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*Subverting perceptions of academic and professional learning with drama*

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# Subverting Perceptions of Academic and Professional Learning with

## Drama

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Scott Welsh is an academic, playwright and poet with an interest in creativity, social constructionism and education. His Ph.D research explored the language of social labels, using applied Drama to gain insight into school culture and classroom situations. He is currently working as a sessional tutor and research supervisor at Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia.

Shiona Long is an academic teaching scholar at Victoria University, Melbourne and former secondary music teacher. Her M.Ed. research explored how secondary music teachers cater for gifted students in core music classes. She believes supporting pre-service teachers to confidently embed the Arts in their pedagogy brings creativity and joy to their chosen vocation, while transforming outcomes for their students.

# Subverting Perceptions of Academic and Professional Learning with Drama<sup>1</sup>

What is the impact on student learning when Education is taught through the Arts in a diploma level bridging course? This paper describes and analyses the experiences of 180 students when the expectation of a first-semester, first-year unit in an Education course is to devise and perform an ethnodrama – a drama based on the lives of the students themselves. The students, many of whom have had negative experiences of education, are challenged to think of learning as physical as well as intellectual and emotional. Influenced by Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and August Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*, the authors encouraged risk-taking and playfulness in class in order to develop students’ understandings of personal agency, capacity and responsibility. Participation in the Drama, although very challenging for many students, resulted in increased confidence as learners and as individuals, increased collaborative skills, empathy, respect for others, and a sense of empowerment.

‘Knowledge is power. Don’t ever forget that.’ *Ellie*, (student, 2016)

## **Introduction: why are we doing this??**

Contemporary educational environments demand a number of diverse approaches to deliver quality programs that reach a broad cross-section of students (Churchward & Willis, 2019; Barnes, 2018; Nguyen & Larson, 2015; Carneiro & Draxler, 2008; Hargreaves, 2005). This paper outlines the use of Drama as the primary pedagogy in the presentation of a unit within a Diploma of Education Studies entitled Academic and Professional Learning. In this unit we deliberately use Drama to confront our students, creating discomfort, in order to stimulate new thinking about learning. In the tradition of Boal and applied theatre (Boal, 1979), our students are challenged to

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<sup>1</sup> This work has ethics approval from Victoria University, number 0000024773. Students’ names have been changed; dates accompanying student names indicate the year of the student’s study. Participating students signed consent forms.

become participants by the fact of their presence. We invite our students to ask three central questions: Why me? Why here? Why now? These prompts create space for students to generate their own questions, such as: What influences in my life brought me here? What are the narratives I construct for myself? How do these narratives support or hinder me as a learner? Who am I? By asking our students to perform, we ask them to confront these questions physically, through action, as well as intellectually (Darder, 2016; Nguyen & Larson, 2015).

The question of why we use Drama is raised by the students, and by sessional staff working with us. How we understand 'professional learning' is less often raised. The use of Drama as the primary pedagogy is aimed at opening up questions about such learning, while also building skills in collaboration, artistry, problem-solving and critical thinking, and enhancing students' attributes of empathy, respect for others and personal agency. This is not a simple process. As Dunn and Stinson (2011) identify, the teacher needs to work in several roles at once, guiding students through a conceptual understanding of the use of drama, at the same time as providing skills, and planning to facilitate the process. Adding to this complexity, in a Higher Education context, we consider it necessary to de-hierarchise our practice (Heron and Johnson, 2017), so as to explore different kinds of authority in the classroom and in learning.

As teachers in this unit, we are seeking to actively subvert our students' received understandings of academic learning as text dominant content transfer. By doing this, we hope to equip them to become confident as critical learners who can simultaneously engage with education and critique its systems and processes. In this way we aim to align our curriculum (broadly understood as how we engage academically in the world), with our pedagogy (embodied learning opening up new ways to act in the world), and

our assessment (requiring students to devise and perform an ethnographic piece of theatre).

