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The Second Curriculum Opera: Arias, Assessment and Methodological Traces

Abstract

Drawing on contemporary forms of qualitative research such as performance ethnography (McCall, 2000), autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis & Flaherty, 1992) and using narrative and writing as forms of inquiry (Richardson, 1990; 1992; 1995a; 1995b; 1997; 1999; 2000), this research project constructs a 'learning through' (Gardner, 1983; 1993; 1995; 1999; 2003a; 2003b) approach to curriculum within pre-service teacher education. During 2002 we initiated the first curriculum opera (Dixon & White, 2003; Dixon, White, & Smerdon, 2003) in our Faculty of Education with thirty-seven students. In 2003 we developed this learning and teaching approach with twice as many students. We also reconsidered assessment of students involved in the opera for overall theoretical consistency. As students increasingly took control, they 'imagined curriculum' (Doll & Gough, 2002) and transformed their exploration of identity in the 'process of becoming' teachers (Britzman, 2003). In this paper, we outline the project and the learning involved. We also indicate future directions for learning and teaching in preservice teacher education as well as the potential uses and misuses of teacher assessment through portfolio.

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Libretto

The beauty of opera is the way it brings together several different art forms (music, drama, and visual arts) to make one incredible theatrical experience. Opera unifies a whole range of passions and themes: the triumph of love, love unrequited, lust for wealth and power, unexpected joy, murderous jealousy, the corruption of innocence, sexual infidelity, and political intrigue (Fielding, 2002).

What has opera got to do with curriculum and preservice teachers? In our attempts to break with formalist traditions (Greene in Britzman, 2003, p. x) of teacher education we have posed questions about the relationships between pedagogy and practice in our classrooms. We have resisted the tendency to accept the spatial and temporal dislocation of the ivory tower of academia from the authentic learning site of the school classroom and insisted on authentic and participatory learning in our curriculum decision making. We are provoked by our experience of education students who bring a wealth of learning experience. We have been witness to and participant in their emergent professional and personal identities as they struggle with the conflicting sites of their professional learning in schools and then in the university (Moss et al., 2004). In this paper we provide a critical reading of a text of practice, a text of learning to teach. This includes both our learning as teacher educators and the learning of our students. We provide a 'libretto', if you like, that outlines the narrative or plot about the development of the opera. This narrative documents the exploratory project we developed with preservice teachers in both primary and secondary teacher education programs at the University of Melbourne during 2002, 2003 and into 2004. We discuss the development of this teaching and learning approach together with our three major concerns:

1. the significance of 'learning through' approach and student ownership,
2. assessment of knowledge construction and identity formation, and
3. methodological traces and influences from our research work on our teaching.

In 2002, we initiated a project in which students developed an opera about curriculum. As explained earlier (Dixon & White, 2003; Dixon et al., 2003), the opera was initially conceived as a research project focused on two central questions:

1. To what extent is the understanding of multiple intelligences by pre-service teachers improved by 'learning through'? (Gardner, 1999);

2. Can pre-service teachers address fundamental issues in curriculum and assessment through the development of a performance? (p.3).

While we were interested in using opera as a medium for learning, we saw it as only one part of the class time and operating alongside other learning approaches. The ‘real’ and ‘proper’ learning still occurred in the form of workshop activities to support content that had been presented in lectures. The students’ reflection and comments about the opera were a small part of the overall subject assessment. It was an ‘add-on’ if you like. However, the student response to the opera experience was powerful and intense. As reported earlier (Dixon & White, 2003; Dixon et al., 2003), ‘the student learning went beyond the expectations and boundaries we set as the students revealed ownership and articulation of their learning processes’ (p.5). As a result we decided to reflexively reconceptualise what we were aiming to do and how we would develop and improve this process of ‘learning through’ (Gardner, 1993, 2003a). These changes had implications for three significant aspects of the project – the approach to teaching in the subject, the assessment process and the methodological positioning of the project.

Opera should engage you to the point where you see with your ears and hear with your eyes. You are so overwhelmingly involved in the experience, you can't tell where one sense ends and another begins (Fielding, 2002).

The subject in which the opera project occurred, ‘Curriculum & Assessment’, is a core subject for over eight hundred students and is delivered through a weekly one-hour lecture and three-hour workshops for groups of about thirty students at a time. In 2002 the three-hour workshop had included the opera amongst other activities. The initial opera experience had revealed the possibilities for learning in a situation characterized by student ownership (Kezar, 2001) and ‘learning through’ (Gardner, 1983, 1993, 1995, 1999, 2003a, 2003b) process. We were convinced that learning about curriculum and assessment came *through* their opera-work rather than from workshop activities *about* curriculum and assessment. In 2003 we gave the workshop over entirely to the development of the opera. Further, the issue of ‘ownership’ had implications for our teacher role. While in 2002, we had been ‘producers’ of the opera, and had called in artistic expertise to ‘direct’ the performance, in 2003, the students took *ownership* of the project.

