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Monologue-Writing as Social Education: Applying Creative Practice

Abstract: This paper explores an example of applied theatre and praxis learning in an Australian classroom with drama students aged 16 to 17 years which took the form of ‘real fiction’ or social theatre monologue writing. It presents monologue responses from nine participants, altered by the researcher to protect identities and to tease out issues encountered by the student authors. This practice provided vital data about how participants view and behave in the social world of secondary school. Student participants explored the various ways that they are labelled in their social world, and agreed that the labels that matter to them are the ones used in the schoolyard and outside school as opposed to in the classroom. The use of a specific, practice-led methodology, based on the writing of theatre monologues in a drama classroom, represents an original contribution to the field of practice-based and/or practice-led drama research in education. The monologue form, with its focus on a single voice, is a medium for the exploration of subjectivity that provides insight into how young people view the social and relational spaces they exist inside.

Keywords: real fiction, practice-led research, social labelling, ethno-drama, qualitative practice.

The monologues presented in this article were written by a group of Australian secondary school drama students who participated in a social theatre writing workshop using a ‘real fiction’ documentary-style methodology. The students were asked to write monologues based on real people, exploring the subject of labels.

What is a label? What is the act of labelling? What does labelling do? I believe we rely on labelling when we don’t know how to describe something. I see x. I don’t know what x is. I fear unfamiliarity. If only I could put a name to this thing and understand what it is by listing its properties: junkie, ‘at-risk’, ‘social deviant’. A junkie is addicted and lives a particular lifestyle, one that we may fear because it is so removed from our experience: intravenous drugs, homelessness, filth, vagrancy. All these qualities we can associate with the label ‘junkie’ and it frames our subsequent encounters. In other words, the label prepares our imagination for the social interactions we are about to engage in.

The idea of social labels has been a common theme in my own creative work, including my work with ‘real fiction’, where I have explored issues such as homelessness, crime and addiction (Welsh 2014). Issues that have repeatedly emerged in this practice relate to the challenges of giving voice to subjective experience, as well as the risk of speaking on behalf of those who are objectified by a negative label - the homeless, drug-addicted and those who may have felt themselves to be ‘other’. In the work with the students reported on here, I felt that monologue writing might provide a useful medium for participants to express their preconceptions about these ‘others’ as well as about their own subjective experiences, in ways that may not be available elsewhere. The outcome not only provides insight into student perceptions of social labelling and theatre creation but also how these two practices can be combined and utilised by young people to reflect on themselves and their surroundings.

One might argue that the practice of writing monologues on social labels in a drama class trains students to become anti-social, in the truest sense of the word, because in writing monologues that question the everyday social practice of labelling, there is an underlying intention to subvert and change ‘conventional’ social practices. A sense of estrangement is self-consciously maintained in the presentation and analysis of the monologues. This is partly why the research can be considered dangerous and ‘transgressive’ (St. Pierre, 1997). Any work that encourages young people to question

the conventions associated with their appearances as good, compliant citizens is likely to be controversial. This work was partly about unlearning certain habits encouraged by parents, teachers, and managers or youth workers, indeed anyone in authority. It encouraged young people to question the foundations of ‘moral values’ and the practices associated with their use. With this in mind, the monologues have been conflated, partly for the student participants’ protection and anonymity and partly so as to shape the students’ words for my own performative and political purposes. I attempted to maintain the voices and rhythms of the students’ work but shaped and coloured them. The monologues are my edited versions of the students’ words, with ideas emerging from my analysis of the raw data incorporated into the monologue form and stage directions. For example, one student participant says: ‘I mean you look at someone who looks like a junkie and you assume they are.’ My conflation constitutes an extension of the thought whilst maintaining the voice of the original monologue: *‘You say what’s that? And the answer you give, the answer you know and have been taught is junkie.’* It is still the voice established by the student, but with additional reflection and questions that reflect my analytical work with the material.

The conflation process embeds meaning and interpretation into the work that may not have been in the original data. In this sense the monologue or playwriting process becomes about the analysis of, as well as the collection and dissemination of qualitative data. Here, the meaning arises from a process of dissection and analysis that, in turn, arises from crafting and editing the monologues. In the process, they become suitable for a particular style of social theatre I refer to as ‘real fiction’.