In this paper we suggest that drama-based pedagogies challenge students to commit physically as well as intellectually to learning. We outline the background to the unit and describe and analyse the pedagogical strategies used in it. Teacher observations, student reflections and student results are examined as indicators of capacity building. We suggest that when drama pedagogy is used in teacher education classrooms it offers students new ways to understand and engage with learning, builds a range of skills, and challenges students to take the intellectual, emotional and social risks necessary to become collaborative workers.

### **Background: the constructs**

The Diploma of Education Studies course is delivered on-campus at Footscray Nicholson campus of Victoria University, located in the Western suburbs of Melbourne. Traditionally, our students are first-in-family, from working class or lower middle-class backgrounds, and frequently speak English as an additional language (Gilmore, Loton & Welsh, 2018). Generally, they enter our course because they have not met the requirements to enter directly into the Bachelor degree for Education. Successful completion of this diploma can pathway our students into a Bachelor of Education P-12. However, our students are not usually accustomed to academic success and their educational experiences have often been negative. Nonetheless, our students want to become teachers. There is something that drives our students to aspire to make changes to a system in which they were not successful. This desire for disruptive learning echoes the work of Paulo Friere (1970); it demands that students empower themselves as learners and as actors in the world. McGraw and Fish (2018) undertook a study of similar students at Federation University in an attempt to understand what

qualities such students bring to preservice teacher education. Their study, in conjunction with ours, suggests there is a significant body of students who have not been traditionally successful in education, but who seek to change educational paradigms for the future. As university teachers, we interpret our role as one of assisting our students to realize their aspirations by supporting them to develop the capacity they need to become successful as teachers. This often goes beyond the academic or intellectual realm to the more philosophical or ontological question of how to *be* as a teacher: how to utilise critical engagement with education and personal agency to bring about change in the world.

A previous incarnation of this unit involved readings and discussions in a seminar format. Our decision to use drama as our pedagogy sought to subvert the traditional form, with the aim of empowering our students through developing insight, awareness, and empathy (Buley, Yetman & McGee-Herritt, 2019; Nicholson, 2002). Our students still read academic writing on learning theories, inclusive practice, and classroom practices. However, their responses to these readings are mediated through image theatre, action and improvisation; the focus is on internalizing and embodying the readings, rather than discussing them as theoretical concepts external to the students' own experiences. Our aim is to prompt students to reframe their understandings of 'knowledge', to view it as collaboratively built, and understand it as a layered and nuanced construct (Gillies, 2015; Joliffe, 2015; Simoes & Pinheiro, 2014; Attwood, 2011). To action this we build scenes of an ethnodrama (discussed below), affecting not only the content that students learnt, but their epistemological beliefs (Huang-Yao & Shu-Ping, 2010). Our hope is that students might change their perceptions and understandings of what knowledge is, and question traditional definitions and assumptions about the very nature of knowledge.

The outcomes for EDC1000 Academic and Professional Learning are listed as:

1. *Participate in an academic community of discourse through reflective and critical engagement in academic texts*
2. *Elucidate knowledge and understanding of theories in relation to how students learn and examine the implications of this for teaching*
3. *Articulate academic, personal and professional learning needs with a focus on evaluating their own learning needs*
4. *Critically review and reflect on cases of learners from diverse cultural, economic and religious backgrounds including those from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds (College of Arts and Education Handbook, 2018).*

By choosing to teach this unit through Drama, our focus shifts from the content of the unit to how one understands and communicates that content. Students engaging with their ‘own learning’ and ‘participating in an academic community of discourse’ interpreted their experiences, and ultimately developed them into physical enactments. The transformation of individuals is represented through their enlivening of space and place, and their devising of a dramatic performance to communicate this experience. Furthermore, by challenging the nature of the learning in this unit, we seek to rethink the academic values we communicate to students: what is the purpose of their learning? This is about shifting the emphasis – from *learning* in order to be a teacher, to learning in order to *be as* a teacher - with an emphasis on personal experience and identity. In the latter the engagement of the affective is explicitly drawn upon as a way of embedding learning.

