teacher in Role' and Performance Ethnography.

Performance Ethnography – sometimes called Performance Text (Denzin, 2003) is now a recognised research methodology. Some scholars classify it as a type of Autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2013). I am advocating its potential to facilitate the integration of Arts teaching into curricula, and to engage children with issues relevant to their community. I have trialed the approach with both school students as researchers and university students as researchers. Here is an example:

### A Story of Theatre as Research

Last year my Arts Education tertiary students visited a local school, and talked to Year 8 girls about what life and school was like for them. These 13 year old girls were simply asked to tell stories - about anything – as they recall them. The pre-service teachers spoke with the students in small, independent groups. When we returned to our rehearsal room, each group reported the stories as they recalled them, endeavoring to remain true to both the detail and overall intent of each story. We then wrote key sentences and words on the whiteboard. What began to emerge was a common theme. Concerns about bullying and cyberbullying were at the center of many anecdotes. There was a sub-theme too; that of needing the approval of one's peers.

Back at the university, we improvised around some ideas, and created characters. The actors were

trained Drama graduates, so this was relatively easy. Theatre as Education research works best with experienced Drama students who have a few theatrical conventions and protocols at their disposal. We decided to set the action in a school. Finally, one of the students, a promising young writer, took the ideas and wrote them into a script, which she called, *The Popular Problem*. In the past, when I have worked with high school Drama students, I have usually needed to write much of the script myself, to insure the inclusion of all of the data. When the play is eventually performed for the storytellers, it is important that they can identify their personal contributions and see their stories come to life.

The tertiary students returned to the school with the *Popular Problem* several weeks later. After the show, the girls told us they could relate to the material, because they had generated it. The script left open important questions, asking the audience what they would do in cases of bullying and cyber bullying. We had prepared two loosely predicted and rehearsed endings, so that the performers could end the play as advised by the audience. This worked well, as the audience enjoyed power over the story making along with the performers.

The discussions and collaborate decision-making tasks enabled the audience to engage with the issues. The audience was energized, passionate, and these polite, private school girls found themselves calling out in excitement. We were delighted. There have been decades of research devoted to engaging middle years students in learning (DEET, 2001), so why was this apparently so unusually energising for both the performers and the audience? As educators, what might we take from this to lift motivation in the classroom? Perhaps the *I do, We do, You do* approach works for spelling, but it certainly can't accommodate Bloom's Higher Order Thinking Skills (CELT, 2015) and emotional empathy (Vallack, 2011) like the theatrical playback of one's own story seems to do.

## Children as Researchers

The example of Theatre as Education I have described was constructed by pre-service teachers in conjunction with school children. It could model a way forward now for those children to conduct similar performance ethnographies within their community. The children then become the researchers. Let me cite an example of how some of my former Secondary students used the same Theatre-as-Education approach for cross-generational research. It took place in the remote Victorian town, with a population of only 800:

A small group of Year 11 Drama students visited the Senior Citizens Club one Tuesday in 1998. Pairs of students sat with an older person, who related stories of the town, as they recalled it, when they were about the age of the listener – about sixteen. It took them back to the time of World War 2. One of the ladies used to work in her parent's General Store, and (later) we found it convenient to set the story there. The store was a meeting place, which enabled other characters to drop by and relate their own stories. The characters that emerged via the anecdotes included a young teacher, two young men who were sent to war, school children and the protagonist, Grace, who worked behind the counter in the shop. We created a fictional character as a vehicle for incidental and (as it evolved) comical information about the times. We called her Mrs Brown. She developed as the town gossip.

As the preservice teachers had done, we returned to the classroom to record elements of the oral data on a whiteboard. We then looked for ways to link the anecdotes, and during one of the class improvisations, we stumbled upon Mrs Brown holding up customers in the general store with her gossip. I must emphasise the superior way that free-association through dramatic improvisation can bring data together as theatre. A conscious attempt at thinking it through and script writing is better left until after the improvisation has revealed all of its little gems of character quirks and comic ironies. The conscious mind is not as creatively gifted as the unconscious, as I have argued on other occasions (Vallack, 2010b).

