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THE TEACHER AS RESEARCHER OR, HOW I LEARNT TO LOVE LEARNING IN THE DRAMA CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Lifelong learning is a notion that celebrates the willingness of the individual to ameliorate, reinvent, and expand ways of knowing. The author shares experiences of participant-observation with Year 12 students whilst they explore gendered identities in the Drama classroom. Concomitant with this is an evaluation of the author as a teacher and researcher.

SHIFTING PRISMS, CHANGING LENSES

When, in the mid 1990s, I first evaluated the direction of drama-in-education at the academic level, to augment my understanding of my own

teaching practice and praxis, there was clear evidence that “gender”, within the context of the debate, was seen as a fruitful platform for qualitative ethnographic research – a key perspective in feminist, sociological, and

educational readings – and a viable category of cultural analysis in critical theory and performance.

The context, from a professional point of view, informed my beliefs as the teacher and researcher that gender was a definitive agent of identity. My Year 12 Drama students had studied contemporary Australian plays and then had written and performed dramatic expressions that challenged or reflected gendered discourses. It was my belief that gender was determining the cultural attitudes and ideologies evident in the students' work. Boumelha (1994) succinctly states: "Gender ...is implicated in every aspect of our personal, social and political existence" (p. xiv). Gender is inextricably linked to knowing self and others; thus its significance in terms of lifelong learning for the individual cannot be underestimated.

The context, from a feminist perspective, situated drama-in-education theory and practice within the realm of masculinist ideology and discourse. Dialectic fingers were pointed at practitioners such as Cecily O'Neill and Gavin Bolton, whose collective influence on drama teaching practice was significant at the time. Accusations of collusion with and reproduction of the dominant hegemony were embedded in the prevailing literature. The dominant hegemony was identified as singularly masculinist – the discourse of male authority and ways of knowing – "universal truths".

Helen Nicholson (1995b) claimed that influential theorists had "...failed to engage with contemporary debates about gender" (p. 27). She considered the impact of their engagement with masculinist discourse upon students' meaning making through drama forms, styles and, conventions as problematic. Issues were raised concerning essentialist assumptions about the universalities of human experience. Helen Nicholson (1995b), in her discussion of Gavin Bolton's work, stated, "The question raised by post-structuralist feminist theory, is who does this notion of the universal include? Who does it render invisible or as living outside of the discourse, and marginal to the education drama text?" (p. 28).

At the classroom level, drama-in-education within this context validated the status quo through a singular, Anglo-centric view of gendered roles in collusion with masculinist praxis. Through the drama text, the drama

experience was guaranteed to privilege the experiences of some over others. Helen Nicholson (1995b), demanded that drama-in-education classroom practitioners act as a conduit for "...opening implicit values for scrutiny" (p. 28), so that the opportunity to hear diverse voices might be achieved. She was concerned about what students were learning in the drama classroom through their exposure to dominant hegemonic ideologies embedded in the teaching tools and practices employed in the classroom. As Nicholson (1995a) said of her own drama teaching experience,

Far from being a gender-neutral activity, children use the context of dramatic playing to become increasingly confirmed in the sex-stereotyped patterns of behaviour...I often felt that young people were constrained by a narrow and culturally defined display of gender roles. (p. 17)

The role of the drama teacher was paramount to the process of students making sense of their life experiences and coming to know self and others.

In 1999, Helen Nicholson, in a paper titled "Drama, Education and Masculinities", stated,

As such, the influence of peers, the attitude of the teacher, the culture of education, the social expectations of drama, and the ways in which young people actively negotiate their (gendered) identities all contribute to their learning in the drama classroom. (p. 104)

Nicholson chooses to parenthesise "gender". This abandonment of gender as an indissoluble entity is indicative of the significant shift in focus of the drama-in-education debate since the late 1990s. Nicholson (1999) identifies the new direction when, in her opening paragraph, she states, "I argue that because feminism has explored the political significance of gender, it has led, perhaps paradoxically, to a reconsideration of the dramatic representation of masculinities, which has consequences for the processes of drama education" (p. 98).