Our exploration of theories of learning and the implications of these for teaching; our evaluation of personal learning needs; and our critical review of, and reflection on,

learners' needs from diverse cultures, as required by the outcomes listed above, take place within a project with two main parts:

- (1) Students explore the meaning of their own personal stories and write these stories on the walls of a stairwell, creating a permanent word-based artwork, and
- (2) Using and adapting these stories, we employ theatre, and a contemporary arts-based, practice-led approach to education in the university classroom, to culminate in an ethnodrama. We link stories of place from past and present and acknowledge stories of indigenous cultures in the area.

This paper is focused specifically on the second of these, the ethnodrama.

The implications of this study go well beyond our own site. This study asks whether teaching differently at university, using an arts-based pedagogy, can provide a gateway to learning that less-privileged people in our communities can access. Our examination of student experiences in building an ethnodrama indicates that when we use Drama to teach, can we shift the balance of power, and provide a way for traditionally unsuccessful students to enter the teaching profession.

### **Methodology: what we did**

Our use of drama as pedagogy was constructed as a research project in order to explore whether the way we taught could impact on the quality of student learning, particularly for those students who have traditionally not performed well. Our central question was: do students become empowered as learners through the use of Drama pedagogy?

We collected data from student participants in the research across three years: 2016, 2017 and 2018. All students in the course (approximately 200 students each year) were invited to participate. Of these, about seventy per cent chose to allow us to use their



work in class, their class journals, and their assessments, as data for this study. Ethical clearance for the study was given by the University High Risk ethics committee. The challenge of being researcher and teacher, and the students' dual role as learner and participant, were managed through open communication and clear rules about access to student work. Many classes were videoed, with student permission, and these videos were viewed as data after the completion of the unit. The risks associated with filming were discussed with participants and consent was sought and given. An opt out clause was included and a process of member-checking was undertaken. All student work was assessed and moderated by teaching staff not involved in the research before that work was considered as data. The assessments used as data for this study were students' journals which used a praxis inquiry process (Burridge, Carpenter, Cherednechenko & Kruger, 2010) to describe, explain and theorise their experiences of creating of the play. The data was analysed using an open, thematic process.

### **Our actions**

Three teaching staff worked with eight groups of 20 to 25 students each. We invited our students to tell part of the story of what brought them to this course at this time. We asked: Why are we here as individuals? Why are we here as a group? What does this mean for the way we see the past, the ways in which we engage in the present, and the ways we imagine the future? We explored these stories and built drama skills through games, focusing on power, status, transformation, response and spontaneity (Spolin, 1999; Boal, 1992), image theatre (Boal, 1992), emotional memory (Stanislavski, 1983), forum theatre (Boal, 1995), epic theatre (Brecht, 1974), and poor theatre (Grotowski, 1970). Each of the drama theorists and practitioners we drew on had a focus on the embodiment of abstract ideas and feelings, and the representation of ideas through symbol. We hoped the students' use of these theorists would push them

to untangle the ways in which their identity was constructed and communicated. The exploration of their own values and motivation, and their interrogation of themselves as learners (and sometimes as people), formed the basis of their learning to become teachers. We asked students to present this interrogation as theatre because it provided them with the opportunity to experience and explore alternative ways of engaging in the world. We knew that what we asked students to do would be uncomfortable for many of them. However, we also saw this space of discomfort as a place of vulnerability, and a place where experimentation, learning and growth could occur (Brown, 2016; Yeager & Dweck, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978).

### **Playing ourselves: building the drama**

Ethnodrama is a dramatic performance built from the stories of those acting (Saldana, 2011). Practitioners of ethnodrama use it as a way of exploring individuals' and communities' stories, often (but not always) to bring about change (Saldana, 2011; Taylor, 2003). We used ethnodrama as a method for the students to explore their learning experiences.

In developing the ethnodrama, each group devised several small dramas. Each class involved games, the creation of scenes, the recreation of experiences in schools or families, machines, idealized images of education, abstract representations of teaching and learning, and so forth. When we shifted the focus to developing the ethnodrama for performance, the students picked up on a metaphor or process from a game, and then used it as a structure on which to hang their scenes. For example, in the game 'Cars' students worked in pairs, one 'driving' the other by guiding them around the room using a set of hand signals. One group developed this into a scene set in a car, where power and control were key themes. Those watching made suggestions, stepping in and out of scenes as 'spectators' (Boal 1995), or taking a single moment, and

creating something quite different, from the group's work. This work took place over several weeks, and eventually, each class developed a single, cohesive piece of theatre that reflected their group's educational 'journey'. To do so, the students needed to identify commonalities and differences, and respect individuality.