You don't have to know a lot about opera to understand what makes a good performance, because when opera is good, you will know it on a gut level (Fielding, 2002).

The change in the teaching demanded a change in assessment and this led us to 'authentic' assessment (Cumming & Maxwell, 1999) and the use of portfolio (Wolf, 1994). We decided to use portfolio because of its potential for exploration of the opera process as well as identity and curriculum. It would also allow a place for individual expression alongside the collaborative opera site.

Throughout the development of the opera, each student constructed their own portfolios that articulated the development of their professional stances on curriculum and assessment.

In critiquing our teaching and learning practice in 2002, we used four stages of action research outlined by Arthur, Gordon and Butterfield (2003):

1. pondering
2. planning
3. putting in a strategy
4. pulling back to refine your initiative (p. 212)

as a theoretical framework. In 2003 we developed a more reflexive (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Smyth & Shacklock, 1998) teaching approach and in so doing distanced this project from action research. Some methodological considerations and implications regarding this shift are taken up later in this paper.

During the making of the opera the students 'imagined' curriculum. In their curriculum 'imagining', the operatic chorus critiqued current mandated and outcomes-based programs and constraints. The operatic dancers worked through curriculum tensions as they juxtaposed contemporary dance with haka¹ and ballet. They 'reconceptualize[d] the nature of curriculum to see it not in terms of plans preset or ideologies advocated, but as an image hovering over the process of education' (Doll & Gough, 2002).

¹ Based on Maori ceremonial posture dance with vocal accompaniments

In November 2003, our seventy students publicly performed their opera and completed their portfolios, which included such forms as written pieces, CD Roms, photographic narratives, models, art pieces and paintings. For example, one student, Gisela, reported that:

Working in the opera has given us the chance to begin to express our identities as teachers by establishing where we stand as curriculum creators and assessors. Much of this awareness has also come from the way the Opera itself reflects Curriculum and Assessment through the arguments, suggestions, knock backs, and successes. It is these understandings that we hope will profoundly colour the stance we take with our students in the future (Gisela, 2003).

We now move from the libretto to the three arias.

Teaching and Learning Through Opera

‘[a]n ethnographic opera where voices argued, disrupted, and pleaded with one another; where the high drama of misunderstandings, deceit, and the conflicting desires made present and absent through language and through practice confound what is typically taken as the familiar story of learning to teach’ (Britzman, 2003, p. 247).

Although Britzman was writing of her own experience in writing an ethnography of student teacher experience, the tensions and dynamics of operatic voices are evocative of the sounds of our opera. In this process we, the students and the teachers, were engaged in exciting and confrontational risk taking. The ownership of their learning was established from the outset as the students actively chose to join this class. They knew they would be ‘doing’ this subject through making an opera. Many of the students knew us, the teachers, through previous classes. Mureli commented, ‘I hate opera. But I want to do it because I trust you - so I will come.’ Other students did not know us personally but had heard that this class was going to create an opera, and so they came. The numbers

for the class grew to fifty students. By the second week, other students had heard about the class and its singing, dancing, writing, arguing, acting and authentic collaborative work and then there were seventy students.

Finishing assignments and assessments at the end of the first semester, the prospect of presenting an opera next time, rather than another bloody essay, seemed idyllic. I decided “Why not?” and signed up (Antoinette, 2003).

We had a group of students who had chosen to be part of this learning process – the stage was already set for student-centred learning.

Students knew they were not going to learn *about* the subject and then at the end create a presentation of their learnings in the form of an opera. It was clearly not an exhibition (Sizer, 1992, 1996). The students were confronted in a way they had not previously experienced. They had heard of the process of ‘learning through’ (Gardner, 1995) and of meaningful learning and authentic learning. They had heard of, and even advocated, a student-centred approach. Their workshop time was, from the outset, devoted to creating the opera. They were responsible for both creating this opera *and* for constructing their understandings of curriculum and assessment through that process of creation. Initially, this was a source of concern for some students. For example, Justin wrote:

I have reservations that this will disintegrate into a big ‘love-in’ that loses its way and does not keep focus on our as yet unidentified goals. I am also wary of people hijacking the class and dominating it with their personality. Apart from that I am excited by the scope that we have and by what might happen, lasting outcomes are more likely from this approach (2003).