It is important to explore the apparent shift in the debate as articulated by Helen Nicholson. Implicit in her statement is an acknowledgement that the highlighting of issues surrounding masculinities could threaten the power base of feminist theorists and practitioners in the field of

drama-in-education. The celebration of emancipatory change in the exploration and performance of masculinities could in itself engender universalities that, whilst freeing up the performative constraints of males acting out their gendered identities and empowering them within the drama classroom, lead to the silencing of the voices of those marginalised in the past.

Drama teachers, (in Queensland, at least), have been working with their students, in the celebration of diversity and difference through studies of gendered identities for a decade. Contemporary Australian playwrights have ensured, through their playtexts, that the complexities of living gendered lives for young people have been foregrounded and privileged as sites of personal and group validation and meaning making. Nick Enright (1997), when interviewed regarding his play, *A Property of the Clan*, described it as a work where "...the principal theme...is an exploration of male sexuality, male sexual violence – adult male sexual violence – and the way in which young men connect with young women and the other women in their lives". Philip Dean (2000), in his stage adaptation of Nick Earl's novel *After January*, gives voice to Fortuna, the female character seen by some as underdeveloped in the novel "...when Alex and Fortuna spend the night together, I gave Fortuna some moments of speaking to the audience...I didn't want only one person's view of what went on" (p. 98). Both texts investigate gendered identities and interrogate power struggles based on gender.

Helen Nicholson (1999) said in her paper "Drama, Education and Masculinities",

I have tried to reflect the struggles which face young people in contemporary society – the struggle to find a place, to communicate with others, to articulate feelings of neediness, to learn to live with ambiguity...For drama education to participate in such a debate, and to tackle issues of gendered identities as they inhere in our teaching and children's learning, there is further work to be done (p. 107).

Nicholson (1999) advocated forcefully the significance of gendered identities in relation to learning in the drama classroom, yet she corralled gender, thus erasing its qualificatory power in relation to identities. Inclusive drama means difference and diversity are explored and

performed; identity is defined by cultural distinctions (and their inherent power struggles); and meaning is elicited through the narratives of participants. If drama education is a site where conflicts "...for struggle and [the] creative possibilities for greater knowledge of self and others" (Gallagher, 2001, p. 135) are played out, then the relational knowledge of students is intrinsically embedded in their experiences as gendered identities.

How then is identity defined in the current debate? Helen Nicholson (1996) stated that, within the context of gender and drama education in the late 1990s, "...constructs of art and identity ...stem from a society entrenched in patriarchal values" (p. 78), and bemoaned what was a clear exclusion of gender from the debates in drama during the 1980s. Bruce Wooding (2000), states, "Identity and culture are sites of struggle...identities are fragmented and draw from many experiences" (p. 90). Wooding supports his concept of identity through citing the opinion of Stuart Hall,

...we are always different, negotiating different kinds of differences – of gender, of sexuality, of class. It is also that these antagonisms refuse to be neatly aligned; they are simply not reducible to one another; they refuse to coalesce around a single axis of differentiation. (p.90)

Identity is not fixed. Identity shifts and changes in accordance with situations, relationships, environments, social and cultural contexts. Gender informs identity. Gender, within the drama classroom, acts as a powerful agent of self-knowledge and a meaningful cultural location for both male and female participants.

The drama-in-education debate appears to have swung full circle since the 1980s. Nicholson and Bundy (2000) claim,

A gender inclusive praxis of drama will incorporate the idea that there are multiple sites of power and knowledge. It will incorporate the notion of "agency" by recognising that there are a diversity of power structures and discourses evident in any society or group. (p. 23)

I turn to the work of my Senior Drama students to exemplify how significant Nicholson and Bundy's current stance is in relation to the imperative status of gender as a way of

knowing. The self-devised drama created by my students clearly signifies gender as a powerful and pervasive factor in their performative knowledge of self and making sense of their experiences both as individuals and as members of a group.