Within this context of making meaning, aesthetics had an important part to play. Dewey (1963) writes about aesthetics, considering the arts as a mode of intelligence, a way of knowing and communicating by speaking symbolically. Andersen (2016) explores this idea and develops the thinking, citing Sinclair's belief that aesthetics is "a powerful component of a broad education" (Sinclair 2012, p. 44). O'Toole and Chapman both reinforce the long-held belief amongst Arts educators that aesthetics is a synonym for the Arts (O'Toole, 2010; Chapman 2004). What is clear is that developing an aesthetic understanding of how things work, and how it is possible to communicate, is an empowering way of engaging with all learning (Saldana, 2011). Students naturally engaged aesthetically with the work. They sought to tell their stories 'artistically'. Danny (2017) wrote in his journal that he "learnt what being creative is and ...tried to embody it." There were many discussions about what looked, felt, and sounded better. Students were exposed to different ways to present ideas through theatre, with activities on Brecht, alienation and epic theatre (1974); Stanislavsky and emotional memory (1983); Boal's image theatre (1995); Dorothy Heathcote's process drama (Wagner, 1976); Grotowski's poor theatre (1970); and Laban's movement (Laban & McCaw, 2011). Despite a strong focus on process, the students were very aware of the theatrical performance as an outcome (Saldana, 2011). They drew upon knowledge offered to them, and knowledge within the group of cultural and ethnic art forms, to develop their own aesthetic. Students with a focus on a particular area of the arts danced, sang, wrote scenes or music, or designed props and costumes. There was

space created for students to explore and express their capacity in a range of areas in the Arts. Aesthetic decisions in all cases were made by consensus (or argument).

The creation of the group's 'journey' was at times problematic. Some students oscillated between embracing the group and defining or understanding themselves in opposition to it; for some students the idea of a 'collective journey' was uncomfortable. Over time, students came to appreciate the theatrical techniques that tended to allow space for them to express themselves as part of the group, and also as apart from the group. Some of the classes developed their own social, linguistic and temporal distancing strategies (Nook, Bustamante, Cho & Somerville, 2019) to provide the opportunity for individuals to move in and out of the group identity. The learning here was significant around diversity, validating and respecting the experiences of others, and finding common values. Student participant, Susie (2017) observed that working on the play taught her to "deal with and bond with all different types of people." David (2017) stated that the "most valuable quality I have gained is the ability to collaborate", and Tony (2017) said he had developed "confidence, humility and compassion for others." Perhaps Ian encapsulated these experiences best when he wrote: "I have learnt mostly about a sense of belonging in every environment, and that there is a place for everyone." McCoy (2012) describes these sorts of experiences as transcendental moments, "vicariously walk[ing] in the shoes of another" (p.61).

Each groups' drama was performed at the end of semester, in a theatre on campus. In the development of the ethnodrama there were five critical concepts, each of which is discussed below: playfulness, risk, disruption, empowerment and collaboration.

*Play:* When we play we learn (Rice, 2009; Vygotsky 1987). In developing our ethnodrama, we encouraged our students to experience the playfulness they engaged in

as children, involving imagination, improvisation, and fluidity (Momeni, Khaki & Amini, 2017). Childish play is both a practice for the real world and an experience of the real world. It involves the whole body engaged in action that replicates real life at the same time as happening in real life. The ways we use the word, 'play' emphasize this. We 'play' a role in an organization; we act in a 'play' or go to see a 'play'; we 'play' a game; children invite you into their world with the words, 'Let's play'. Boal knew this when he said that theatre is not revolutionary in itself but a rehearsal for a revolution (Boal 1979). By playing many games with the students, we were able to practise new ways of being, experiment with relationships and interactions, and develop real skills for use in daily life. In the spirit of Boal, we are not using theatre primarily to create works of performance but to rehearse for a revolution of kinds, involving undergoing fundamental change in the way we viewed and participated in the world. We knew that "to transform is to be transformed" (Boal, 2008, p.xxi).