When the play was ready, and complete with musical *Hits from the Blitz* to energise and transport the audience to a past era, it was performed for the town. We called the play, *A Penny for your Thoughts*". The Senior Citizens were invited as special guests, and given reserved seating in the front row. One lady cried a little as she watched her life unfold as theatre. They were the stars. And the students, who originally had been a little sheepish about talking to "old people", played their roles with reverence and pride for their new friends. One of the best research elements to come from this project was an awareness of how values and customs have changed over the decades. The most poignant story was told by the lady who worked in the General Store – the girl we called Grace. She had fallen in love

with a young man when she was fifteen. She could not marry him, as she was obliged to keep the family business afloat. As her parents grew older, she was obliged to care for them. Finally, when she was fifty, her parents died. Her young man had been to war and returned to Murtoa to wait for her. They married when they were fifty, and had enjoyed over twenty happy years together, before he too passed away, two weeks prior to the students' visit to the Senior Citizens' Club.

This research was based on oral histories, collected, analysed and presented by secondary students, through the research process I call Theatre as Education. The outcomes included a written record of local history, a theatrical performance for the school and town and all of the learning associated with it, cross-generational community awareness and engagement, and expression of respect for community citizens who were recognised and made to feel valued. Importantly, I think, it was research that allowed the viewers to appreciate the findings both cognitively and emotionally. As academics we focus so much on knowing things intellectually, but that is not the only way we know what we know. Sometimes we just know intuitively – in our bones. Jean Gebser (Gebser, 1986) has convinced many of us (Neville, 2005) (Vallack, 2010a) that we know through our ancient “mythical” and “magical consciousness” as well as our scientific and rational, “mental consciousness”.

Like Dorothy Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert, Theatre as Education is an approach to teaching and research that sets out to develop in children the confidence to creatively go forth into the unknown. This confidence grows from within the learner. Heathcote (2009) explains the concept as follows:

Mantle is not a cloak by which a person is recognised. This is no garment to cover. I use it as a quality of leadership, carrying standards of behaviour, morality, responsibility, ethics and the spiritual basis of all action. The mantle embodies the standards I ascribe to. It grows by usage, not by garment stitching. (Heathcote, 2009, pp1-2)

Aitkin (Aitken, 2012) explains it further:

...the Mantle of the Expert places the child at the centre of the learning. The teacher's role is to create conditions whereby a mantle of leadership, knowledge, competency and understanding grows around the child. This approach assumes a progressive view of learning, responsive to the needs of the child (Heston, 1993) cited in Aitkin, 2012, p.35)

The child-centred learning that takes place through play-based pedagogies such as Theatre as Education and the Mantle of the Expert is a far cry from gradual release practice of *I do, We do, You do*. But of course different types of learning require different methods. Whereas the gradual release approach may well serve rote learning and the mastering of duplicable skills, higher and more complex thinking tasks must be learned experientially. Creativity cannot be rote learned. It cannot be predicted with accuracy. Like a garden, it can be planned for and nurtured, but the seeds must ultimately find their own way to fruition. Like Heathcote's child-centered approach through the Mantle of the Expert, Theatre as Education empowers the child-researchers and performers for these elements of growth and awareness:

Table 1 What Learning Takes Place with Theatre as Education?

Element	How it works
Creative fiction and metaphor	Students base their characters on the data, but use artistic license to link or represent themes symbolically. This engages the Higher Order Thinking Skills of synthesis and creativity, as well as the sophisticated concept of metaphor.
Collective Identity	A group-devised performance is team work, which gives the individual players a sense of belonging
Client-Focus with real life purpose	Having met with the co-researchers, the storytellers, the students make a commitment to do justice to the stories and take on responsibility of the client's trust. Students see purpose in the activity
Integrated Learning	The project combines the learning skills from subjects like History, Drama, English, for example, in a meaningful way. Since ACARA now mandates that the Arts are included in the curriculum, Arts-Based Pedagogies may be a useful and valuable solution to overcrowded timetables.
Complex analytical skills	Synthesising the story elements realistically allows students to appreciate the multiple perspectives, paradox and irony.