They were worried that they wouldn’t know enough about the content as if the content of curriculum and assessment existed in a bounded document or place. We knew from our previous experience of opera making (Dixon & White, 2003; Dixon et al., 2003) that they would be involved in serious, reflective and highly analytical thinking about curriculum. We knew that, through a collaborative process involving music, movement, and writing,

they would engage with and critically interrogate central issues of curriculum and assessment.

Opera has offered us the scope to express our thoughts into performance and allowed us to whisper our fears. As the Opera evolved a series of vignettes began to take shape, each with its own voice; each exploring a different aspect of the Curriculum and Assessment landscape (Gisella, 2003).

As they committed themselves to the opera, each student (even those who had initially declared they wanted a backstage role) positioned themselves on the stage. In doing this they questioned, created and imagined themselves as curriculum makers – not just program implementers. They saw curriculum as a creative process rather than the technical implementation of programs devised by others. They seemed to recognise that it was the expression of their professional identities as teachers that they were singing and dancing. Mureli traces this process:

Why do I have to do this? What's this got to do with teaching anyway?
I can't dance! I can't sing! Look at all of them getting into it! What can I offer?
We were planning a curriculum! Transformation! I was so nervous!
Coming together! So much work has been put in by all of us. I have come such a long way. I have learnt by doing, by doing I have understood, and by that I have become ... A TEACHER (Mureli, 2003).

They were also 'writing' their portfolios at the same time as they were creating the opera. These took a multiplicity of forms. And the 'writing' was important work in terms of identity transformation (White, 2004) and curriculum understanding. In her seminal work, 'Writing: A Method of Inquiry,' Laurel Richardson (2000) explains: 'Although we usually think about writing as a mode of "telling" about the social world, writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of "knowing" – a method of discovery and analysis' (p. 499). Further, an interesting connection between identity and writing is that the *process* of writing (or in this particular

instance, creating and making as well) itself can help gather and order thoughts and can be a time of contemplation and illumination. Ely, Vinz et al (1997) comment that ‘We often marvel at how understanding is informed through writing’ (p. 14). Further, writing seems to have a transformative quality. It has the power to change people and as bell hooks (1994) commented, ‘Focusing on experience allows them to claim a knowledge base from which they can speak’ (p. 21). As mentioned earlier, other forms were included as well as writing, but the essential focus was on making the internal world explicit. This is aligned closely with autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) ‘whereby the researcher’s own experience [becomes] a topic of investigation in its own right’ (p. 733).

For our students, the collaborative, creative and authentic process had profoundly engaged them both professionally and personally.

My dealing with people, their lives, and the process we went through and the endless questioning of worth, quality and meaning will forever affect my teaching. It weaved curriculum, assessment and teachers work into a coherent whole much more than I will ever be able to. It was the success of many working towards a shared goal with a thousand different visions. The process of working with people, text, ego, time, pressure, joy, sadness is what made it rich. The learning was something that happened subtly while you tried to explain to someone that it would be ok, or to trust the process when you yourself were not so sure (Matt, 2003).

Knowledge, Identity and Portfolio

We ‘noticed’ (Mason, 2002; Moss et al., 2004) that in developing curriculum knowledge and ‘creating’ curriculum understandings through the opera and subsequent portfolio, our students focused very much on identity and transformation during the process. Connelly and Clandinin (1999) also commented that, after talking with many experienced teachers about knowledge, the issue of identity emerged as being paramount:

We noticed that teachers seemed to be trying to answer different questions [from knowledge-related ones]. Their questions were ones of identity. They were questions of “Who am I in my story of teaching?”; “Who am I in my place at the school?”; “Who am I in children’s stories?”; “Who am I in my administrator’s stories?” “Who am I in parents’ stories?” and so on. We began to listen more closely. What we heard intrigued us. In graduate student writing, in teacher inquiry groups, and in research meetings, teachers were more inclined to ask questions along the lines of “Who am I in this situation?” then “What do I know in this situation?” Teachers seemed more concerned to ask questions of who they are than of what they know (p. 3).

We saw the portfolio as an opportunity to engage with significant curriculum ideas and the self. Using portfolios with preservice teachers is not a new idea (Loughran & Corrigan, 1995; Lyons, 1998; McLaughlin & Vogt, 1996; Reid & Frid, 2001). While the portfolio is drawn originally from the arts (Wolf, 1994), where it is used to exhibit one’s technique and skill, in our context a portfolio draws on narrative theory. Our aim in using portfolio was to encourage:

- the exploration of identity
- reflection on involvement in the opera process
- interaction between knowledge about curriculum and the self
- the articulation of personal philosophy including beliefs and values.

We encouraged the students to use a range of forms for this expression and were surprised at the extraordinary portfolios they submitted.