*Risk* is also critical. The space for learning happens in the risk zone. This builds on Vygotsky's and Bruner's conceptualization of scaffolding (Bruner, 2017; Vygotsky 1978). The risk zone is the space on the scaffold where one is at greatest risk of falling, where collaborative learning is the only support that will take one across the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). This is a difficult, awkward and uncomfortable place to be, unless the learner is a thrill seeker. As teachers we modelled the experience of operating in the risk zone, explicitly setting up tasks for which we did not know the outcome, and articulating the risk involved in that action. We told our students we were practicing brave teaching for brave students. Consequently, shared risk became a point of engagement. One of the greatest risks for many of these students, was to participate wholeheartedly in play (Dewey, 2012), and to recognize this as a learning space (Kolb, Kolb, Passerelli & Sharma, 2014). Engagement with learning as

an exercise of playfulness, with an openness to being surprised (O'Connor, 2016), and building knowledge in the moment, through improvised interaction, was a space in which most students initially felt uncomfortable. Their reflections almost unanimously spoke of moving into areas of discomfort and unease. Tegan (2017) identified her learning in this experience: "I learnt that we don't always need a plan. Sometimes you just need to relax and see what happens." Where the lack of an obvious plan was a risk for Tegan, Van (2017) was worried that "If I talk everyone will laugh at me." It was clear that risk presented itself differently to different students. However, students also acknowledged how powerful it was to engage in risk. Charlie (2017) wrote: "I have grown by accepting my flaws and showing myself to my friends, opening up to them as well." Lauren (2017) commented that facing the difficulties "made me a wiser person," whilst Jean (2017) reflected that "being out of my comfort zone has made me grow as an individual."

*Disruption:* The result of playfulness and risk interacting in the classroom is both disruptive and transgressive (Cekaite, 2007). Understandings of education, of the nature of learning, of personal relationships, and of the purpose of education are all disrupted when students engage directly in embodied learning as risk in a playful environment (O'Connor, 2016). Students are confronted with recalibrating their perceptions of how learning occurs and what education is. Moreover, the connections between 'rehearsing' for life as a future teacher, and *being* a future teacher elevate the experiences of play, beyond a class activity. Playfulness invites students to consider alternative realities: what happens if...? The consideration of such alternative realities is central to dramatic thinking (Davis, 2017). For our students, acting out scenarios literally and metaphorically, and finding ways to express their own stories through and with drama, and in collaboration with others, validated experiences that had often been

invalidated in school environments. In this context students connected learning theories with their lived experiences, prompting critical questioning around the nature, structure, resourcing, assessment and purpose of education. Such disruption was similar to that discussed by Gallagher and Wessels (2013), in their work with young people living in shelters – it challenged the ways we categorised, judged and measured ourselves and others. An example from one ethnodrama created in 2016 included a cyclone entering the scene and causing chaos; in another part of the same performance, disruption was represented by a driver struggling, and increasingly panicking, in an effort to keep up with the GPS, before turning it off and finding her own way. Disruption can leave one without guidance or structure. However, in playing out these scenes, and exploring ways to engage with the disruption their actions created, students suggested alternative ways to find meaning, set courses and establish purpose.

*Empowerment:* Playfulness, risk, and disruption worked together in our classes to create environments where students empowered themselves to critique systems and act with confidence. Rather than being receivers of information, students developed the critical and theoretical skills to build knowledge and use that knowledge in rethinking previously received ideas of education and power (O’Grady, 2019; Leonardo, 2004). Capacity building developed through play and the experience of taking risks was significant in students recognizing their ability to make change in their own lives and the lives of others. Rather than being aspirational, their ambitions to become teachers became realizable when play, risk and disruption interacted to develop capacity. Part of this process was for the students (and teachers) to let go of fear. Ellen’s reflection on the semester was simple but profound: “I have learnt that I have to make brave actions and share my ideas” (2017). It was in the action of creating the play that

students fully realized the purpose of the experiences of the classroom exercises, games and activities:

During each time we practised together, we developed stronger group confidence. Demonstrating creativity and critical thinking ... through participation in the play, we developed social and cognitive skills, gaining the self-confidence required to engage in new experiences and environments (Ted, 2018).