Much of the workshop was concerned with discussing society’s ‘others’, social stigma and how stigmatisation comes about. Extensive discussion took place with student participants as to whether they should be identified or remain anonymous. It was unanimously agreed that workshop participants should remain anonymous. Then a question emerged as to whether they would agree to my conflation of their monologues and this was explicitly referred to in the consent forms. The student participants provided written consent to this conflation process. In the initial data, I separated the original writings from the conflation by way of italic and bold fonts. However, in order to maintain a consistent commitment to anonymity and to claim the ideological implications of the work as my own, I have done away with the fonts that distinguish the participants’ voices from my own. Whilst this format change may have dissolved this distinction, it is important to note that they remain the outcome of a dialogical encounter with the participants. The monologues represent the voice of the participant, that is, *what they said*, and my own voice, *what I wanted to say*, drawing on my analysis of the participants’ voices.

The participants’ writings explore notions of privilege, how we perceive the other and ourselves in relation to the other. If I were to explain my reasoning in this work, it was perhaps to explore the world of the label and the ‘labelled’, to understand contemporary labels that define particular groups as deviant or abnormal. This may have been the person with mental illness or the person who doesn’t fit gender stereotypes or ‘conventional’ norms of sexual orientation or the homeless person or person with substance abuse issues. I also wanted participants to consider the way in which labels operate in their own world. One revelation was that students seemed more concerned with labels that came from within their own peer group or in the school-yard, rather than in the broader context of society. Some students did engage with this latter context, perhaps because of our discussions during the workshop and, where possible, I used the conflation process to broaden some of the more localised or personalised notions to reflect this.

In this work, I use the method of monologue writing. Or more specifically, a monologue writing workshop. During the workshop reported here, student participants were encouraged to comment on social labelling and, whilst conscious of the artistic learning objectives of a drama class, I was also

concerned with the potential for social reflection to be generated in the drama-writing process. Each of the student monologues reveals the potential of drama and performance to stimulate explorations of the social world. The combination of these revelations show the way in which drama and theatre processes allow a group to move beyond the creation of artifice and engage in a social conversation. This is similar to what Wittgenstein refers to as language games or John Shotter's conversational realities (Wittgenstein 1968; Shotter 1993). The language game is an instance where the parameters of language use are recreated and governed by the situation. An example of Wittgenstein's language game below is the monologue where the student writes 'My brother calls me fat. He's a li'l' shit!' As an ordinary fragment of conversation, this is self-explanatory - a story about an event within a family. However, the workshop and the conflation process set up a 'language game' where words and their meaning all came to refer or relate to the idea of social labelling. Therefore, the brother's utterance and the response takes on a completely different meaning in this context. Wittgenstein compares the language game to a chess game where the rules and meaning of the game need to be understood in order for one to make any meaningful attempt at playing.

Student Monologue 1

Student 1: An average day in the life of me at school is filled with a lot of bullshit, a lot of lies. Labels tie in with this. One thing I have noticed no matter how many labels you hear they are all originating from the same people: the popular kids. Just who the popular kids are, where they come from, what they've got that everyone else hasn't, that can change from day to day, hour to hour. Why should I be burdened by their thoughts? What makes their labels mean anything? Who says they mean more than me? What if I said your words about me mean nothing and I'll make my own labels? By doing this do I become one of them?

Sure I've been labelled too. It doesn't matter what that label was. The important thing is that you know the popular kids made it. Do we live in a world where, in order to believe in myself I need the endorsement of others? I'm glad I'm not one of them (**to audience**) I'm glad I'm not one of you! Why is it that no-one labels them? Maybe they are the true faggots, wankers, weirdos (this bit reminds me of that Joe Jackson (1982) song, Real Men (**hums then sings these words from the song**), '... but now and then you wonder who the real men are?'

Are we not all faggots, weirdos and, well, we're definitely all wankers. Freud named masturbation or wanking as the first and foremost addiction! What does the word 'weird' mean? What does it describe? It is what I do not know. Or what I did not know yesterday. It is not a negative. Estragon says of Vladimir 'Everything seems black to him today', meaning of course bleak. But is black bleak? Is darkness death? This is a very western, Caucasian view of the world which we have all adopted. If you are black skinned is blackness equal to bleakness? Perhaps then blackness equals beauty and whiteness is blindingly hostile? It's interesting that the sample participant group consisted primarily of white students, perhaps this is why the voice appears to be white. What might sleep bring but tomorrow in all its hope and splendour? Who is to say who or what the normal ones are?