As a drama practitioner there is often the challenge of creating or devising ideas, scenarios, or situations through which the students can engage with the “realities” of others. Through applying Jonathan Neelands’ “Process Drama” model the students do the story creating. The participants worked with the play, *A Property of the Clan*, by Nick Enright. I had hoped that the experience would empower the students and offer them the opportunity to create layered meanings where gender is realised in its performative state. However, what the students brought to the experience, as evidenced in their responses to a written questionnaire after the event, was an uncritical acceptance of the status quo. An indicative (female) response was,

These themes [gendered discourses] are relevant to the world today, because without them we would not have conflict and misunderstanding between the two genders today. (Student)

The sense of inevitability was strong. If lifelong learning implies, in the main, a positive experiential process of knowing self and others then my concern lay with the students’ willingness, as attested to above, to roll over and play dead. What did this imply about the teaching practices and working materials that I employ in the classroom? How do they construct and reconstruct images and voices of gender? What, as a feminist teacher do I bring to my teaching?

Helen Nicholson (1995b), refers to “communities of discourse” that provide a stratagem through which meaning and cultural practices are prescribed and maintained. The site of the research is the campus of a boys’ boarding/day school. The participants are Year 12 Senior Drama students in a shared-subject class comprised of boys from the research site and girls from the nearby girls’ boarding/day school. What I see in my classroom are the institutional practices of single-sex boarding schools contributing to and controlling students’ ways of knowing as gendered beings. Self-reflexive practice highlights for me as the teacher and researcher the multiplicity of selves

that I bring to the classroom; those that my students require of me overarched by those that the institution demands of me. Lifelong learning, for both the students and myself, is influenced by an institutional ideology defined and articulated through a community steeped in masculinist discourse.

To gain a sense of distance as the teacher and researcher from the dominant community ideology through what Ely (1991) calls “...making the familiar unfamiliar...” (p. 125), the students were asked to devise a script that reflected representations of masculinity and femininity. Script extracts from students’ work highlight their perceptions of gendered identities. Student A’s (female) monologue focused on images of physical self-obsession:

“I look like a hippo.”
 “... now we have Ms Hugeass [sic] wearing a lovely gown, complimented [sic] by thunder thighs and donut rolls”
 “I should be part of AA anonymous, well more like fat arse anonymous.”
 “Mirror, Mirror on the wall who’s the fatest [sic] of them all [?]”
 “‘You are Anna.’”
 “I know, its [sic] me my big fat thighs and stomach...no guy could ever love Miss Piggy....”

It is evident that the author is clearly aware of the insidious nature of the masculinist “view” of the female form as object. Her character knows the audience, as both spectator and the Mirror, is judging her. (Initial stage instructions state, “Her mirror is the audience.”)

The character’s opening lines are,

“Shit my arse looks huge, so much for black making you look thin. I look like a hippo. *What are you looking at?*”

It is not possible to assume that the student deliberately chose the word “looks” rather than “is”, however it could be inferred that this is a symbol of female ways of knowing. Note that the audience is also “looking”. In the process of the character exposing herself to the audience it is possible to see that the audience as the symbolic mirror, whilst initially confronted by the character, becomes the omnipotent judge of her worth. The character cannot avoid the audience’s gaze. In the character’s final,

desperate dialogue she pleads with the mirror (the audience).

“You make me fat...do you want me to go down in history as the fattest thing on earth, get me out...please. Mirror, mirror on the wall who’s the thinnest of them all...I am...Anna is the thinnest of them all....”

Student A over-states the physical size of familiar domestic objects in her monologue. This is a deliberate imaging of female consciousness that allows the performance to evolve in a confronting way.