The argument Aitkin(Aitken, 2012) uses to endorse Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert is also relevant to Theatre as Education research:

...the purpose of the learning is clear and immediate. This is not learning for its own sake, nor for the teacher or "for your own good". Neither is it learning for some time in the future or for a test. Rather it is learning because someone actually needs it done now, and needs it done well. In other words, each task is purposeful, and occurs within a real life context (Aitkin, 2012 p.38).

I have argued the virtues of learning through play-based pedagogies, such as Theatre as Education. Play comes naturally to children, and adolescents have good role models in film and television to enable them to sustain an interest in the performing arts. I will now offer a set of guidelines for teachers to use, should they wish to do a research project with their classes, using the Theatre as Education approach.

### How to do Theatre as Education Research in the Classroom

1. Decide what to research. Ask the children to collect stories from older folk, or younger siblings, or perhaps local heroes – a fireman, a policeman, an indigenous elder, for example. The JCU preservice teachers interviewed adolescent girls, and the Victorian school students talked to older folk, but any appropriate cohort of interest may be interviewed.
2. Once the stories and anecdotes have been collected, and the group is ready to begin to analyse the data and look for story lines, ask students to sit in a circle. The circle operates as a practical and symbolic way of indicating that this is not a teacher-led activity, but rather one that is group-devised. It has served in this way before even King Arthur's round table. It is a theatrical tradition and also an ancient indigenous protocol for storytelling. In the circle, the physical position of each person shows they are of equal importance to the process.
3. Allow each person to present their data – to tell their story as they recall it, without interruption. The group can then discuss the story and identify and research themes, performance ideas or characters that seem to 'jump out' at them. Write these on a white board as the students talk. One reason for using the whiteboard is that it is immediate and inclusive. Children see their ideas appear in writing before their eyes, so they know they have been heard and noted. It is hard for them to hear others when their minds are tracking down their own paths, so later, when they are more aware, they will see how their thoughts may sit in the context of other ideas. Links, settings and ideas for improvisations can be drawn from the whiteboard notes.
4. Improvise. Allow children to play with characters and dialogue. See what emerges. This way, through creative play, the dreamy, unconscious minds of the children can play a part in synthesising the many strands of data. Remain alert for insights that may pop out unexpectedly.
5. Draw up characters and story lines from improvisation.
6. Take the data and analysis and write it up as a script. As the teacher/researcher, you may do this, but if motivated, some students may do it better. At JCU, when the preservice teacher wrote the script based on adolescent bullying themes, her product was far superior to anything I could have written, as she was in touch with social media and humour relevant to the clients. She was funny because she knew what would make Year 8 students laugh. I was out of touch, having been away from schools for too long. Humour is so important for engaging the audience, and cuts through doubts the clientele may have about being patronised by outsiders who don't understand.
7. Rehearse the script, but don't always stick to it. If better ideas flow during the rehearsal (and they will) look for ways to accommodate them. Don't be surprised if profound insights dawn. Work them into the script.

8. Perform the play to the clients who told the stories. Throughout the rehearsal process, the actors know that their ultimate evaluation will come from the storytellers themselves, and this lends a purpose to the activity that goes beyond doing school work. This purpose engages intrinsic motivation, which as Csikszentmihalyi argues, takes the performance up to the level of Art (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Once the data has been collected, and written up as fragments all over the whiteboard, it is important to construct a framework for the detail to follow. When we did the play in the Victorian country town, with the older folk, we set the scenes in the General Store. This enabled us to bring in, as incidental, the many small memories related to us, which gave an ambience and authenticity to the performance. Here is an example of how we combined several accounts, covering a diversity of historic references, including the types of sweets sold in the shop, the deadly influenza outbreak of the 1940s and a budding romance that would endure a lifetime.