Popularity isn't about having friends, it's a state of being. And a state of popularity shouldn't give you the right to label others badly, it only makes the hard life of a weirdo even harder! We, who have been labelled by those who live in a state of popularity, will never try to change that label. We will accept it, embrace it, walking proudly in this scarred and wounded skin, damaged by the perception of others.

Student Monologue 2

Student 2: I've been labelled, sure, I mean who hasn't? Everyone has a label, good or bad, and everyone uses them. A lot of them are bad. We walk down the street and in our mind we label everyone we see. Is that bad? I do it too. It's like, like a way of seeing the world that eases the mind and the eye, makes the world easy to understand. Maybe it's lazy to label people because I just can't be bothered looking at you or you or you, I mean really looking and understanding and knowing and telling you, 'This is what I think of you'. I'm lazy, we're all lazy. We use labels because the alternative's too hard. To have a conversation with someone we don't understand would mean learning a new language, understanding and maybe accepting a new way of life, another way of being and that might mean changing our own and why would anyone want to do that? Whoever you are, whatever it is, if you don't get it, easier just to put a name on it, give it a label. I'm just guessing here but I don't think I'm the only one who does it. We live in a world full of labels. You can see people labelling others when you're just walking down the street. It's in their eyes. The judgemental eyes casting down on all the people we pass. And the world evolves and unfolds into the touchables and untouchables, like the Indian Caste System. You know, the ones hanging on the street, the ones you pass on the street and you go to walk toward them and your parents tug at your arm and drag you back, nobody goes to the gutter for fun, no-one becomes a hobo for a holiday!

You can see people labelling others when you're just walking down the street. It's in their eyes. The judgemental eyes cast down on the people as they pass. We're all divided by the stares of those who make the world of 'us' and 'them'. I'm one of 'us' (**to audience**). You're 'them'! Look at them! What are they? What should I call them? What are you? What should I say you are? Some say this guy's a freak. Gay, faggot! Fat! Ugly! I know there're people who have thought all of the above but what do I care? I'd probably think the same if the situation was reversed, if you were different from me and I felt threatened by your difference. I'd want to give you a name, just to make sense of you.

Then there are the good labels I can see in people's eyes, the ones you want to be known by, the labels you strive to hide inside like Dr or maybe you'd like to be Mrs or Mr so bad, you don't care who it is that you're a Mr or Mrs. with. Or there're other positive labels too like 'winner' of this or 'achiever' of that. You know, like the Olympics. What is it? Maybe it's just a dude standing on a stage with a gold medal round his neck - would probably just look stupid if you didn't know what it was ... I haven't been stamped with too many good or positive labels, most of the ones used to describe me have been bad, real bad, for me anyhow. Sometimes it seems that a lot more other people have been given these, most of my family have been blessed with these. The label is in the eyes of those 'inside', *the insiders*. I get looks sometimes from my own family. Strangers look at me like I'm an outsider in my own family and sometimes I wonder if maybe I'm adopted and nobody ever told me. If the world were divided into labelled and labeller, I would be everyone's everything! And nobody's nothing.

Student Monologue 3

My brother calls me fat. He's a li'l shit. I get in trouble for calling him a li'l shit but how much damage is done by that compared to him calling me fat? It's not his fault. He's nine. He probably doesn't even know what 'fat' is. Do I really know? Why does it hurt so much, being called 'fat'? I mean do I feel fat? Sometimes. Am I really fat, though? I look in the mirror at myself sometimes and I can hear a little voice in my head saying 'Fat, fat, fat ...' and then I've got him in the background right behind me and just as the imaginary voice fades out, I hear the little shit and see him smirking behind me in the mirror. So I'm not even looking at myself in the mirror. I'm looking at him! And maybe I'm seeing what he thinks! He says I'm ugly but it doesn't matter because he's nine! He calls me lazy because I sleep till midday. But one day he will grow and so will I and I will shed my puppy fat and see myself as beautiful. He will want to know me because I'll be very cool and I'll want to know him because I'll

need my brother. But what if he's gone too far for me to love him anymore? What if I just can't trust him? I get in trouble for sleeping so late. Nobody would even notice if he didn't bring it up! He knows this. He thinks it's funny. Because he's nine.