*Collaboration:* Because the unit teachers released power to the students to make their own ethnodrama, and sought to assist only by providing the support they requested around skills development, the quality of collaboration within the group became critical. When making a play there is further concept underlying collaboration – that of belonging. Students were invested in their own stories; in order to create a group story, however, they had to also acknowledge and respect the stories of their peers. From this a group identity, a sense of belonging emerged. Tania (2018) writes of her own learning within the group:

Shiona delegated this task of producing a play to us students in an environment where we had lots of support and resources. Because of this, I was able to step out of my comfort zone, therefore, entering a ‘learning zone’. Through the experience of the play I grew in confidence, learnt about how others react to me and I learnt a lot about myself.

In those cases where groups did not function well students were often initially unclear why things were not working. In many cases it was not their skill level or their story telling that was letting them down, but a much deeper and more elemental part of the process – the degree to which they care about, and for, each other. Liana (2018) sat out in order to watch her group when things weren’t going well:



Has it looked this bad the whole time? Why had I not noticed before? ...The irony of the situation was a slap in the face. Our performance was all about us being a team and coming together, but where was the team work? Observing from the audience's perspective, it became very clear that nobody was looking out for anybody else; as individuals we were concerned about our personal image and being ridiculed.

Recognizing that the focus had to shift from personal insecurities to group success was critical in developing a true sense of collaboration. The shift from self to group, and yet the recognition of self within group was both powerful and empowering. The heart of this shift was relational, and is fundamental to the role of the teacher. This experience of belonging was also an effective disruptor: it took power away from one person or group of people and shared it across the class in a genuinely democratic way (Pearl & Knight, 1999). It made authentic collaboration possible (Darder, 2015; Friere, 1970).

The final performance generated a feeling amongst the student body that they could do anything. Overwhelmingly students wrote in their journals that they had grown in confidence and belief in their own capacity, and that of their peers, to be successful as learners. Dora (2017) wrote: "I have gained confidence which I never had. Also, these experiences have shaped me in becoming a greater person...I will not stop growing as I face new experiences." Tonya (2017) stated that the unit "taught me to be confident within and with myself."

The risk-taking and problem-solving approaches of the Arts meant that many of these students engaged with an environment where, for the first time in their education, they could not 'fail'. If something didn't work students were encouraged to simply try again another way, or to build on things that didn't work the first time, rather than

dismiss these experiences as mere failures. The sense of what we were trying to do was captured by Liana in her reflection on a lightbulb moment:

All my feelings and thoughts were swirling around in my head like a tornado; then it suddenly stopped. I'd had an epiphany! I realized that making mistakes and having a go was not a bad thing but a learning curve. People aren't waiting around the corner to laugh at you when you mess up; they're usually there to help you. The rehearsal allowed me to gain perspective... TRY. If you miss the mark, learn from your mistakes and try again. It only takes one step to get started.

Liana's experience was evidence of our attempt as teachers to enact Bruner's idea that "success and failure are principal nutrients in the development of selfhood." (Bruner 1996, p. 36). Bill (2018) had a similar experience to Liana, stating that as a result of the ethnodrama he had "the confidence to face all sorts of challenges." However, Danny (2017) put it most beautifully: "I have discovered myself, learnt to connect to my soul to find what brings me happiness."

### **What did we learn?**

When designing the content of EDC1000 we were concerned as much with the process of learning as the content being taught. By subverting perceptions of Academic and Professional Learning through Drama we taught the attributes and skills required in that unit in the process of learning the content of the unit. It was a layered engagement with the process of developing professional identity: of becoming. The use of drama incorporated the development of attributes such as communication and interpersonal skills; collaborative knowledge building; problem-solving and analytical skills; time management; empathy and emotional intelligence; and the capacity to follow directions (Elias, 2006).