Excerpt from *A Penny for Your Thoughts* (Vallack, 2005)

The troupe enters as neutral actors, and take up the various characters in the play, "You Don't Get Much For a Penny These Days". This play is also presented non-naturalistically, but there are moments of emotional truth. Vera Lynne's "Lily Marlene" plays as actors arrange set. The red painted modules, the doorframe and an imaginary table are moved into place by the actors. Characters of Grace and Tammy take up positions. Grace begins to dust the shop. Tammy dons costume in view of audience, then enters.

**Grace:** Morning Tammy.  
**Tammy:** Morning Grace.  
**Grace:** What can I do for you today Tammy?  
**Tammy:** I'd like a farthing of them please.  
**Grace:** These?  
**Tammy:** Yes please. And a ha'penny of them. Um...How much are they?  
**Grace:** Two for a penny.  
**Tammy:** No...a halfpenny worth of them. What are they at the top Grace?  
**Grace :** Right at the top?  
**Tammy:** Yes.  
**Grace:** They're aniseed balls – eight for a penny.  
**Tammy:** Yes, I'll have two please.  
**Grace:** You're up to a penny ha'penny.  
**Tammy:** OK, here. Bye.  
**Grace:** Bye. See you next Friday  
**Tammy:** I'll have a whole twopence to spend then! *Grace looks horrified.*  
*Exit Tammy.*  
**Lewis:** 'Morning Grace. Gee, that kid takes her time, doesn't she!  
**Grace"** 'Sure does. I think she takes more time to spend a penny than most people take to spend a pound.  
**Lewis:** Has the formalin that Dad ordered come in yet?  
**Grace:** Yes, I'll just get it from out the back. Your father's ordered a fair bit of this lately. This flu epidemic is really tragic.  
**Lewis:** The town's not itself – there are no dances any more - they've even closed the skating rink.  
(Pause)  
  
You look really nice today, Grace.  
**Grace:** Thank you, Lewis.  
**Lewis:** You must really miss the dances.  
**Grace:** No. I didn't really have anyone to go with.  
**Lewis:** Well, when they start again, maybe you will. *(Pause)* I'd better get this back to Dad.  
**Grace:** I'm glad you're not in the funeral business, Lewis.  
**Lewis:** No need to worry about that – George is a good worker. Dad

doesn't need anyone else.  
*Enter Dad, tired of waiting for Lewis.*  
**Dad:** What's taking so long, Lew?  
**Lewis:** Oh, nothing. 'Just talking.  
**Dad:** Good morning, Grace.  
**Grace :** Good morning, Mr Beck.  
**Dad:** Lewis, George has quit – I'm gonna need your help son.  
**Lewis:** George? Why?  
**Dad:** This flu epidemic is bad, Lewis. He says he wants to get his family back to Broken Hill before it gets any worse. He's just scared, I guess. There's no need – the formalin kills any infection. We're not scared though, are we son!  
**Lewis:** No Dad.  
**Dad:** OK then. Good day, Grace.  
*Exit Dad*  
**Lewis:** Actually, I am a bit scared , Grace.  
**Grace:** So am I.

#### *Exit Lewis*

Doing Theatre as Education and as research is like a leap of faith. Many of us hesitate in the face of uncertainty. Some are more comfortable with *I do, We do, You do*, and leave Theatre as Education to the rest of us – and that's OK too. There are not only many valid learning styles but also many valid teaching styles. When embarking on Theatre as Education, the participants do not know in advance what information they will receive, and what they will learn from the experience. This learning is both research and art, which will evolve and take shape through the creative process. And it *will* evolve. It always surprises me a little each time a play seems to unexpectedly manifest. For a while, the researchers sit patiently with the chaos, but patterns always emerge, if you sit quietly and wait. The concepts take time to rise from the unconscious to the preconscious (Freud, 1900/ 2010) before breaking into the consciousness in the form of an image or metaphor. In a recent Radio National Australia broadcast, writer David Bann observed that we always see shapes in ink blots because humans are pattern makers. I think this is why purposeful research direction can emerge from a chaotic conglomeration of oral histories. We construct meaning out of chaos, thus creating our realities. Scientists do it. Autoethnographers do it. Artists do it. Children are especially good at it.

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