Peta Tait (1994), in her discussion of theatre spaces and their significance in relation to performance and meaning, states,

Spatial location is crucial to the formulation of a performative identity because society orchestrates and structures space to control, contain, exclude and imprison. Therefore space is also a contested environment of signification in theatre as it is in society, especially in relation to categories of gender, class and race. (p. 132)

Tait’s discussion of spatial expressions is crucial to the process of analysing student work in the search for meaning. Students’ willingness to challenge cultural and social signifiers of gendered identities can be read as a powerful form of displaying an intrinsic awareness of culturally defined gender status. Senior Drama becomes a vehicle through which the individual can challenge his or her relationship with, and contest the meaning of, cultural codes that “control, contain, exclude and imprison.” (Tait, 1994, p. 132) Student A has achieved this through creating a temporal relationship between the character and the objects that define her own identity.

Student B (female), in her preface to her work, states “This pressure [teenage sex], often gender-specific, gives rise to issues of equality: what difficulties must teenage men and women endure as sexual beings, and how influential is gender in relation to these?” Student B incorporates titled episodes into her script. Episode 3 is titled “Mates” where “staging is ...confined to an oversized sardine tin [which] ...reflects the fierce, impenetrable bond between male homosocial groups”. Another episode is

titled “The Ladder” where “the higher level of the female represents her moral standards, however, it is the persistence of the male to have power over the female, and his eventual success, [that] represent[s] the dominance of males...in relation to sex”. Student B challenges and deconstructs male and female stories, both fantasy and real; yet, like other female students, expresses a sense of inevitability when she states “the notion of male power dominating female resistance can be identified in the female’s ‘mechanical’ recital of two of the male’s lines. This suggests that the male’s words...must be dutifully followed by the female”.

Student C (male) describes his play titled *No one owns females* as “...written to show the attitude that males have towards females...many males in relationships think that they have ownership over females and like to dominate what they have between them”. The issue of property and ownership was significant in the discourse employed in the majority of the boys’ scripts. Often the mood of the scenario the student created was aggressive; character relationships were fuelled by tension and the language of the dialogue was confrontational and base. As Student C acknowledged, power over female companions is seen as a cultural “given”. Weedon (1987), as cited in Weatherall (2002), states, “Power is not something that can be owned but, according to Foucault, a ‘force relation’ exercised through discourse...” (p. 80). This is evidenced in Student C’s script.

Jake: Yeah, f*** off, get your own women, or can’t you do that you little private school poofs?

Phil: Get over it, you don’t own these girls. Piss off and leave them alone.

Ann Weatherall (2002) contends, “...the concept of gender is itself constituted by the language used to refer to it” (p. 80). Both male and female characters employ the active, violent language that is evident in many boys’ scripts; however, the equally virulent words of the female characters do not impact on the events in the scenarios being played out. The power of language in the active role is the preserve of the male characters that often have to both verbally and physically fight it out with other (predatory) males. It is apparent that Helen Nicholson’s “communities of discourse” prescribe and maintain dominant cultural practices in relation to gender and identity.

The debate in drama-in-education has shifted significantly since the 1980s. In the here-and-now, notions of self and others and the enactment of self-knowledge in the drama classroom, as I have observed when working with young people, are inextricably linked to gendered identities. Boumelha (1994) states, "It is impossible to stand outside the systems of gender difference...none of us can say 'That doesn't affect me'" (p. ix). As the teacher and researcher I continue to learn from my students about my own practices as well as their perceptions of themselves as gendered individuals. In the words of Angela McRobbie (1991) "For me... I am continually learning from my students in the same way as I hope they are learning from me" (p. 73). Lifelong learning embodies gender. Gender, as an agent for knowing self and others, is a discourse that gives form and shape to identity.

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COMPARATIVE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF LIFELONG LEARNERS IN ENGINEERING AND TECHNOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

The engineering-technologist degree is an important element of continuing engineering education for many members of the engineering workforce. This paper reports on the study of close to 9000 unit enrolments to gain an objective understanding of the withdrawal, persistence, and academic-performance characteristics of both engineering-technologist and professional-engineering students.

INTRODUCTION

In many countries, including Australia, the engineering workforce incorporates the occupational classifications of professional

engineer and engineering-technologist. Entry to these professional occupations normally requires the completion of a four-year and three-year, respectively, undergraduate university bachelor's degree. The engineering-technologist