We valued student reflections on their own learning, including those quoted above, as evidence of transformative education taking place. A second way of measuring whether this pedagogy impacts student learning is by analyzing student results. Students' results in this diploma from 2016 and 2017 can be compared to the results of students in the Bachelor of Education for the same years, as three units were taught in common across the two courses. These units had the same content and assessment and were taught by the same teachers. Although the students in the Diploma entered the course with lower academic levels of achievement than those in the Bachelor degree, they achieved a higher pass rate in each of the three units in common, in both 2016 and 2017 (infoVU, 2018). There are too many variables to claim that the pedagogy, curriculum and assessment in Academic and Professional Learning was directly responsible for students in the Diploma outperforming those in the Bachelor degree. However, these results, read in conjunction with the qualitative data of students' perspectives and experiences, indicate that deep engagement of learning was happening across the course. Students claim to have increased in confidence, to have learnt to take intellectual and emotional risks, and to have developed skills in problem-solving. Their results in the three units in common with the B.Ed suggest that the Diploma students are accurate in their self-assessment.

Sahin-Taskin (2018) discusses the importance of active learning environments and self and peer assessment as ways to shift pre-service teachers' thinking from the imitative, which replicates what has been previously observed and experienced in classrooms, to the creative. The design and implementation of our unit demonstrates that drama is also a powerful active learning tool for the communication of both content and process. Aligned with Sahin-Taskin's study, we observe that the experience of *doing*, alongside the experience of *thinking about*, creates a rich learning construct. In

the development of the ethnodrama the rehearsals were themselves the process of becoming – it is in them that identity was developed in response to others, and that problems were solved (Boal, 1979). A good example of this was provided by students who had never previously had the experience of leading, needing to do so. It is the action of leading that makes one a leader (Gunter, 2001), and so the student who had never previously been a leader became one, when they stepped in to direct, organize or manage. Identity shifted, both for the student taking leadership, and in the way that they were perceived by others. As Boal asserted, when one acts out change, that action is not an act or an artifice, but it is the change itself (Boal 1979). By encouraging students to create a performance, many learn how to lead, follow directions, think on the spot, create and express themselves in the world.

### **Concluding thoughts**

In teaching this unit, we sought to privilege process above content. Content was not the sole purpose of this unit of study, but was the vehicle for learning the skills of communication, teamwork, collaboration, and problem solving, and developing the attributes of empathy and compassion. Students learnt content because they were actively involved in developing skills, and the process of skills acquisition required them to engage in analytical thinking about the content. Our shift in focus as teachers from *what* we taught to our *pedagogy* enabled us to move away from conventional lectures, powerpoints, readings, and discussions, into areas of exploring feelings, impact, action and reaction, and nuanced perspectives on issues, expressed through Drama, movement, or poetry.

Part of our aim in redesigning this unit was to encourage young people to develop the skills to act as positive disruptors in their future lives, to question established ways of doing things, and to seek alternative ways of reaching outcomes.

We wanted to encourage our students to value the process of learning, and to develop an understanding that anticipated outcomes is not always the most important part of undertaking a task or experience.

Supported by the work of Freire (1970) and Boal (1979; 1992; 1995), we invited In looking to the body as the site of learning, and to theatre as the expression of learning, we consciously sought to disrupt students' inherited understandings of what learning is and how it is attained. By encouraging our students to physically enter a space of risk and ambiguity through which they could explore, construct and analyse their own meanings of the world, we offered them an opportunity to enact themselves as both learners and teachers. Ultimately, we learnt that using Drama as a pedagogy in a Higher Education classroom is effective and satisfying. Creating an ethnodrama challenged students to explore their identity as teachers, learners, citizens, friends, and peers, and to connect theory and action. It also challenged them to ponder the nature of learning, and the quality and range of their educational experiences. It supported students to become critical thinkers and spontaneous, collaborative problem solvers. At the end of the unit we ask our students to tell us the most important thing they had learned. Anna (2017) gave a simple but profound answer:

I now know

I can.

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