We felt that we could not assess the individual performance and contribution of students through the performance alone. Nor could we assess the performance as a collaborative effort. There were many

‘supernumeraries’² or ‘spear carriers’ onstage, but the development of the opera vignettes was collaborative and inclusive. The individual portfolios allowed us to assess individual students through their own voices.

We were also aware of the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) plans to introduce a portfolio (VIT, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c), and felt an obligation to prepare our students for this. What VIT actually ended up requiring of beginning teachers (VIT, 2004) in their ‘portfolio’ reflects a quite different discourse about what it is to be a teacher (White, 2004). In contrast to the portfolio we required our students to complete, the VIT version of portfolio emphasizes a much more narrow and bureaucratic understanding of teaching. Judyth Sachs’ (2003) provides a key to understanding this difference in her comment: ‘Because standards in Australia and the UK have been set, in the main, by administrative agencies...they tacitly emphasize bureaucratic rather than professional controls over teaching’ (p. 44). In other words, the bureaucratic understanding of teaching, one of ‘packaged skill and content’, dominates the discourse and the profession. The irony of this has been discussed elsewhere (Hay, White, Moss, Ferguson, & Dixon, 2003; White, 2004), but simply put, is that the Victorian Institute of Teaching, while claiming to represent the teaching profession, is actually representing the bureaucracy and seeking greater control over teachers by the introduction of standards and using portfolio in this debased way. In that context the portfolio *process* appears to be a contemporary and forward-looking approach, but the *content* reflects a checklist of basic skills and strategies and a competency perspective (White, 2004).

Returning to the type of portfolio we had envisaged, we were mindful of Deborah Britzman’s (2003) view that teaching involves ‘coming to terms with one’s intentions and values, as well as one’s views of knowing, being, and acting in a setting characterized by contradictory realities, negotiation, and dependency and struggle’ (p. 31). She also explains that ‘Learning to teach – like teaching itself – is always the process of becoming: a time of formation and transformation, of scrutiny into what one is doing, and who one can become (p.31). The ‘private’ aspects of pedagogy Britzman describes as:

[C]oping with competing definitions of success and failure, and one’s own sense of vulnerability and credibility. Residing in the “heads” and “hearts” of

² A supernumerary is a person on the opera stage who performs a non-singing, non-speaking role that are used to fill in crowd scenes (Fielding, 2002)

teachers, and emerging from their personal and institutional biography, this “personal practical knowledge,” or knowledge made from the stuff of lived experience, is so intimately a part of teachers’ enactments that its appearance as skills becomes taken for granted (p. 28).

She also talks of the importance of voice in becoming a teacher and comments that ‘The struggle for voice is a conflict between old and new events, and what will be discarded and what will remain as the self becomes something other than itself. The struggle for voice is a struggle for narrative, not authenticity or adaptation into a pre-existing identity (p. 22).

Methodological Traces

A number of methodological interests underpinned our work. Traces of these can be seen in this work, but none of them dominate. With performance ethnography (McCall, 2000) the study is presented in a non-conventional form such as a play or musical, for example. Autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), already discussed briefly, involves a high level of introspection and has been characterized as ‘an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural’ (p. 739). Laurel Richardson’s Creative Analytic Practice (CAP) ethnography overlaps to some extent with autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Richardson, 2000; White, 2004) and involves performance or non-conventional presentation of findings and observations. All of these in some way have been part of our thinking behind the opera and the portfolio.

The exploration of social inquiry through the arts has recently claimed attention (Bochner & Ellis, 2003; Gray, 2003; Richardson, 2000; Sclater, 2003; Scott-Hoy, 2003; Thorp, 2003) and the links with autoethnography have been documented. Together with the journal, *Qualitative Inquiry*, during 2002-2004 period, the 2001 conference in Helsinki on ‘Arts and Narrative Inquiries’ appear to have focused attention in this area. In addition to Laurel Richardson’s lone and persistent voice urging researchers to report their studies using poetry and other narrative genres (Richardson, 1992, 1993, 1995a), other art forms have come to the fore in qualitative research. Norman Denzin has long talked of performance texts (e.g. Denzin, 1997)

and the ground between cinema and ethnography (Denzin, 1991, 1997), but it hasn't occupied the space it seems to be doing at present, particularly in the United States.

We have not yet reached the finale of this project about student and teacher learning is and the curtain has not yet fallen. Our 2003 students are currently curriculum creators and implementers in schools. We are intrigued by the ways the curriculum opera experience is echoed in the students' transformative portfolio work. A large cohort of these students has agreed to attend a weekend later this year where they will share their experiences as graduates. They will also meet with 2004 opera students and will create an aria to contribute to the next opera – perhaps the ghost of curriculum past?

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