He's young, a child. But then so am I. Who isn't, anyway? When do we stop being children? Being called fat makes me feel so lonely, so lonely. I'm THE LONELIEST PERSON ON THE PLANET, WHEN HE CALLS ME FAT! He laughs. He thinks it's funny. What's funny about my loneliness? (starts squealing louder and louder and louder) Ha Ha! She's alone! Ha Ha! She's a monster, growing outward like an oil leak ... FAT! FAT! FAT! How is that funny? I'm shouting but can anybody hear me? Does he know how much it hurts? It's only because I'm a girl that it matters. I'm already seeing myself as fatter than I'm supposed to be. The last thing I need is the word being bleated by a nine-year-old sheep. But that's just it, who's he imitating?

My brother calls me stupid, old but it doesn't matter because he's nine. It can't matter. If it did matter, my brother would be more damaged than me. He's the one who's cruel. One day he will look in the mirror and he won't like what he sees. But he thinks it's a joke so it's a joke. His names don't hurt because he's nine.

It's me that does the hurting in my own thoughts about myself, not his names or labels. I remember being nine. I remember seeing my mother look at herself in the mirror, back when I was a child and she was a woman. Before I entered this, this age of uncertainty. Anyhow, she'd stare at herself and describe herself as fat, grab tiny handfuls of skin and call them flab, call herself ten-tonne Tessy when she was all skin and bones!! What I can't work out is when I turned from being nine and knowing the objective truth of what the image in the mirror looked like!

Student Monologue 4

We live in a society where people are subjected to various environments and, because of these environments, a label is forced upon them, how they look, what they wear, where they live; what they have done in the past and what they do now. Supposing I began to speak in another voice, what would you think of me? Supposing I told a different truth with a different sound like: she said not to worry, dat I wasn't in no trouble. It was a special program for da 'socially disadvantaged'. When she said dat, she even did dat fing wif her fingers, makin', what are dey called, quotation marks, yeah. At first, I got really mad, drew a chair, said 'Fuck you!' It's easy to fit into a certain label, based on the way we look but at what point does the way we look define us as individuals?

Dat teacher just fucken looks at me! I say to her you fucken dog slut! She says she knows how I feel, that I am at-risk. She says she wants to 'elp me get by at 'ome and dat, which I spose is good, cept she don't know me dad. He gets real mad when do-gooders try and come into our place. 'e don't seem to like no-one, not even us!

Why are we categorised into a genre? The answer is simple, it's just the way we run. We all use labels, even those who are a victim to it. Misunderstood. We hear it all the time and see it as a cry for attention – the misunderstood girl, the guy who his friends think he is but who he really isn't. Sounds like a movie plot.

Student Monologue 5

I am standing here, looking at you all, labelling you, every single one of you. But don't tell anyone, it's a secret. It's a secret even though it's what I've been taught to do ever since I could walk. Or before I could walk ... ever since I learned to think. And, can anyone tell me when we learn to think? It is once I know who I am, who I am supposed to be in the world, in society, that I learn how to tell

others what they are. Everyone labels, even if we don't say it out loud. That's what thinking is, using your judgement, judging. And in a way learning is all about labelling. When we don't know what something is, we say, 'What's that?' And if you know the answer, well, then you're clever! I mean you look at someone who looks like a junkie and you assume they are. You say 'What's that? And the answer you give, the answer you know and have been taught is 'Junkie!' Straight away. It's an automatic thing. I mean I labelled them to make a point. You make a label to be able to describe someone/something. It's how we know what is what and who is who. What I am really saying by calling you Junkie is that 'YOU ARE NOT ME!' It's almost cruel in a way but we'd be nowhere without it. I don't mean to be cruel, it's just how I was taught to be part of society and I see the grim-looking scab-faced, drawn, thin gaunt sick man before me, gnawing on his rotting teeth, falling from his mouth as he goes and he says to me 'I'm cold.' But I can't quite hear him. He says it again and this time I understand but I feel like I can't do anything, just stare at him like he's an object because he is, to me, he's a junkie. Like I said it's cruel but I guess that's how our society will always work.

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